Since this vision is among the most sublime [...], there are no means by which those of us who know little here below can explain it.

Teresa of Avila¹

Not only because of this inability to understand contemplation is it called ‘secret’ but also because of the effects it produces in the soul. The wisdom of love is not secret merely in the darknesses and straits of the soul’s purgation (for the soul does not know how to describe it) but also afterwards in the illumination, when it is communicated more clearly. Even then it is so secret that it is ineffable. Not only does a man feel unwilling to give expression to this wisdom, but he finds no adequate means or similitude to signify so sublime an understanding and delicate a spiritual feeling.

John of the Cross²

I do not think anyone who has not had such experience will understand this well. But, since the soul experiencing this is aware that what she has so


² Juan de la Cruz, Obras completas, ed. L. Ruano de la Iglesia (11th ed., Madrid: 1982) 398 (Noche oscura, 2.17.3): ‘Y no sólo por esto se puede llamar secreta, sino también por los efectos que hace en el alma, porque no solamente en las tinieblas y aprietos de la purgación, cuando esta sabiduría de amor purga el alma, es secreta para no saber decir de ella el alma nada, mas también después en la iluminación, cuando más a las claras se le comunica esta sabiduría, le es el alma tan secreta para decir y ponerle nombre para decirlo, que, demás de que ninguna gana le dé al alma de decirla, no halla modo ni manera ni simil que le cuadre para poder significar inteligencia tan subida y sentimiento espiritual tan delicado’. Trans. from Juan of the Cross, The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross, trans. K. Kavanaugh – O. Rodriguez (Washington, D.C.: 1979) 368–369.
sublimely experienced remains beyond her understanding, she calls it ‘I-don’t-know-what’. Since it is not understandable, it is indescribable, although, as I say, one may know what the experience of it is.

– John of the Cross

The height of divine experiences cannot be expressed in words.

– Juan de Jésus Maria

Words cannot describe the mystic’s experience. Can pictures do any better? How does one describe or depict that which occurs outside or beyond the senses? In order to be effective, attempts at such description and such depiction call upon the sensory apparatus of both the writer/artist and the reader/viewer, and doubly so: through the sight of words and images and through the memory of sensations like those adduced in the descriptions and depictions. Recourse – ultimately inadequate – is in most instances to metaphor and other figurative devices. In early modern devotional practice, all the senses were engaged, but writers consistently asserted that the purest experience of, or union with, God can occur only outside the senses because God, being uncircumscribable, cannot be fully apprehended through the senses.

Although the line of demarcation between the sometimes complementary practices of meditation and contemplation is not always clear, meditation may be seen as a mental image-making activity: the votary is encouraged and instructed to produce mental images of biblical history, and pictorial images in a variety of media may be useful as meditative prompts. Contemplation, or mystical theology – that is,

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3 Juan de la Cruz, Obras completas 598 (Cantico espiritual [B], 7.9): ‘Esto creo no lo acabará bien de entender el que no lo hubiere experimentado; pero el alma que lo experimenta, come ve que se le queda por entender aquello de que altamente siente, llámalo un no sé qué; porque así como no se entiende, así tampoco se sabe decir, aunque (como he dicho) se sabe sentir’. Trans. from Juan of the Cross, Complete Works 440. Cf. idem, Obras completas 722 (Cantico espiritual [B], 39.3): ‘que no hay decirlo por lengua mortal’.


5 Likewise, verbal accounts engage the sense of hearing.