CHAPTER FIVE

BUBER’S MYSTICISM DURING THE DIALOGICAL PERIOD: UNITY, ECSTASY AND INCLUSIVENESS

Creation—happens to us, burns into us, changes us, we tremble and swoon, we submit. Creation—we participate in it, we encounter the creator, offer ourselves to him, helpers and companions. (Buber, I and Thou, 130)

1. Introduction

The change that occurred over the years of Buber’s work was not only in his mysticism per se, but also in his way of defining mysticism. As we have seen above (Chapter 1.4), during the first decade of the twentieth century Buber characterized mysticism by means of two paradigms, positive and negative. From the beginning of the second decade, he began to characterize it by means of only one, negative paradigm, albeit removing it from the unique psychological state that he wished to foster. From 1913 on in particular, Buber criticized mysticism quite sharply, no less so than would a rationalist. Thus, in his essay “With a Monist” (1914), he identified it with the negation of things in the world, declaring of himself that he was not a mystic: “for I still grant to reason a claim that the mystic must deny to it. Beyond this, I lack the mystic’s negation. I can negate convictions but never the slightest actual thing.” Nevertheless, he continued to stress the importance of the unique a-rational dimension in reality, by whose means and within which man operates with a unifying tendency: “all comprehensibility of the world is only a footstool of its incomprehensibility” (“With a

1 Buber, “With a Monist,” 28. It is therefore quite surprising to note Buber’s later withdrawal, in his essay “God and the Soul” [1945], from his position in “With A Monist,” in which he states that mysticism tends towards abolishing the multiplicity within reality: “What is decisive is… not the dissolution of the phenomenal multiplicity, but that of the constructive duality, the duality of experiencing I and experienced object, is the decisive factor, that which is peculiar to mysticism in the exact sense.” (Buber, “God and the Soul,” 185). On this essay see below, §4.
Monist,” 27). Neither is the essence of man accessible to the realm of knowledge:

then self, the hidden lark, soars upward out of the circle [of rational understanding—IK] and warbles. You have dissected and partitioned the I, yet there it soars untouched above your artifices, the untouchable one (ibid. 26)… The world is not comprehensible, but it is embraceable: through embracing one of its beings…2 and it is in this state that man enters into the realm of “the great reality.”

It was self-evident to Bergman that the non-rational realm depicted in “With a Monist” is mystical, notwithstanding Buber’s determined statements denying that he was a mystic:

Buber rejects mysticism if this be understood to mean that the mystic negates the world and believes that he will find beyond it a path to God… There is a route to the inwardness of the world which is neither that of reason nor yet of world-negating mysticism… “The world is not comprehensible, but it is embraceable: through the embracing of one of its beings”… This is clearly a mystical approach to the world, whether or not we desire to term it that.

Bergman’s sweeping statement that Buber does not reject mysticism as such, but only world-negating mysticism, is based not only upon a phenomenological analysis of his statements in “With a Monist,” but also upon his later comments (1927) about the Baal Shem Tov, in which he attributed to the Baal Shem Tov a realistic and activist mysticism which does not negate the world, and which he characterized using his dialogical terminology.5 Indeed, in his essay on the Baal

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2 Buber, ibid. On contact with the absolute reality that lies behind the world of phenomena as expressing a mystical state, see Maréchal, Studies, 116.
3 Buber, ibid. On this embrace-encompassing, see below, Ch. 10.2, in which we deal with Buber’s thought regarding love.
4 Bergman, “Buber and Mysticism,” 298–299. Cf. Smith’s words about mysticism, that are consistent both with what Buber says in “With A Monist” and with Bergman’s statements: “Mysticism, therefore, is not to be regarded as a religion in itself, but rather as the most vital element in all true religions, rising up in revolt against cold formality and religious torpor… It is to be described rather as an attitude of mind; an innate tendency of the human soul, which seeks to transcend reason and to attain to a direct experience of God, and which believes that it is possible for the human soul to be united with Ultimate Reality, when ‘God ceases to be an object and becomes an experience’” (Smith, “The Nature and Meaning of Mysticism,” 20).
5 Bergman, “Buber and Mysticism,” 304–305; Buber, “The Baal-Shem-Tov’s Instruction,” 171–173. And see my discussion of the internalization of the realistic-activist mysticism attributed by Buber to the Baal Shem Tov in his I and Thou (below, Ch. 7). And cf. Kaufmann’s comment: “Buber taught me that mysticism need not lead