

# THE MYSTICAL FORMATION OF PAUL TILLICH

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References to mysticism abound in Paul Tillich's theology; and indeed Tillich insists on the presence of a mystical element in all religion. Yet quite unlike the situation of another thinker well-associated with mysticism, William James, biographers of Tillich have largely neglected the question of links between his life experiences and his interest in mysticism. Nor does Tillich himself explicitly draw such ties beyond brief comments on nature and on the holy in *My Search for Absolutes*. But significant and varied connections do exist. So this project takes up the biographical task of examining how Tillich's life experiences encouraged him to valorize mysticism and to construe the mystical in the manner he did. This project will also involve theological analysis and evaluation with relevant references to Tillich's theology and my own reflections on Tillich's life in relation to his thought. It draws especially upon the well-regarded biographies by Wilhelm and Marian Pauck and by David Hopper as well as Tillich's autobiographical *On the Boundary* and *My Search for Absolutes* and his pieces on art and religion.

In relation to both Tillich's life experiences and theology, the intellectual milieu of German Romantic idealism with its mystical tendencies, and more particularly the thought of Schelling and, through Schelling, Boehme (Thomas 45-46), of course lie in the background. The mystically formative concrete events and experiences fall into three main categories: 1) nature 2) World War I and 3) art.

Consonant with German Romantic fascination with nature were Tillich's own

encounters with the natural world. He recalls “actual communication with nature daily in my early years,” including many “memorable instances of ‘mystical participation’” (1967). The natural settings for this communication included sailing, hiking through the Brandenburg countryside, and activities in the family garden (Pauck & Pauck 11). The ocean constituted for Tillich an especially powerful source for communion with nature and its source. Already at the age of eight Tillich wrestled with the idea of infinity while gazing upon the Baltic Sea (Pauck & Pauck 8). We might label this Tillich’s “oceanic” experience! In *On the Boundary* he reveals that “the infinite bordering on the finite suited my inclination toward the boundary situation.” It provided an imaginative element for conceiving of “the Absolute as both ground and abyss of dynamic truth” (18; see also 30). (These early mystical experiences with nature offer an interesting counterpoint to Tillich’s later musings about mysticism in relation to art: Courbet’s painting, *Wave*, evoked from Tillich the exclamation that he “never really saw the ocean” before! [1987:148].) In *My Search* Tillich explains his disagreement with Ritschlian theology’s postulate of an “infinite gap between nature” and the human personality, allowing “no mystical participation in nature, no understanding” of its “finite expression of the infinite ground, no vision of the divine-demonic conflict in nature.” (25). In the same work he casts his vote for the “infra-Lutheranum” over the “extra-Calvinisticum,” because the former affirms for Tillich “the presence of the infinite in everything finite,” “that nature mysticism is possible and real.” (26). Not surprisingly Schelling wins praise from Tillich for expressing the import of these encounters with nature: Schelling’s philosophy of nature “became the direct expression of my feeling for nature.” (1966:17).

We can hardly underestimate the influence of World War I on Paul Tillich. It

represented both personal emotional collapse (in today's terminology Tillich suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome) and a collapse of modern German—and in some ways modern Western—society. So we should expect it would have profound influence on his theology and on his perspective on mysticism. To facilitate consideration of World War I's effect on Tillich, I will utilize William James' categories of religious personality: the healthy-minded or once-born soul versus the sick soul or divided self driven to achieve integration through a "second birth." Besides the positive experiences of nature we have discussed, Tillich's childhood also offered intellectual challenges and successes, a comfortable relationship with his father's churches, and a generally happy family life. On this latter score, by all accounts Tillich received unconditional love from his mother, whom he adored. While fear was a definite ingredient in his relationship with his father (Pauck & Pauck 30) and he repressed his mother's death from the age of seventeen (Pauck & Pauck 14), Tillich entered young adulthood as a fundamentally healthy-minded and untroubled self. In so doing, Tillich's life paralleled the optimistic, once-born self-assessment of the German culture and culture Protestantism of that time. But Tillich's World War I service as a military chaplain profoundly changed matters.

Tillich eventually had bouts with depression and anxiety that left him unable to function. But long before these, Tillich wrote from the front lines, "True experience has its roots in suffering and happiness is a blossom which opens itself up only now and then." (Pauck & Pauck 43). As the extent of the carnage grew, Tillich indicated that he no longer thought of his own death but that death's force gripped his whole being (Pauck & Pauck 46). When a friend was killed, Tillich managed to do the funeral liturgy but found himself incapable of preaching (Pauck & Pauck 51). Though it was not as terrible

as the first, when Tillich endured his second major episode of depression and anxiety, the repetition caused him to write that he “could not stand it any more.” He also penned, “Body and soul are broken and can never be entirely repaired ...” (Pauck & Pauck 54). (Note the parallel to James’ depressive incidents in young adulthood, albeit the apparent causes in James had more to do with internal brain chemistry than with external events.) In relation to Schelling’s thought Tillich now saw the lack of an adequate tragic element, an element for which he had seen no need due to the once-born nature of his prior life.

Hopper quotes Tillich from his *Interpretation of History* :

The World War in my own experience was the catastrophe of idealistic thinking in general. Even Schelling’s philosophy was drawn into this catastrophe. .... If a reunion of theology and philosophy should again become possible, it could be achieved only in such a way as would do justice to this experience of the abyss of our existence. (30[35])

The eight and one-half million dead and twenty-one million wounded of World War I exacted their toll on many. World War I changed Tillich into a “sick soul,” a divided self, ready for a twice-born experience of transformation. Art would provide the context for precisely that kind of experience.

Tillich did recognize the importance of art for his theology of culture but only rarely connected it explicitly to his own valorization of the mystical. I will argue that art became his template for transformation in a mystical vein through the interplay of form and substance or import, both for his personal faith and for his theology. Growing up Tillich already had a type of mystical experience through art, more specifically architecture, but lacked the tools to put it into words at the time. Living between a

Lutheran school and a beautiful Gothic church, Tillich experienced what he later identified as “the holy,” “an indestructible good” (1967:28). Indeed, Tillich immediately understood Rudolph Otto’s *Idea of the Holy* in light of those experiences. Furthermore, his reflections on the implications of the holy while reading Otto led him to a positive “reevaluation of Christian and non-Christian mysticism.” (1967:28-29). Interestingly, Tillich had an early interest in becoming an architect (Scharlemann 157).

Tillich’s decisive experience relative to art and mysticism occurred on his last furlough of World War I, which overlapped the end of that terrible War. He had turned to studying magazines and books with classic works of art to provide some sense of hope and beauty, some link to sanity, in the midst of the despair and ugliness of the Western front. One of the works he had viewed in the trenches was Botticelli’s “Madonna with Singing Angels.” Tillich now rushed into the Kaiser Friedrich Museum to view the original. The setting of the painting called attention to the work: it hung alone on the wall opposite the entrance (Pauck & Pauck 76). Gazing up at it, an ultimate meaning grasped Tillich. The traditional religious content (Inhalt) had nothing to do with this effect. Rather the form(s) of the colors and their spatial arrangement became the vehicle for experiencing a divine depth content (Gehalt). Recollecting this moment for *Parade* magazine in 1955, Tillich wrote, “... Beauty itself ... shone through the colors of the paint as the light of day shines through the stained-glass windows of a medieval church. .... I turned away shaken.” (Note the architectural reference.) Tillich concluded, “I know now that the picture is not the greatest. I have seen greater since then. But that moment of ecstasy has never been repeated.” It constituted for Tillich a second birth that “brought vital joy and spiritual truth” to a sick soul. It also gave to him “the keys for the

interpretation of human existence,” providing the basis for his theology of culture.

(1987:235)

Several features of this experience became keys for Tillich’s theology, especially for his theology of mystical experience. I will highlight them now as denouement to my consideration of this life-changing event and as prelude to wider treatment of Tillich’s theology of mysticism and art. Tillich understood this as an ecstatic experience, where one stands outside of oneself, indeed where one experiences a unity beyond the ordinary subject-object structure. It entails a breakdown of or a breaking through the normal perception and understanding of forms and their sense. At the same time perception of form is transformed rather than superseded—the forms remain a necessary and vital part of the experience.

Despite his many published articles and lectures on religion and art, Tillich never systematically developed his theology of mysticism and art. While still pastor at Moabit, he did speak on “The Mysticism of Art and Religious Mysticism” (Pauck & Pauck 37). Unfortunately the content of that speech is not extant. That he titled his presentation that way, though, does suggest the importance of art for Tillich’s understanding of mysticism. Robert Scharlemann (162-63) and John Dillenger (xxii-xxiii) have noted the variations in Tillich’s typologies of art which all revolve around artistic styles and their respective conduciveness or non-conduciveness for revelation of the divine. Tillich varied his approach depending upon context, realizing that an absolute scheme of categorization was neither possible nor desirable. Nevertheless, despite much variety in terminology and sometimes major shifts in his assessments of individual artists and movements representative of certain styles, I will argue that an underlying consistency runs through

Tillich's oeuvre on artistic style. Indeed, some of the tensions, polarities, or dialectics in his analysis of style themselves constitute consistent features of that analysis.

In a nutshell, artistic style determines the interplay of form and substance. To elaborate, form potentially interacts with substance on two levels: the ordinary or surface content (*Inhalt*) and the extraordinary, depth content (*Gehalt*). An important background note to keep in mind: for Tillich *any* finite reality can become the vehicle of revelation for someone. So when we theologically analyze artistic styles, we presume a certain modesty: some styles are more conducive than others for intuiting the divine, and some styles indeed put up barriers to revelation; but *no* style or individual painting automatically disqualifies itself from the possibility of becoming the vehicle for an ecstatic experience.

Certain realistic or naturalistic styles call attention to their finite content in and of itself. Some of these also have idealizing elements that exaggerate the present reality or depict the future glory of the subject matter. But the key point is that this idealized reality does not depend upon the infinite divine but possesses its being and glory through and by itself. This is the "self-sufficient finitude" Tillich decried. This kind of realism does not look beyond itself as does a critical or prophetic realism. For most of his career Tillich criticized impressionism for that kind of attitude, for limiting itself to a technical approach to light and surface and/or for its idealizing of bourgeois life (for example, 1987:61-62). (Late in his life, though, he had kinder words for impression's mystical tendencies, which probably represent a fairer assessment given the continuities between Cezanne, whom he lionized, and the impressionists [1987:146, 187].) For Tillich the worst kind of naturalism took religious symbols as its subject matter but left them in their

self-satisfied finitude. Tillich bristled at such sentimental or complacent kitsch with the outrage appropriate to witnessing blasphemy or desecration. A self-sufficient realism or naturalism then is the type of artistic style that erects substantial barriers to the breakthrough of the divine. Significantly, except in his early works, Tillich usually identifies the demonic with the finite which claims absoluteness for itself (for example, 1987:108).

Expressionism for Tillich is not just a modern artistic movement centered in Germany but a style that appears in many periods of history and pre-history. If the above realism is the bad-boy of artistic styles, expressionism is the hero. Expressionistic style uses forms in a manner that does not restrict our attention to the ordinary content (Inhalt) but alters forms so as to permit an in-breaking of an infinite depth content (Gehalt) through the forms. In Tillich's words, "The expressive element in a style implies a radical transformation of the ordinarily encountered reality by using elements of it in a way which does not exist in the ordinarily encountered reality. Expression disrupts the naturally given appearance of things." (1987:123). In a similar vein Tillich expounds that the "expressionistic element" breaks "the surface of reality," "it pierces into its ground; it reshapes it, reorders the elements in order more powerfully to express meaning. It exaggerates some elements over against others." (1987:177). In theonomous periods (when culture has an integrity whose expression harmonizes with its sense of ultimate reality), as in primal prehistory and in Byzantine, Romanesque, and Gothic, either everyday or explicitly religious subject matter can constitute the Inhalt, though with bending or alteration of form that encourages the divine ground and abyss to break through for the observer. Already in "Art and Society," Tillich identified a "positive

expressionistic style” “in which the spiritual substance shines through the natural forms of reality” (1987:31). In “Art and Ultimate Reality” Tillich refers to this type of expressionism as “numinous realism” in relation to primal art. Its depictions make things “strange, mysterious, laden with an ambiguous power. It uses space-relations, body stylization, uncanny expressions for this purpose.” (1987:143ff). Positive expressionistic elements also “are effective and even dominating in many styles” of Western religious art. In general, expressionism allows “(u)ltimate reality to appear ‘breaking the prison of our form’ .... It breaks to pieces the surface of our own being and that of our world.” (1987:150). But in theonomous periods it only partially negates: it also affirms the Inhalt, the everyday content or traditional symbolic religious content.

In other periods, especially the modern one, a fundamental harmony between the culture and the ultimate, the ordinary on the one hand and divine power and purpose on the other, has vanished. Meaninglessness constitutes the primary spiritual threat in such a period. And here another form of expressionism may come forth. Here the ordinary Inhalt of the culture can in no wise be affirmed. Instead of merely bending the forms of ordinary reality or even breaking them to a degree that still allows reintegration, this expressionism destroys them (though, as we shall see later it is the ordinary perception and meaning of the forms that is lost, not all form). In “Art and Society” Tillich referred to a “negative” or “critical” expressionism that “shows the demonic, disruptive elements in the depths of reality, not through their content, but through the style of its creations.” (1987:31). (Note that here, common in the early Tillich, “demonic” refers to the abysmal element in the infinite that resists any attempt by the finite to claim absoluteness for itself (1987:31).

In his 1922 article, “Mass and Personality,” Tillich discerned a “mystical mass” embodied in the crowds depicted in theonomous, expressive medieval religious art. Medieval society constituted a mystical body in this worldview. Given that culture’s understanding of its religious symbols, this mysticism, though experienced within the finite, breaks in transcendently, from above. With the negative type by contrast,

*It is the mass of immanent mysticism that expressionism reveals [emphasis Tillich’s] .... The end is linked with the beginning. A new mystical mass is in the making, except that the mysticism is not guided supranaturally, from above, but remains immanent in the reality of this world, breaking forth from the depths of the soul. (1987:64).*

Some scholars have debated whether the New Realism or “belief-ful realism” permanently superseded Expressionism for Tillich, whether in terms of a particular artistic movement or a wider style. We can find the answer in light of our above discussion. Tillich hoped that the modern West might someday regain a theonomous culture—a culture where art could affirm the symbols of ordinary reality as well as of more explicitly religious reality, bending them to allow the divine mystically to break through, rather than a culture that only permitted such a breakthrough through their destruction. And initially Tillich believed that the New Realism signaled a positive breakthrough, where the forms and subject matter depicted could be affirmed in a culture or subculture becoming theonomous (for example, 1929:65ff; 1956:57ff). In later works, however, he doubted that the New Realism had succeeded in that difficult mission (1987:99,124,152,169-70). To the question of whether art with both a religious style and religious content was possible, he answered, “Sometimes ... I am willing to say that it is

possible. Sometimes I am not willing to say so.” (1987:98-99). Regarding straightforwardly positive religious symbols, Tillich commented even more negatively: “Symbols such as the resurrection have not found any adequate artistic representation and so it is with the other traditional ‘symbols of glory.’” (1987:124). Tillich’s last word regarding theonomous art was, “We cannot force it, as we cannot force the resurrection of the God who died ...” (1987:170). The implication of that apparent failure was that the most success the New Realism could expect in mid-twentieth century Western culture was that of Expressionism: to break down or negate the forms and their ordinary content enough to allow the infinite depth to shine through. Interestingly, a comment from “Ueber die Idee einer Theologie er Kultur” suggests that Tillich believed the Expressionists themselves were trying to affirm content and symbol but likewise had failed:

Thus, a No and a Yes come to expression in great depth in this art. But the No, the form-destroying element, seems to me to have the upper hand throughout, even though this is not the intention of the artist, for in him there pulsates a passionate will to a new, unconditional Yes. (41-42)

If we keep in mind that Tillich intended none of his typology to be absolute, that a particular piece of art usually included several stylistic elements, we realize that typing a piece or an artistic movement is a matter of degrees. Thus, whether a work with expressionistic elements exhibits a bending or even breaking of—while still affirming, form, content, symbol, sense—versus destroying same is not an all or nothing matter. We can probably conclude, however, that Tillich eventually came to the judgment that neither the New Realism nor any other artistic movement on the whole succeeded in both

expressing the divine depth content and affirming its own forms and surface content.

And in terms of the broadest typology of artistic styles, numinous realism, theonomous religious art, Expressionism, and the New Realism are all expressionistic.

Before we move to the third major type in my analysis of Tillich on art, religion, and mysticism, I will say a stylistic word about Tillich's ecstatic, mystical experience of Botticelli's *Madonna*. In terms of Tillich's general assessment of Renaissance art, in its own cultural period the painting would most likely have been received in a realistic manner, indeed, in a self-sufficient naturalistic mode. At best, enough expressive elements might have been accessible so that the Renaissance viewer could have had a theonomous experience where the ordinary religious content was affirmed while allowing the divine depth content to break through. For Tillich, however, the religious content or *Inhalt* constituted no part of his experience: that content and the ordinary sense of the forms were destroyed. So for Tillich in the twentieth-century, the artistic style that functioned in his apprehension of the *Madonna with Singing Angels* was a negative expressionism.

Given that the two broadest types of artistic style covered thus far entail, respectively, self-sufficient finite content that neglects the infinite versus expressive finite content that reveals infinite depth, exhausting the abstract logical possibilities would leave the following third type of style: infinite depth that attempts to eliminate finite content (as much as possible). I add the parenthetical remark because visual art by its nature involves an indispensable finite medium. Only once, in "Art and Ultimate Reality," does Tillich explicitly identify this arguably counter-intuitive "mystical" artistic style (1987:145ff). Such a style is analogous to "the mystical type" of religion that "tries

to reach ultimate reality without the mediation of particular things” (145). Some variants of this general mystical style merely dissolve particularities “into a visual continuum,” hiding but not eliminating the potential particularity of things. One example Tillich offers is “Chinese landscapes in which air and water symbolize the cosmic unity, and individual rocks or branches hardly dare emerge to an independent existence.” (145-46). We might subsume this variety of “mystical” style under expressionism broadly construed, in that air and water in this example are altered sufficiently from their natural appearance to reveal something of the ultimate divine source. Interestingly, Tillich here also talks of impressionism as entailing a continuum where things “hardly dare to become fully individual.” (146).

A more radical version of mystical style must stand on its own, namely, “non-objective painting” (146). In his works that develop the types of religion, Tillich weighs in with a decisive negative judgment against any form of mysticism that attempts to utterly transcend or bypass the finite (for example, 1951:140, 1952:186, 1959:28). Not only is such an attempt practically impossible—even the most rarefied mystical experiences are mediated by a tradition and meditative techniques—but also theologically impossible: the infinite is never experienced apart from finite mediation or expression in the finite, for metaphysically the two partake in a dialectical relationship. In his “Introduction” to *On Art and Architecture*, John Dillenger opines that Tillich’s instincts about Abstract Expressionism “were not negative, but undeveloped.” (xxi). I suspect otherwise. Tillich countenanced the destruction of form in Expressionism precisely in that it strove for new forms even as it destroyed the old. Tillich describes an immanentism in *Visual Arts and the Revelatory Character of Style*:

Not even the elements of encountered reality are any longer of interest but only the relation of colors in an unordered-ordered geometrical network. Here the point is reached in which the physical material of every painting is transformed itself into a painting. But this painting does not transcend the material and its inner relations (1987:137).

And in *Religious Dimensions of Contemporary Art* he pens,

Nevertheless, in spite of this breaking to pieces, this piercing into the underground, this distortion and reduction of dimensions, this exaggeration—expressionism still exhibits artistic form; it discloses the unity of sense impressions, the unity which embraces a manifoldness. In this manifoldness, the whole and the broken, the totality and the parts, are united by the integral act of the artist in creating his new aesthetic form. (1987:177).

Expressionist style then does not try to outstrip all form. I surmise that Tillich had theological qualms about some manifestations of Abstract Expressionism and other schools of non-objective art of the mid-twentieth century, because they did attempt to use their minimalist forms in a kind of purely abstract, instrumental manner that involved their own destruction in order to induce a supposed experience of the naked infinite, rather than creating a new aesthetic form.

While John Dourley and Daniel Peterson disagree as to whether God in Boehme's thought derives fulfillment from what happens in time, they concur that Boehme, like Eckhart before him, posits an absolute divine fulfillment belonging to a timeless, formless dimension—and which humans can also experience in a mystical state that absolutely surpasses any distinction between subject and object, an utterly unmediated

experience of the God beyond God. In this case, as Dourley puts it, “the abyss which craves form for its self-completion, would cede to a deeper abyss which does not” (14). Dourley concludes that Tillich would have taken his theology in a more expansive direction if he had followed the lead of those two German mystics. Yet Tillich was aware of that option and deliberately spurned it. Instead he threw in his lot with Schelling: while God as infinite ground and abyss is not limited to any particular finite forms, neither does God achieve an absolute fulfillment apart from expression in and through some finite forms. Tillich’s beatification of expressive artistic style is fully in keeping with this fundamental theological judgment. Expressive art participates in the divine fulfillment through the creation.

That an explicit mystical experience could occur in the context not only of nature—obvious in the German Romantic tradition—or of the religious per se, but of secular art, provided key support for Tillich’s epistemology of a universal mystical connection with the divine. This carried Tillich far beyond his early intellectual interest in the German mystical tradition. While I have just highlighted the finite as necessary and substantive for realization of the depths of meaning for both humans and God, I will now conclude that Tillich’s World War I journey and his appropriation of classical Christian theology conspired to mute this crucial role for finite form. (As my theological mentor, Ronald L. Williams, often proclaimed, “theologians take away with the left hand what they’ve just given you with the right.”) While Dourley rightly interprets Tillich’s understanding of the divine life to always entail the Logos element of form, he regards Tillich’s notion of essentialization in Volume 3 of the *Systematic* as a decisive change whereby Tillich finally allows that *creaturely and human* forms contribute to divine

blessedness and fulfillment (15). Developed at greater length elsewhere, I would offer a different interpretation that involves a position consistent with the whole Tillichian corpus, albeit a position never fully developed in an explicit manner: whatever finite forms creatures realize or fail to realize, God overcomes and purges the negative and makes up in eternity the gap between the creature's existence and its essential goodness. In that sense God's fulfillment in and through the world is "beyond potentiality and actuality" (for example, 1951:251:52). God needs to create the world for complete blessedness, but that fulfillment does not depend on creaturely realization of certain forms over against certain other forms. (Nikkel:173ff). Parallel to this unambiguous fulfillment in eternity beyond history's ambiguities is an archetype for religious experiences especially evident in *The Courage to Be*: In the midst of an existence at best ambiguous, an absolute meaning and fulfillment breaks through the despair, depression, and doubt, and through the forms and the substance of the finite, all of which may be lost in an abyss of meaninglessness. The finite forms here at best represent a hope that sometime concrete meaning may yet (re)appear. In this mystical experience, we find "the courage to be," an absolute assurance of the meaningfulness of one's life in the absence of any concrete evidence. One may discern here a tragic element in Tillich's theology as well as a dialectical dimension that sounds a note of dualism. Yes, Tillich never denies the cruciality of the finite for expression of an absolute divine meaning. However, this absolute fulfillment appears to lose any concrete connection to our life! Yet this is the kind of fulfillment for which a sick soul yearns. But Tillich was hardly alone. Did not Neo-Orthodox or Crisis Theology in the wake of the First World War typically evince a tragic as well as dialectical-tending-towards-dualistic tenor? It should not surprise us that

Tillich, rooted in that era, never did find a school of art that he could unambiguously endorse as furnishing a mystical expression of the divine in tandem with an affirmation of the forms of his culture. Today we might ask, if we have entered a new postmodern period, has or will a style of art arise that fulfills such a positive expressionist role? Or does the postmodern signal that we must abandon any hope or pretense of a truly immediate mystical encounter?

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