

# The Mass in Spanish

## *Words and the Word*

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D. GRAHAM BURNETT

**A**blaze with the spirit, days divided neatly. A cock's crow addled me in a gray light. By 6:30 every morning I had put on a thin pair of gum-soled canvas sneakers and left the house, trotting up the Via Nicotera toward the hills and the rocky path that ran along the edge of the mountain through the olive groves. Thirty minutes later I would sprint the last two hundred yards back into town, sweating, shirtless, making a bit of a show on the high street, just as the shop awnings began to open, the Vespa scooter-trucks buzzed to a stop for milk deliveries, the sun began to brighten the cool streets. My aunt would have laid out breakfast for her curious foreign houseguest: hard biscuits and milky coffee. And after a quick shower in a small semi-attached water room, I would sit before the vinyl mat laid over the primitive, solid table, and eat, wrapped in a towel. She seldom joined me at the table, more at home in the adjacent kitchen, drying dishes, already beginning preparations for the gnocchi, beef, beans, salads, fish, breads, and sweets that would be the evening's endless dinner. Zio Franco, my distant uncle, would usually choose to sit outside, on the stone balcony over the narrow street, watching neighbors pass, feeding the tortoise, collecting eggs from the squawking coop by the lemon trees.

I did not clear the table; such incursions into the domestic realm only annoyed my aunt. Offering thanks, I mounted the white marble steps, past the gravel-throated bird (who spoke Italian about as well as I), past the flowerpots, past the small shrine to my great-great-grandfather, with

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~ D. Graham Burnett, Assistant Professor of History at Princeton University, is the author of *Masters of All They Survey* and *A Trial by Jury*, forthcoming from Knopf.

its single, flickering orange electric candle. Then, to the room: the tall, narrow wooden door closing with a thump; the pair of louvered shutters folding back to reveal the view over the lapis bay—the slow gray mass of Vesuvius, the long bass clef of Naples already smudged by its own thick air. All morning I would sit there, at a desk facing the sea, studiously writing (longhand, in pasteboard books) an execrable adolescent novel about love, death, and God. Daily at noon I went to mass. After lunch and a short nap, the remainder of the afternoon consisted of conjugating Italian verbs, translating some Dante, and reading the Bible. Though it was winter, I would often—in the face of strenuous objections from the gallery of old ladies who spent the early evening visiting on the balcony of the family house—descend the 1,283 steps to the rocky outcroppings and truncated beaches below the town. There I would swim, and often fish, too, with a rod I had carried in my pack for the last year. I never saw in the water a living thing longer than my pinky: the shore was deserted; my casting an exercise in meditative futility, a plowing of the sea.

Though with family, I was very much alone: cut off by a small vocabulary, and cut off also by a cloud of small-town skepticism that greeted a youthful distant relative who appeared (announced) from months traveling in such a miserable place as India, where people were known to be largely lepers and skeletons. Upon my arrival my aunt (unannounced) discarded, and replaced, all my undergarments and socks, my prized saffron towel, and my sarong. When I objected, she brought in my uncle to clarify. A former member of an elite anti-smuggling unit of military police and still a giant, dark-eyed man with a thick mane of white hair, Zio Franco Rossano came in from his garden. “*Sporchi!*” he declared definitively (Dirty!), and went on to indicate that, as family, I was not to be seen in town looking like a vagabond; nor would such items be placed on the family wash line. Appearances were to be maintained. And, on the subject, would I like two eggs, still warm, to suck from the shells? I looked thin to him. A complicated story of many months in the subcontinent translated awkwardly into my phrase-book Italian: the family summed it up in a single word, which they offered me, and which the black-garbed ladies on the balcony often repeated, for emphasis and clarity, when I was introduced: *Miseria! Ay, India, tanta miseria! La miseria!*

This was not wrong, of course: misery I had seen. Reluctant to put the family off, I did not share my leper stories, did not describe the twisted fragments of human beings who would at times crawl through the marketplace in Kanpur, taking coins between knuckle-like fissures in ambiguous appendages. Ever in search of the sublime, I had made my way to an outlying leprosy in Uttar Pradesh, where I fed hot patients, touching their hardened skin. Afterward, in my journal, I wrote with the self-conscious pride of a nineteen-year-old embarked on a Grand Tour of human suffering, “I have touched a leper.”

I got sick, too, and of this I said not a word. Alone in a small village in the foothills of the Himalayas, I had begun to suffer from debilitating gut cramps and fever. I had thought—with all the melodrama of youth, with the hypochondriacal anxieties of a lonely traveler—that I was going to die, probably from appendicitis. It snowed. The woman who kept the empty house where I stayed gave me a brazier, but no charcoal, which was strictly rationed. I wandered around the village in muddy slush and paid an exorbitant price for three dung balls enriched with charcoal dust; they smoked and crackled next to my cot. I dozed for several days, listening to the scurrying of meaty rodents across the corrugated tin roof. I prayed a great deal. I read psalms. I got better. I felt I had been saved by God.

God came with me to the little town of Vico, a cluster of thick houses on the Sorrento Peninsula, the town my great-grandfather had left in 1903 to go to New York to study medicine. I arrived in Italy via the overnight ferry from Greece, after making my way through Eastern Europe. My passport sported some unlikely entries, and consequently, at the customs post in Bari, groggy from a night on the deck, I found myself eyed suspiciously. The rainbow-hued visa for India stopped the shuffling fingers of the abundantly frogged officer in a black beret. My pack and its curious attachments (the fly rod and kit) received scrutiny. Pulled from line, I spent five hours with a pair of quizzical German shepherds in a small shed on the quay.

God came with me to Vico, and the family did not know quite what to make of it. No one had any objections to saying one's prayers, naturally, but the young American's fervor fit into no recognized category of late-adolescent male behavior. That I spent two or three hours a day reading the Bible on the balcony came to be a subject discussed in assembly at family dinners: discussions that I followed unevenly, but that often ended with my uncle attempting to explain to me how many illegitimate children had been fathered by the local prelate. Zio Franco had no great affection for the clergy. The women of the house, in general, seemed better disposed toward the outward signs of my religiosity, at least at first.

For my part, the months remain marked as a kind of climax. The oddly mystical Catholic sensibility that had been mine from the age of ten or eleven blossomed in that publicly lonely period in the thick stucco house overlooking the bay. By the end, I could be found in my room after mass, on my knees, waiting for an apparition. I was increasingly certain that the moment was upon me, that the Beatific Vision would shortly be made manifest before me, luminous, pale blue, kindly; to me, it seemed only a matter of time.

Of these ecstasies the family knew nothing. But they knew I went to daily mass. I could tell that no one wanted publicly to object to this display of piety, but it was clear my uncle thought it odd (that part of odd

on the cusp of ridiculous), and my rotund aunt shuffled about with a knowing smile on her half-averted face as if there were some joke we shared about my afternoon pilgrimage. At mass I prayed, drinking in the sense of a self called back from the grave for some divine purpose—a purpose I dimly supposed would involve saving India. I was the only man (excepting the potent celebrant) and the only person under sixty in the church, a bright little building adorned with dozens of votive paintings presented on the occasion of local shipwrecks—perspectiveless storm paintings in which a luminous Virgin hung in black clouds over the hulk of a mastless ship. On the fourth day of my attendance, at the close of the service, I exited onto the small, fountained plaza and found myself confronted by a phalanx of stout-bodied women, several in widow's weeds and the rest in shapeless smocks, their gray hair up in sensible arrangements. A woman with very few teeth seemed to have organized the party, and she addressed me challengingly, in words I could not parse. The first word I understood was "son," and she seemed to be posing a question. "Do I have a son?" No. "Do I know the son?" In a manner of speaking. The use of the third person confused me: "Who is he, the son?" they seemed to be asking. He is God's Son, I offered, hopefully. They seemed taken aback. "Whose son is he?" they demanded again, with greater communal animation, and a finger in my breast. And I understood. They were asking whose son *I* was (using the respectful form of address, the third person singular); they wanted to know just whom they were dealing with.

I introduced myself, correcting my hesitant suggestion that I was the Son of the Almighty, making it clear that I was a distant cousin of the Rossano family. Joy all around. They wanted to know my name, which I gave as *Davide*, since my first name is David, and Graham, I had discovered, brought blank stares in the south of Italy. *Davide*. The ladies seemed very pleased.

Thus began my local canonization. Zio Franco wore his puckishly mock-stern face the next evening at the table, playing *scopa* with his (ancient but sharp) mother after dinner. Crushing out his cigarette, he rose, went into the pantry, and emerged with a large and ornate peach tart, which he put down in front of me, announcing wryly: "*Per San Davide!*" My aunt gave a hearty guffaw. As it turned out, this tart and many more to come were gifts from the group of older widows and religious ladies from mass, who had decided that I showed signs of a peculiarly intense relationship to the Most High, and who had approached my known-to-be-impious uncle to warn him that he had a saint in his house. No one in the Rossano household could disabuse them of this idea, and I suspect rumors of my Bible reading leaked to the marketplace. Over the next weeks more little offerings appeared: bags of fruit, sweets, nuts. One of the women ran a fruit stand, and I learned that if she caught sight of me on the street, I would not be able to separate myself from her until I

was carrying four or five kilos of peaches, plums, sweet lemons, bitter oranges. In the house on the Via Nicotera, the “Saint David” moniker had stuck. Embarrassed, I prayed harder than ever.

When I told bits of this story to my future wife, years later, she countered with a confession of her own: As a girl, she had believed intensely that she was the second coming of the Messiah—an unwelcome idea that brought untold terror to a light-eyed Puerto Rican eight-year-old. We exchanged these tales for the first time in a small, hot room in a decidedly third-class pension in San Jose, Costa Rica, a place we had ended up after deciding that we needed to get to know one another. It worked. For two months we crisscrossed this narrow isthmus of a country, making our way along a well-grooved circuit from beach to rain forest to volcanic springs and back to beach: I was reading *Moby-Dick* and trying to catch a *guapote*, or “peacock bass,” on a fly; she was reading *Othello* and worrying about what her grandmother would say if she found out her *nieta* was traipsing around Central America with a young man she barely knew. We talked about religion incessantly. She thought of herself as an atheist; I remained a relatively serious and practicing Catholic. To amuse ourselves we played cribbage or read particularly ridiculous bits of *All the Pretty Horses* out loud in exaggerated Mexican accents. We were falling in love. Several months later I would propose, and she would come and join me in England, where I was doing my graduate work. A year after that we would be married in the Cathedral in Old San Juan, in a Spanish mass; she would receive communion for the first time since she had left the church at the age of eighteen. At the time this pleased me a great deal.

How does a child come to think of herself as the Messiah? How does one become a mystic? How do we learn to think better of these visions? Spelunking into the recesses of memory seems the only way to reconstruct how God comes distressingly close, and then seems to wander away. Several years ago, a traveling companion and I passed evenings on a long trip by practicing what we called “memory-diving.” It worked like this: A subject was proposed—say, for instance, rivers—and we would alternate narrating our associated recollections as richly as possible. These might include earliest memories of a river, archetypal experiences of rivers, long-forgotten riparian dreams, and so on. Hours of meandering in the labyrinthine passages of memory produced a thoroughly hypnotic effect. I recall wending our way through one of these sessions deep into the night, sitting on the terrace outside the small room we had rented, which was built into the wall of the Rajasthan fort-city of Jaisalmer and looked out on the dry expanse of the Thar Desert. It was the middle of *Holi*, the Hindu feast days of colorful play, and we had spent the day dodging hyperactive children armed with paint bombs and Technicolor squirt guns. We turned to religion, and the assignment was to produce our earliest

recollections of an attempt to communicate with a god. His went this way: The night his childhood dog died, he had walked out into the woods behind his Colorado home and desecrated the earth—pulling up saplings, breaking the low limbs off the aspens, stomping down the wildflowers. God, he decided at seven, needed to be addressed, and he sought to strike the Creator in the delicate pressure points of His creation.

For sheer blasphemous defiance, his moonlit scene rivals for me the great God-spitters of myth and literature: Dante's Vanni Fucci, looking solemnly up to Heaven from Inferno XXV and flipping the Almighty the thirteenth-century equivalent of the Italian salute; Prometheus himself, writhing on his rock, forever unrepentant. Less triumphantly existential, my own earliest memory consisted of an inward structure, akin to a great stack of long corridors, through which I would move as I lay in bed. After floating the axis of each hall, I would seek audience with the Divinity, learn that I was not yet deep enough, and be invited to go down another level, where the process would repeat itself, over and over again, until I drifted off to sleep. Perhaps our respective overtures to God intimate our later preoccupations: my traveling companion has since become a biologist with a particular commitment to ecology and environmental conservation; I have become a historian who focuses on travel and exploration.

My companion, as his early memory might suggest, left off concerning himself with God when he was young. He had, it seems, spoken his piece—once—in the only language the world-spirit appeared to know: the tongue of destruction. For me, however, the searching had only begun in the passages I made through the spirit palace in my head as an anxious child, predisposed to sleepless nights. That memory constituted my first recollection of *seeking* God, but I can recall several earlier instances of reasoning about God, among them one of my first memories of any kind. Working on a wood-block puzzle that depicted a corpulent pink elephant standing in a flower bed (I was perhaps five), I suggested to my mother that God could turn flowers into an elephant. To which I think she must have responded that He *could*, but that it never happened because He never *wanted* to. I sense this must have been her answer because I went around explaining it to people for quite a while, substituting other transubstantiations for the floral-pachyderm metamorphosis that had served as my test case for omnipotence.

Omnipotence had proved relatively easy at first grasp, but omnipresence proved a tougher proposition. I cannot have been much older when my mother and I had a less successful exchange about the nature of the Divinity. Habit dictated that we said a decade of the rosary together each night before I went to bed, and while I was still learning my half of the Hail Mary and the Our Father, she asked me once simply to explain the meanings of the prayers as I understood them, rather than get bogged down trying to remember specific words. I recall very clearly paraphras-

ing the salutation of the Our Father as: “Our Father who is *not* in Heaven,” which elicited a helpful correction to the effect that, on the contrary, Our Father was very much in Heaven. I made a mental note, and said nothing, but I remember still my surprise. Not only did “art” (as in who *art* in Heaven) bear a strong resemblance to a negative (aren’t, weren’t, isn’t . . .), but the very idea that God was *in* Heaven struck me as absurd, since I had understood very clearly that God was everywhere, which followed, evidently enough, from His being all-powerful. And anyway, I had been told that God was *in* me (and this certainly seemed right), but the idea that *Heaven* was in me made no sense at all.

Much later, reading Dante in college, I would learn the dominant conceit of Christian metaphysical writing: Theology, as a human enterprise, invariably fails to grasp its inhuman object; the only recourse involves the pursuit of ever more subtle metaphors accommodated to our intellect. Like the *Commedia*, all great theology is great allegory. In that caesura between the thing and the way we speak of it lies one of the deepest mysteries of being human: If there is something beyond what can be said, then there is the unspeakable, and this, we feel, is what we mean by God. I first peeked into this space when I confronted the meaning of a prayer I thought I knew. I understood: God was not in Heaven, but I and all those around me would always say that He was.

God was emphatically not merely in Heaven for me: From the age of ten on I moved in the company of a *daimon*. I sensed that the Almighty addressed me directly, and regularly, on matters specific and general. By nineteen, I had grown sufficiently accustomed to these oracular interactions that I could sit still and wait expectantly for a visitation in my ancestral home. The moment remains clear to me: kneeling in the room over the sea; the distinctive houseflies of the Mediterranean—with their penchant for sudden, angular turns—tracing precise polygons in the middle of the room; the patient ecstasy of the true believer on the threshold of revelation. How things have changed. Now I put my head on my pillow and when I say “God” it is a simple question that leads me to sleep, not direct address to a familiar spirit. The questions linger: How does mysticism happen? Where does it go?

**H**ow it happens. Perhaps mysticism is metaphor gone mad. Just as theology amounts to more and less sophisticated allegories that present the otherworldly and incomprehensible in worldly and comprehensible analogues, so for some this trope might start to read in reverse, turning the quotidian happenings of the ordinary world into numinous messages from the gods. This was surely my case. My callings never came to me as voices, neither booming God-tones nor seraphic twittering. Rather they came as the sudden, seemingly involuntary, realization that a given situation (scene, device, setting, word) *actually meant something else*.

For instance, filling a bath at the age of fourteen, I noticed the flecks of foam on the surface and how they coalesced, divided, and drifted to the edges of the tub. This, I rapidly understood, represented the fullness of the universe, its plenitude and diversity under the watchful eye of God. It meant, naturally, that living beings could be found at various points in the vastness of creation. There is no way to describe this (curious) resolution of the exobiology question that does not lengthen into several clauses a sequence of interlocked observations that became manifest in a single instant: the tub, the universe; mankind here, other forms of life elsewhere.

Often these numinous encounters took the form of if/then scenarios. The most chilling of these, I recall, involved a small stone that I kicked absentmindedly on my way back to the tent on a canoe trip in my early teens. The rock, I knew suddenly, represented me, its course over the ground constituted the span and character of my life: If it went smoothly a great distance, I would live well and long; short or rough meant the reverse. The kick was my own to make. It is an indication of the seriousness with which I took these irruptions of superabundant meaning that I chilled and became withdrawn that night. I had squibbed the kick, sending the stone a distance that corresponded—I understood instantly—to an early passing at the age of twenty-three. For better or worse, I now write from the other side of my foretold death.

I am resistant to the language of psychoanalysis; resistant to “diagnose” (or have diagnosed) retrospectively a condition that falls, under current norms, in the category of mild mental pathologies. The case history, however, must strongly tempt the professional: My daimonic possession culminated in what looks straightforwardly like a case of obsessive-compulsive disorder. For a year I could not pass any bit of loose litter on the grass or sidewalk without sensing that the moment was a test of my willingness to humble myself and submit to divine will. Aware that this smacked of lunacy, I increasingly struggled to pass by. I wonder what I looked like to people on campus, a serious young man in a tie and jacket stopping as if suddenly halted by a bit, reversing direction a dozen steps, picking up a discarded can he had passed thirty feet back, and then continuing on his way. Perhaps fanaticism comes in little energetic clusters.

The few people who stayed close to me during this period knew that I was embarked on a particularly otherworldly enterprise. A family friend, a philosopher and thoughtful fixer, took me out for pizza. He wanted to know, apropos of my intimacy with the Divine, what I would do were I to receive a message to the effect that it was time to exterminate the old family philosopher-friend, i.e., him. I thought about this for a moment, slurped my Coke, and told him I didn’t think I would get that message. He pushed. Yes, but what if I did? After all, Abraham had received such an instruction concerning Isaac. This I could not deny. I neither saw nor sought latitude for my reply: if the word was “snuff out Schulz,” Schulz



would have to go. Herr Doktor Schulz suggested I go and buy myself a copy of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and keep thinking about these matters. He let me know that he saw the whole business as a serious stumbling block in my development as an enlightened thinker.

I read the Kierkegaard and saw that the problem was not a new one. I read other commentators on a life of faith as well, none more obsessively than Aquinas, whose enormous effort to answer all possible questions struck me as simultaneously sublime and ridiculous. I felt that the *Summa* was a vast labyrinth: One could come to it with any giant and burning question about God, nature, or humanity. A look at the index promised a direct path to the answer. Flipping to the indicated page, one found that the issue had to be broken up into several promising parts, that each of these pulled one in a different direction, that within minutes one had marked fifteen related pages in four different volumes, and that full understanding of the answer to the original question seemed to depend on making one's way systematically through each of these subsections before returning to the principal question. This, of course, was just the beginning: Understanding any of the subsections seemed to depend on grasping yet another lattice of related bits, spread through still more diverse parts of this universal work. Hours and dozens of pages later, the thrusting query I had brought to the text—say, the origin of evil in a world created by a perfect God—would have dissipated into the effort to keep track of a raft of subtle definitions and variously overlapping categories. I found this delightful, though not, somehow, satisfying. The web of the text seemed to work to cushion every spiritual collapse, but it did not provide enough elastic virtue to throw me back up into the stars.

Thomas himself agreed, as it turns out. The story of his own direct revelation may well be apocryphal, but for me the legend held within it a parable for the polarity of spiritual life. It is said that as an old man Aquinas had some form of collapse while celebrating mass; that he withdrew for a time in silence; that, on addressing the shocked witnesses, he could say only, "Held beside what I have just seen, all my writing is as chaff." Before the incandescence of direct contact with the Divine, the *Summa*—for all its heft, for all the subtlety and brilliance of its reasoning—simply evaporated. This became the story I told myself when reason failed; for all the delights theological questions afforded the intellect, this whole enterprise—reasoning about God—was the merest frippery when one could catch a sense of the Divine in direct address. There was no substitute for the Word, the trembling imperatives one perceives without effort at appointed times.

For several years I taught undergraduate classes on the *Summa* as part of a great books curriculum. It is not an easy text to teach, precisely because no excerpt can really give students a sense of its mass and structure, and these are, in many ways, its most remarkable characteristics.

How does one teach a labyrinth? You can sketch a map from above, but this gives nothing of the experience of meandering through the halls and getting thoroughly lost; you can take students into a room or two to give them a sense of what it is like to be inside, but visiting a discrete room offers no sense of the pattern of passages. Doing research on the Web, I stumbled on a pedagogical solution: a Web site that presents the whole *Summa* in a sort of hypertext. Using it, students can “navigate” the text, moving down through the index to specific questions, back out to related questions and definitions. It is a text ideally suited to cyberspace—the anastomosing threads of the argument find a perfect analogue in the branching, looping framework of the hypertext. The students, adept at this sort of electronic reading, made their way through several assigned sections, and then followed my direction that they “surf” the *Summa* for an hour or so, long enough to get lost.

Words in webs make mazes, intricately hedged gardens for wandering and contemplating, but in Vico I had no interest in such leisurely promenades. My hero, by contrast, was Ezekiel, for whom words were not a vast and sprawling network but rather a tight little roll. Of all the pages I turned on that terrace under the lemon trees, no biblical story affected me as deeply as that of this prophet, whose “calling” seemed to capture the essence of divine address. Appearing before him, God presents a scroll, “written within and without,” and says simply, “Son of man, eat that thou findest; eat this roll.” For me the lesson was clear: one did not seek to explain things using words; rather, one took the word in, as a form of communion. One wonders if there is not something archetypal at stake in the contrast between these two kinds of text: a vast hypertext of rational theology at one’s fingers; a slim inscription on the tongue. They stand for words as reason on the one hand and words as revelation on the other. Here we have words vs. the Word. The former embodies the disseminative power of language—its ability to spin outward in widening and interconnected skeins; the latter shows the way words can work as seeds, as potent kernels—setting in motion vital forces, linking discontinuous realms. It is this latter *verbum* that is the special spell of the mystic.

If all theology is allegory, then all the words deployed therein amount to little more than an exhaustive circumlocution of the subject at hand. The membrane between the truth and the way we speak of it remains wholly intact, as the words remain here with us. They are our sounds and signs. They are dust we shake over the boundary between this world and the next, optimistic that, like iron filings cast on a sheet, they will move in sympathy with unseen and magnetic forces: We will not see the forces, or the magnet, but we will see something, and something not altogether insignificant. For the mystic, these patterns are not without beauty and meaning, but they do not satisfy. What is wanted in the place of these suggestive scatterings is nothing less than *the* Word, the word that is not

the sound of a thing, not its tracing, not its reflection, but the word that is the thing itself, the word that is made thing. Presented with that caesura between things and the way we speak of them, the mystic seeks the epiphany of elision: For an instant the tissue separating us from celestial things (from truth, God, light) seems to yield, and we know all ultimates in that impossible way—directly. It is as if the vehicle of the vast metaphor of language were suddenly to collide with its tenor. For a moment world and Word are one.

In the final canto of the *Paradiso* the pilgrim, having made an allegorical journey through the whole of the hereafter, rises to the “top” of Paradise. There he will, for one moment, “see” God. It is at this point, and at this point only, that the accommodative allegory of ninety-nine cantos must dissolve: Here there is no “like” or “as,” no “island” of purgatory or “rose” of Heaven. Without the conceit of allegory nothing at all can be said, and it is here, startlingly, that the poem ends. Words fail.

Obviously any of this language is itself an effort to put into words something that—if it is anything—is, by definition, beyond the scope of language. But the effort may yield some small fruit: For this business of the “word-made-thing” surely resonates with the opening of John’s Gospel, “And the Word was made flesh.” For Catholics it is indeed that flesh that one consumes in the sacrament of the Eucharist. If the flesh is the Word, and the bread becomes the flesh, then mass is a weekly rehearsal of Ezekiel’s prophetic encounter. It is literally a “communion” with God: The elegant doublings of the world collapse as the communicant passes to a direct encounter with the very stuff of eternity. Like Ezekiel, the Christian mystic *consumes the Word*. This moment constitutes the center of the mass. So potent did this encounter seem to me that I remember fearing that the wafer would scald me were I not suitably prepared to receive it. Theology was a web of words, but the mass was a communion with the Word.

**H**ow does all this end? Not how does belief itself end—belief in some abstract sense—but rather how does the immediate and passionate belief of the mystic dissipate?

I suspect that all married people, asked to recall the ceremony of their marriage, see instantly in the eye of mind one or two still images, the brightest facets of the highly worked surface of the memory. For me the first such image is looking to my right to hand Christina the chalice as we knelt side by side at the altar. Here we were, in communion with one another, but she would soon be in communion with God as well. As I had come from a curiously divided family—my mother deeply and seriously Catholic (she the Italian), my father absolutely without religion of any kind—I was fascinated by the prospect of a marriage built around a shared spiritual life. It turned out to be much harder than I expected. For

while I never doubted (indeed, do not now doubt) the seriousness of her “conversion” back to the religion of her grandparents, I could not exactly figure out (indeed, cannot now really figure out) what the whole business meant to her. Her earnest questions about the odder aspects of Christianity in general, and Catholicism in particular, gave me the opportunity to try to translate into words my own idiosyncratic, and often heterodox, perspective on the life of the soul. In trying to do so, in trying to put into words what had been the Word, I found myself talking rot, saying things I could tell rang false, things I myself did not believe. I was circumlocuting. I was translating, and things were coming back to me, as in the children’s game of whisper-down-the-lane, unrecognizable.

There was also the simple problem of being decent. It turns out, I discovered, that it was much easier to be pious by oneself, where one seldom had to confront, say, selfishness, because one was, in fact, selfish all the time but, for the most part, there was no one around to point it out. After a squabble, before bed, I felt absurd trying to pray—getting on my knees before some vast deity when I had proved incapable of being a generous person in the most immediate and local setting. Prayer, it turns out, had been enormously dependent on solitude. Praying in front of Christina felt like a performance (as well as an odd sort of turning away from her), but praying with her felt thoroughly artificial. She was very candid that, committed as she was to the principles of Christian life, she found the notion of an intimate, personal God entirely alien. She had shaken her early touch of messianism, and had no truck with numinous communiqués from the beyond; the fact that I did made no sense to her. She saw Christianity as a way of treating others in the world, not a way of glowing from within as one left the world. I had tried to send my notion of the Divinity across the boundary between us, and in the process I was losing my grip on just what, precisely, I thought I was talking about. Leaving the company of this present, real person to drift in the company of an increasingly nebulous Almighty seemed at best foolish, at worst a betrayal. I had set off on a conversion, and had come back confounded.

The actual stuff of Christian doctrine did not help. From the enclosed world of my mystical devotions I had never taken the time to think seriously about the place of women in the Catholic church and of the broader implications of certain quite fundamental tenets of Christianity—the Virgin Birth comes to mind—for attitudes toward sexuality in general and women in particular. As for the nonordination of women in Catholicism, it became clear to me, with Christina’s help, that it would be very difficult for us to raise a daughter in a community that argued that men and women had different sacramental relationships to God. Increasingly, I found myself, at mass, unwilling to say portions of the Creed. Christina, who knew the prayers in Spanish from her youth, had yet to learn them in English. We were both silent.

We are past this. The escape demanded a change of venue: for her, toward something more familiar; for me, toward something less so. Christina and I still go to mass every week, but we assiduously avoid attending services in English. For the last four years we have attended Spanish masses in Hispanic communities in New Haven and New York. The shift has meant a scrim between me and the service, for while I can make my way through a text in Spanish, I am not at all fluent, and I find myself meandering through the words of the readings and homily, with a vague sense of what is going on but without a very literal sense of any of it. This gauzy experience is, for me, less and less about God and more and more about goodness in general and a vague longing for peace and justice. The denotative and potent words of the consecration follow the same cadences as in English, but they have become sounds for me, a pattern of devotion at one remove from my inner voice. Present, I am an outsider, and it is only this that lets me stay. The experience of the mass is no longer one of union and communion, but one of drifting, weightlessly, through music that seems familiar but remains always strange.

Of course, I had been to masses in many foreign tongues before this, but the language had always seemed incidental to the sacramental power of the event, which remained beyond translation. Now the foreignness of the language is itself a sacrament, an outward sign of an inward state of grace (or, in this case, perhaps the lack thereof). I simply allow myself to go to sea in the waves of senseless words that others are offering to God. If once I went to mass to taste that powerful scroll, now I go for the soothing sense of pouring myself out in a web of psalms and songs, arcane gestures, hand-holdings, signs of peace. From a sense that the mass took place between me and my God, I have come increasingly to think of its taking place between Christina and me, and between us as a couple and the other members of the congregation: I feel as if I have abandoned the Word for the words, abandoned the direct line for the vast network of believers who are the church. I once complained that the web of words did not have sufficient spring to throw me to the stars; now I am content that it holds me close, like a hammock, suspended at a great height over darkness.

I have lost something. Lost a bounteous certainty that came with gathering the seeds of heaven that I sensed fell to me at times, and that, nurtured, grew like the beanstalk of fable: grew until they pierced back into the heavens from which they came, affording passage to another world. But if once I had faith in the potent force of the Word, I have lately developed a new kind of faith in the web of words that I once despised. The Word may have the force to animate and impel action, but the meandering web of words possesses a kind of counter-virtue, a disseminative power. While once I thought of this as a mere maze, a distraction from the business of breaking through to the divine, I now sense that this

centrifugal force of language has its own value in the context of the spiritual life.

For an example of this circumlocutory ethic, take the familiar story in John's Gospel in which the scribes and the Pharisees bring to Jesus a woman who has violated the law, and put to him the vexatious question of her punishment: Since Moses said she should be stoned, should she not be stoned? The evangelist records that in answer to this pressing juridical question, "Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not." When pressed, he utters the memorable encouragement to the sinless among the company—that they ought to cast the *melée*-launching stone. But then, immediately after speaking, Jesus is back at his inscrutable work, writing quietly in the dust, waiting for the crowd to disperse.

In this elusive gesture, I think, lies much of the story's power. For the crowd disperses slowly. Slowly. It takes quite a hungry, boisterous rabble to pulp a living person with loose paving stones. But the rising wave of their intention broke on the passive stillness of the Rabbi, and then it trickled away into the ring of grooves He traced in the sand. Here is a parable for the virtues of doodling glyphs absentmindedly in the dust, a parable of the virtues of getting lost in the web of things. The potency of divine direct address may impel us to action, but the meandering web of words, traced out before us at the right moment, can forestall disaster, can diffuse explosive forces. Many of our enterprises ought to be poured out quietly into runnels in the sand.

Increasingly attentive to the words, to the tracings in the dusty antiquity of the liturgy, I hope to throw few stones in this life; at the same time, I realize, I am not likely, robbed of divine fire, to "save" India or any other place.

"**Y**ou know, Tembu," explains the failed storyteller Mira Jama in Isak Dinesen's majestic tale *The Dreamers*, "that if, in planting a coffee tree, you bend the taproot, that the tree will start, after a little time, to put out a multitude of delicate roots near the surface." These tendrils are rhizomic consolations—they spread out wide and the plant thrives, in its way: no fruit, only flowers. As Mira Jama puts it: "These fine roots are the dreams of the tree. As it puts them out, it need no longer think of its bent taproot. It keeps alive by them—a little, not very long. Or you can say that it dies by them, if you like." And so in faith there is a taproot, and it can be bent. The tree does not die, exactly.

How does mysticism happen? Where does it go? It comes from the sky, and it ends in the dust. It starts with powerful prayers, with a legible world, with fearsome messages that arrive unannounced. It ends in dreamy sleep, in the sweet muddle of foreign tongues, in words that say, but do not say—cannot say—the thing they mean.