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On the Relationship Between Cognitive Models and Spiritual Maps

*Evidence from Hebrew Language Mysticism**

It is suggested that the impetus to generate models is probably the most fundamental point of connection between mysticism and psychology. In their concern with the relation between 'unseen' realms and the 'seen', mystical maps parallel cognitive models of the relation between 'unconscious' and 'conscious' processes. The map or model constitutes an explanation employing terms current within the respective canon. The case of language mysticism is examined to illustrate the premise that cognitive models may benefit from an understanding of the kinds of experiences gained, and explanatory concepts advanced, within mystical traditions. Language mysticism is of particular interest on account of the central role thought to be played by language in relation to self and the individual's construction of reality.

*The discussion focuses on traditions of language mysticism within Judaism, in which emphasis is placed on (i) the deconstruction of language into primary elements and (ii) the overarching significance of the divine Name. Analysis of the detailed techniques used suggests ways in which multiple associations to any given word/concept were consciously explored in an altered state. It appears that these mystics were consciously engaging with what are normally preconscious cognitive processes, whereby schematic associations to sensory images or thoughts are activated. The testimony from their writings implies that these mystics experienced distortions of the sense of self ('I'), which may suggest that, in the normal state, 'I' is constructed in relation to the preconscious system of associations. Moreover, an important feature of Hebrew language mysticism is its emphasis on embodiment — specific associations were deemed to exist between the letters and each structure of the body. Implications, first, for the relationship between language and self, and, second, for the role of embodiment in relation to self are discussed. The importance of the continual emphasis on the Name of God throughout the linguistic practices may have provided a means for effectively replacing the cognitive indexing function hypothesized here to be normally played by 'I' with a more **transpersonal** cognitive index, especially in relation to memory.*

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Introduction: Process and Model

Read the entire Torah, both forwards and backwards, and spill the blood of the languages. Thus, the knowledge of the Name [of God] is above all wisdoms in quality and worth.¹

The above is an extract from the work of Abraham Abulafia, an influential thirteenth-century Jewish mystic, who taught a distinctive form of language mysticism. As I shall explore later, the suggested value of reading scripture ‘both forwards and backwards’ stems not only from the mystics’ view of the Torah’s² supreme value but also from the rabbinic attitude which holds Hebrew and the Hebrew letters to be of transcendent significance. As for the Name, it is viewed by Jewish mystics as conveying, through its letters and their arrangement, the divine essence itself. These two factors may be said to set the parameters for Hebrew language mysticism. What is especially distinctive in Abulafia’s technique is its complexity and the intensity with which it was practised. The metaphor, ‘spilling the blood of the languages’, is an apt reflection of the fervour with which he and his disciples attacked their task. My interest concerns the possible psychological dimension in their practices. To what extent may the phenomena associated with language mysticism hint at the kinds of psychological processes involved in consciousness and in the generation of altered states?

Whilst a defining hallmark of mysticism is the quest to *experience* a transcendent realm in whatever form the cultural canon allows, we find that probably the majority of mystical writings relate to the challenge of modelling whatever passes for *reality*, in both inner and outer aspects. Abulafia’s discourses on language mysticism include ‘explanations’ of the states he encountered in terms of kabbalistic imagery and those philosophical concepts, such as *active intellect* and *prime material*, which were current in the mediaeval period. In essence, my approach suggests that contemporary psychological terminology may serve a similar role in allowing explanatory discourse in our day. Whilst my psychological terminology may have the distinction of being more related to suggested causative brain processes than that used by Abulafia, the central concern remains the same: namely, to generate explanatory models. We generally claim understanding of a process to the extent that we can effectively model it, and the terms of our model constitute the shared knowledge-base of our discipline.

The impetus to generate models is probably the most fundamental point of connection between mysticism and psychology. The various kinds of spiritual maps, including, for example, mandala images, temple plans, medicine wheels and the kabbalistic tree of life, are intricate, often beautiful, expressions of this function. Central to any endeavour to interrelate religious mysticism and psychology is the

[1] From the writings of Abraham Abulafia, cited in Idel (1989), p. 27. All cited extracts are from Abulafia, unless otherwise stated.

[2] In the first place, *Torah* refers to the Five Books of Moses. However, the term has a considerably more extended meaning in rabbinic thought. It can refer to the entire Hebrew Bible, to authentic teachings derived from the canon, and, more mystically, to the *World Soul*. The central text of Jewish mysticism, the *Zohar*, boldly asserts an identity between the Torah and God (*Zohar* II, 60a). In Abulafia’s usage here, it refers to the Five Books as a mystical vehicle for plumbing the depths of God’s language.

proposition that such models are expressions of inner, psychological processes. Whatever other, more cosmic, references may be included within the tradition itself, the map may be seen as an expression of the dimensions of human personality and/or the stages operating within psychological processes. The mandala, for example, as emphasised by Jung (1968) and Tucci (1961), is as much a depiction of the relationship between conscious and unconscious realms of mind as it is a representation of a temple, city, or the entire cosmos. Similarly, the kabbalistic tree of life, which is said to depict stages in the emanation of the Godhead as well as the various realms of heavenly influence, is equally an exemplar of stages in the unfolding of thought from its deepest unconscious source through to the level of immediate, phenomenal consciousness. Thus, in the rather cryptic language of the *Zohar*, a primary source of kabbalistic teaching, we read that:

Thought is the beginning of all. It is within, secret and unknowable. When it extends, it reaches the place where spirit dwells and is then called Understanding, which is not so concealed as the preceding even though it is still secret. This spirit expands and produces a Voice comprising fire, water, and air, namely north, south, and east. . . . When you examine the levels, you find that Thought, Understanding, Voice, and speech are all one, and that thought is the beginning of all — there is no separation (*Zohar* I: 246b).

In this scheme, each *sefirah*,³ or divine emanation, becomes a different quality of thought in the movement from unconscious ('secret') to conscious, as symbolized by key kabbalistic terms such as Understanding, Voice and the directions of space. Moreover, the same scheme provides the psychological framework for the mystic's quest to gain experience of the higher, divine realm: 'The *sefirot* . . . are both the ontic realities that constitute the divine realm and the psychological paradigms by means of which the mystic visualizes these realities' (Wolfson, 1994, p. 72). This emphasis on modelling the relationship between an unseen realm and that of the seen is very much the focus of all spiritual maps, and it finds psychological expression in the challenge to understand the relation between unconscious and conscious processes.

Given that specifying the relation between unconscious and conscious processes is one of the major challenges facing cognitive neuroscience today (Kihlstrom, 1993; Velmans, 1996), these various models generated, or employed, by mystics may offer a fruitful perspective to complement data generated through the scientific method. Mystical models are by no means straightforward, and some degree of 'decoding', using a broad understanding of the religious and cultural context within which a given model developed, is inevitably needed. The objective here is not simply to 'explain' mystical states in terms of proposed brain states and psychological processes, as has been attempted, for example, by Persinger (1987) and D'Aquili and Newberg (1993). Rather, my approach draws on mystics' experiences and the models they use in order to refine our understanding of psychological processes. Forman (1998) similarly analyses mystical

[3] The *sefirot* (plural) represent successive focuses through which the divine essence unfolds from the level of transcendence to that of immanence in relation to the human sphere.

states for their value in our understanding of consciousness, since mystics' descriptions regarding inner awareness may offer 'a kind of ongoing microscope on human consciousness' (p. 187).

In recent works (Lancaster, 1997a; 1997b), I have pursued this goal of integrating mystical and psychological data through an examination of perceptual and thought processes as described in *Abhidhamma* texts of the Buddhist Pali canon. I have argued that integrating the understanding of stages of perception presented in this Buddhist literature with contemporary insights into brain systems can generate an inclusive psychological model. The model emphasizes the role played by two brain systems in particular. First, sensory input is analysed and matched against stored memory images. Neuronal oscillatory systems in sensory cortex and connecting structures are presumed to effect this process of interrelating sensory input with memory systems (Damasio, 1989). Second, a representation of self ('I') is constructed in relation to the most parsimonious match(es) achieved. If, for example, the light reflected from a pen strikes my retina, the first stage will generate a match between the input and neuronal constellations representing previous experience with pens, etc. The second stage would, in this example, eventuate in my experience that I am holding my favourite pen in my hand (or whatever). In this model it is specifically the second stage, whereby an 'I'-connection to other activated cognitive structures is effected, which constitutes conscious recognition of the object (see also Kihlstrom, 1993; 1997). The system identified by Gazzaniga as the *interpreter* (Gazzaniga, 1985; 1988) is hypothesized to play a major role in this second stage by generating the everyday sense of self as subject of whatever experience is ongoing. The various characteristics of this sense of self are products of the drive towards interpretation. Thus, the sense of self is experienced as unified, and as the director of events in the mind. Although it is accordingly experienced as a *unified 'I'*, there are good reasons for thinking that it is neither unified nor the control centre of the mind. It is merely a putative focus of the (conscious) mind (for a similar view, see Baars, 1996, p. 213).

This representation of self is further engaged in memory functions, since it is considered to act as an indexing or 'tagging' device in association with other stored representations (*'I'-tag*). The hypothalamus and related limbic structures are implicated in these indexing operations (Moscovitch, 1994; 1995; Teyler and DiScenna, 1986). Figure 1 presents the model in diagrammatic form, indicating the stages as described in the *Abhidhamma* in juxtaposition to the proposed cerebral and cognitive operations.⁴ Full details of the *Abhidhamma* stages, together with my arguments for their relationship to cognitive and neural processes may be found in Lancaster (1997a; 1997b). In brief, the generation of a match between sensory input and memory systems is hypothesized to occur during the first four

[4] What I have described thus far as a two-stage process is presented in the *Abhidhamma* as entailing six stages (see Figure 1). However, any seeming inconsistency is minimised when we bear in mind that the *Abhidhamma* conceives the first four stages as comprising a single block. Any stimulus triggering the stage labelled 'sense' will automatically eventuate in the fourth stage, following which there is a potential break prior to stage five. Thus *Abhidhamma* stages one to four include the neuro-cognitive processes described above as constituting the first of the two stages in perception.

stages recognized by the Abhidhamma. Following a preliminary response by the sense organ ('sense'),⁵ the image is received by the neuronal encoding system ('receive') and a range of neuronal representations is activated through associative mechanisms ('examine'). The principal representation is then determined through the matching process described above ('establish').

The subsequent stage is termed *javana* in Pali. It is said to be the stage at which the conceit of 'I am' arises, and I have argued that it corresponds to the stage during which the Interpreter system generates the sense of a unified 'I'. The final stage in the Abhidhamma system is 'register' and seems to correspond to an updating of memory systems in short-term memory. I relate this stage to my proposals concerning the 'tagging' of memory representations in relation to 'I'.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give full details of the arguments for the correspondences described here and depicted in Figure 1. As already mentioned, extensive discussion of the model will be found in Lancaster (1997a; 1997b). It has been necessary for me to outline the model here since it provides the foundation for my speculations regarding language mysticism. My major premise is couched in terms of the model, as represented in Figure 1. This premise holds that

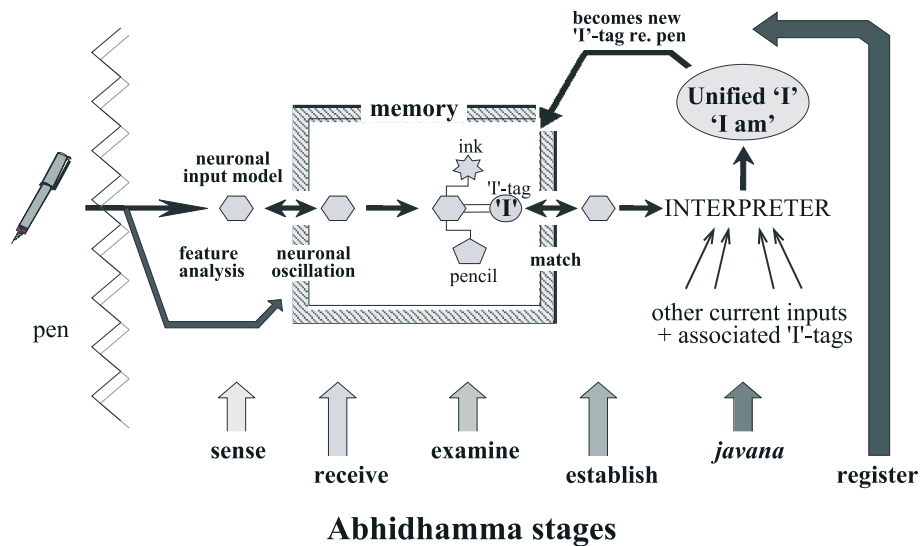


Figure 1. I'-tag model of perception and memory illustrating correspondences with perceptual stages described in Abhidhamma

[5] The words in brackets are translations of the Pali terms given in the discussion of the *Sense-Door* (i.e., perceptual) process.

mystical practices bring about a re-balancing between the stages represented in the model. They shift the emphasis from the end stage, in which the 'I'-connection to neuronal representations is generated, to earlier stages, focusing especially on the stage ('examine') in which associations to the object are explored, normally pre-consciously.⁶ This proposition is illustrated in Figure 2, in which two routes to such a shift are emphasized. The first involves detachment from 'I', which is promoted through meditation and, in most traditions, by embracing a variety of precepts which encourage ongoing selflessness. In the model, the sense of 'I' arises in relation to memory images activated by current stimuli (sensations, images and/or thoughts). The felt continuity of 'I' is a product of the brain's interpretative drive, and is consequent on a certain habitual rigidity in the meanings ascribed to those stimuli. Detachment from 'I', then, would be expected to free up the movement of images within the mind, relaxing the rigidity of response and encouraging greater creativity. I consider the *apophatic* goal of pure emptiness as an extreme of this first route, through which the mystic becomes increasingly detached from the movement of images. The second route, bringing about a shift to normally pre-conscious stages, is identified with

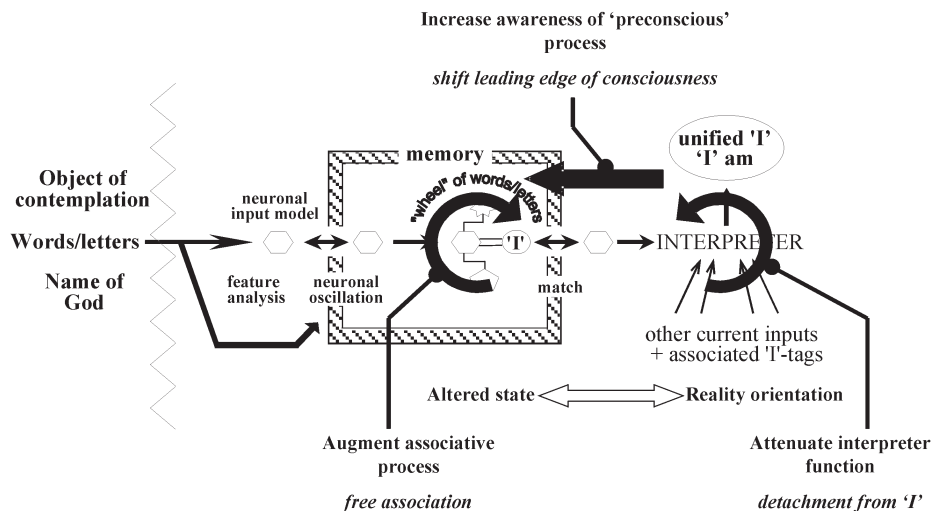


Figure 2. 'I'-tag model of perception and memory illustrating proposed effects of spiritual practice

[6] The term 'pre-conscious' may be misleading due to differences in the use of the term 'consciousness' itself. Typically, psychology and neuroscience refer to the end stage of perception as 'conscious', with preceding stages being seen as 'pre-conscious'. Mysticism tends to regard 'consciousness' as a primary reality, which underlies all stages. In the Abhidhamma, for example, all the stages of the perceptual process, including early ones which an untrained individual would not be aware of, are designated as stages of consciousness. This is not a purely academic distinction, for it bears major implications for our understanding of the extent to which we can bring early stages of perception and thought under the control of the *will*, which in this sense should not be confused with ego-based control. The cultural ramifications of this point are explored in Lancaster (1997b).

kataphatic mysticism, and is hypothesized here to be focused in volitional exploration of the stage labelled *examine* in Figure 1. Wolfson (1994), correctly in my view, refers to such mysticism as *cognitive* and emphasizes the role played by perceptual processes and the imagination. As he notes, although apophatic tendencies are not entirely lacking in mediaeval kabbalistic texts, it is cognitive mysticism which largely defines the mysticism of these texts. A wide variety of imagery-based and contemplative techniques developed within the traditions of cognitive mysticism, and the linguistic mysticism of the kind practised by Abulafia is paradigmatic of this second route. My paper is therefore directed primarily to possible explanations of this *cognitive* form of religious mysticism.

Language Mysticism

To the extent that a goal of mystical practice is that of transcending distinctions and gaining direct experience of the oneness said to characterize ultimate reality, language is often viewed as an impediment on the path, since language specifically compartmentalizes experience. ‘Enlightenment is achieved in the letting go of language’ (Hayes, 1997, p. 580). Moreover, Forman (1990; 1993) has forcefully argued against the ‘constructivist’ position (Katz, 1983), which holds that all experience — including mystical experience — is in some sense mediated structurally; that all experience is intentional. Forman offers numerous examples of mystical states which seem to be contentless, and therefore devoid of language. Such pure consciousness events have also been reported by individuals with no interest in mysticism. Sullivan (1995), for example, describes such a state following a road accident:

There was something, and the *something* was not the nothing [of total unconsciousness]. The nearest label for the *something* might possibly be ‘awareness’, but that could be misleading, since any awareness I’d ever had before the accident was *my awareness*, my awareness of one thing or another.

In contrast, this *something* . . . had no *I* as its *subject* and no content as its *object*. It just was (p. 53).

I see no reason to contradict the direct evidence of such experiences, and would concur in the view that seemingly contentless conscious states — arising either spontaneously or as a result of mystical practice or injury — need to be incorporated within a meaningful psychology of consciousness. It does not follow, however, that ‘language-focused approaches to mysticism’ lead to a psychological blind alley, as Mangan (1994, p. 251), for example, implies. Mangan sees the relation between language and mystical experience in a rather starkly dichotomized form: either such experience is ‘a distinct phenomenon reflected *by* language’ or it is ‘a set of propositions imprisoned *in* language’ (*ibid*, emphasis original). There is, in fact, at least one alternative, namely, that language can itself provide a means for embracing progressively ‘deeper’ or ‘higher’ conscious states, as we find in many traditions of cognitive mysticism. This alternative should be given serious consideration since probably the majority of spiritual traditions have developed schemes of thought and various language-based practices which

reflect it (Katz, 1992). It is probably only in a minority of such cases that the ultimate goal of the practices employed is unequivocally a state of emptiness. The value to psychology of these traditions, irrespective of any purported spiritual or therapeutic goals, lies in the detail with which features of the linguistic process and supposed 'higher' states are described. The insights reported by its practitioners can furnish useful data for the attempts of psychology, and most particularly cognitive psychology, to model the mind. In discussing the *pure conscious event*, Forman (1998) rightly concludes that its occurrence implies that 'consciousness is more than its embodied activities' (p. 193). Beyond the simple statement that 'consciousness is', however, there seems little further for the psychologist (as distinct from the metaphysician) to add. When, by comparison, we focus on the detail of language mysticism — the means rather than the end — we are able to draw on our understanding of language, and its role in cognitive processing, in order to conceptualize the psychology of the mystics' path.

The notion that language plays a critical role in mundane consciousness⁷ finds expression in three major arguments. First is the view that mundane consciousness is dependent on, or even identifiable with, language. This view, which may be traced to the thinking of Darwin, has recently been revived by Rolls (1997). For Rolls, language, defined as the syntactic manipulation of symbols, constitutes a higher-order thought system which enables reflection on, and possible correction of, more primary representations. It is this function which he regards as critical for consciousness. The second is the neo-Whorfian view that language conditions conscious thought (Dennett, 1996). Whilst both of these viewpoints on language and consciousness may be relevant to issues raised by the phenomenology of language mysticism, it is to a third that I shall refer predominantly in my discussion below. This is the view which holds language to be a critical determinant of self. It is on account of the suggested centrality for mundane consciousness of the cognitive representation of self (Kihlstrom, 1993;1997; Lancaster, 1991) that this view interrelates language and consciousness.

Bruner (1997) has argued that self arises as a narrative construction; that the sense of self we may experience in the present is perceived as continuous with a past state only by virtue of the narrative we construct to connect them. He further notes that it is effectively impossible to separate the young child's language development from their process of 'self accounting'. Dennett (1991) similarly refers to self as the 'centre of narrative gravity', and Sacks (1986) interprets neurological disorders of memory to suggest that, 'each of us constructs and lives a "narrative", and that this narrative is us, our identities' (p. 105). In the model I discussed briefly above, the sense of being a unified 'I' is seen as a product of the drive to interpret events as having a coherent focus. The interpreter, which is

[7] I use this term to distinguish it from *pure consciousness*. In their studies of 'consciousness,' psychology and cognitive neuroscience have not been concerned with pure consciousness as such but with the various ways in which events become available, or accessible (Bisiach, 1988; Block, 1995) to conscious reflection. Central to mundane consciousness is the role played by the representation of self, to be discussed below. I am not suggesting that there is no continuity between 'mundane' and 'pure' consciousness, but it is important for purposes of explanation to maintain the distinction. See Lancaster (1993), p. 523 note 2. See also note above.

conceived here as being central to such ‘narrative’, weaves a coherent image from the multiple strands of ‘I’ activated by the large array of memory activity at any given time. Indeed, it is conceivable that such a function represents the primary evolutionary value of language, with social communication as a derivative function. Above all, language enables us to construct a sense of ourselves and a view of reality, which we can, secondarily, share with those around us. Postmodernism in particular has emphasized this view of the role played by language in cognition. Krippner and Winkler (1995) offer a series of propositions concerning the impact postmodernism carries for consciousness studies. Their fourth proposition is especially relevant here since it states that,

Investigators [should] realize that people in each culture construct conscious experience in terms of the categories provided by their own linguistic system, coming to terms with a ‘reality’ that has been filtered through their language (p. 261).

It is evident that language mysticism relates strongly to these psychological arguments. Whatever else they may be doing at more metaphysical levels, mystics are, at a psychological level, exploring aspects of their linguistically-filtered sense of reality. I consider that the testimony from these mystics can offer a specific window into the ways in which the sense of self and everyday vision of reality become deconstructed.

I remarked above that spiritual maps are invariably concerned with the relationship between the hidden and the revealed. In the movement from inner thought to outer speech, language epitomises this relationship. Language mysticism generally projects this intra-psychic experience onto ‘reality’. Thus reality itself takes on the characteristics of language, as in Bonaventura’s scheme in which all of creation becomes classified as manifestations of God’s language, creatures equating to His nouns, their energy to His verbs, etc. (Cousins, 1992). As Cousins remarks, for Bonaventura, ‘at its very apex and centre — on the level of the Absolute — reality is linguistic’ (p. 241). Böhme’s mysticism similarly venerated language, for he considered God to be ‘at the heart of the letters’ (Edel, 1996, p. 444). Of course, the biblical underpinnings of these views are crucial. For Christianity, famously, ‘In the beginning was the Word . . .’ (John 1:1), a notion which draws its power from the essential biblical premise that the creative work of God arises with His use of language (the ‘And God said . . . And it was’ formulation of Genesis 1). Indeed, a rabbinic term for God is ‘He who spoke and the world came into being’. This religious conception of the power of language becomes a mystical one when language is seen as a medium for direct encounter with the divine, as, for example, in the Sufi *dhikr* meditation which focuses on remembrance of God’s Names. Sufism, moreover, considered the letters of Arabic to contain all wisdom, a proposition identical to the Jewish mystics’ view of Hebrew. Schimmel (1975) gives numerous examples of the mystical role of the Arabic letters in Sufi thought and practice, noting, for example, that, ‘[M]ost of the meditations of the mystics were directed toward the letter *alif*’ (p. 417).

Distinctive and complex forms of language mysticism may be traced to the earliest phases of Judaism. The intensity with which aspects of language became

vehicles for mystical speculation and practice presumably owes something to the lack of other forms of religious imagery available on account of the strict ban on images. But the intrinsic power of language and its immediacy as a medium for exploring the nature of meaning are perhaps more important as positive factors in the rise of language mysticism. Language — and specifically the Hebrew language — becomes not only the medium through which God creates and interacts with His creation, but also the primary means for the mystic to gain access to experience of the divine. The mystic attempts to become closer to God by retracing the movement of His language from its outward expression back towards its inner source.

In Jewish thought, the Torah represents the ground-plan of creation. As the rabbis expressed it in a Midrash,⁸ ‘The Holy One, blessed be He, gazed into the Torah and created the world accordingly’ (*Genesis Rabbah* 1:1). The language of the Torah — Hebrew — is necessarily, therefore, the language by which God created the world (*Genesis Rabbah* 18:4, 31:8). An anonymous Midrash describes the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet as the ‘workmen’ necessary for the work of creation (Urbach, 1979, p. 201), and the Talmud concurs in this view that God employed individual Hebrew letters in the act of creation (Talmud, *Ber* 55a). Moreover, the actual form of the Hebrew letters is conceived as being transcendent to the natural order of things (Mishnah *Avot* 5:6) and the letters are, therefore, a kind of window into the infinite.

More elaborate traditions regarding the role of the letters are preserved in two early (dating from the first centuries of the present era) mystical works, the *Sefer Yezirah* and *Shiur Koma* texts. The former details the techniques by which the letters were employed in creation, and the second anthropomorphically analyses the ‘body’ of God, implying that the letters are in some sense bound up with the very ‘structure’ of the divine. These works show clear Pythagorean and Hellenistic influences, reflective of the broad base of this whole strand of language mysticism.

These fundamental rabbinic and mystical premises form the mythic background to the development of *Kabbalah* from the twelfth century onwards. *Kabbalah* is quintessentially a mysticism of language; it is no exaggeration to state that all its major themes are either directly concerned with letters and words, or metaphorically described in relation to the processes involved in generating speech from thought. As Idel puts it, the kabbalists view language as ‘the spiritual underpinning of reality’ (Idel, 1995, p. 219), and the Hebrew letters as constituting ‘a mesocosmos that enables operations that can bridge the gap between the human — or the material — and the divine’ (Idel, 1992, p. 43).

The classical talmudic and midrashic texts of the Rabbis adopt a playful but disciplined attitude to the Hebrew of scripture. A teaching is frequently conveyed by adopting a fluid view of the pronunciation of letters so that alternative readings might be introduced:

[8] The term *Midrash* refers to both a style of homiletic interpretation of sacred texts and the corpus of writings to which this style gave rise. Together with the Talmud, the *Midrashim* (plural) convey the major teachings of the rabbis who taught in the wake of the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.

Rabbi Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Hanina: Scholars increase peace in the world, as it is said, 'All your children will be learned of the Lord; great shall be the peace of your children' (Isaiah 54:13). Do not read *banayikh* [children] but *bonayikh* [builders; i.e. builders of spiritual learning] (Talmud, *Ber* 64a).

A statement such as this, in which homiletic teachings are conveyed by means of word-play, is not merely an occasional 'poetic' excursion, but a central pillar of rabbinic hermeneutics. The approach is predicated *conceptually* on the Rabbis' view of the 'holiness' of Hebrew, and *practically* on the unpointed (i.e., vowel-less) form of scriptural text.⁹ Indeed, this fluidity is itself legitimized from a scriptural text: 'It was taught in the School of R. Yishmael: "Behold, My word is like fire — declares the Lord — and like a hammer that shatters rock" (Jeremiah 23:29). Just as this hammer produces many sparks, so a single verse has multiple meanings' (Talmud, *San* 34a). The rabbinic mind is characterized by a respectful associative tendency with regard to words of scripture, a tendency which, as Handelman (1981; 1985) has argued, displays more than a trivial relation to Freud's approach to interpretation (see also Boyarin, 1990; Faur, 1986; Ouaknin, 1995).

This emphasis on the fluidity in Hebrew constitutes the exoteric dimension to the esoteric practice of language mysticism central to the *ecstatic* kabbalah of Abulafia. Two features in particular seem critical to this esotericism. First, a variety of concentrative techniques were employed, including breath control, visualization, chanting, and body movement as accompaniments to the central work of *permuting* Hebrew letters. Second, the letters were to be continually related to those of the Name of God, thereby imbuing the process with a specific transcendent connection.¹⁰ Whilst features common to many meditative techniques are evident here, the incredible complexity of the linguistic operations themselves marks this mystical practice out from most systems, in which emphasis is placed on simplicity in the object of contemplation (Idel, 1988b). Following preliminaries including fasting and various aspects of religious ritual, Abulafia's technique required the initiate to manipulate letters and words, 'to combine small letters with great ones, to reverse them and to permute them rapidly' (cited in Idel, 1988b, p. 39). Such activity proceeded from writing to chanting to mental imagery alone. The mystic would follow intricate verbal patterns, including various codified means for interconnecting words, letters, numbers, and meanings.

It is beyond the scope of my article to discuss at length the detailed form of these patterns, and the peculiar logic to Abulafia's associative mind. Isolated illustrations are likely to appear singularly bizarre, and the subtlety of the Hebrew

[9] Thus, the above quote from the book of Isaiah includes the Hebrew word, BNYKH. It is for the reader to construct a readable word through the addition of vowels, which leads to the kind of ambiguity exploited in the talmudic extract.

[10] In fact, mystics viewed all the letters either as divine Names in themselves or as constituents of divine Names. The major exegete and philosopher, Moshe ben Nachman ('Nachmanides,' 1194–1270), for example, writes in the introduction to his commentary on the Torah that all its letters constitute a divine Name. According to him, the sequence was altered in the 'version' given to Moses in order to portray stories and commandments rather than disclose mystical secrets to all.

is difficult to convey in translation. Consider, as a single example, the following extract from Abulafia's *Chayye ha'Olam ha'Ba*:

Head and belly and torso, that is, the head, beginning inside the end. The 'head' is the first point that you imagine in it; the 'end' is the purpose of the head, and is like a tail to it, and the belly is likewise like a tail to the head, and is the image of the torso, wherein the heart is located. And the image that you ought to imagine at the time of pronunciation, in order to change within that image the nature of [one] part of the bodies, alone or with others, is: think in your heart the name of that thing, and if it is [composed] of two letters, such as *yam* [sea], and you wish to invert it, and the name of the reversal is *yabasah* [dry land], the companion of *yam* with *yabasah*, and this is 'beginning and end, *yah*.' But the middle is *me-yabes yam*; behold, *Yah me-yabes yam* (God makes dry the sea), for He in truth makes the sea into dry land. And pronounce in this image whatever you remember, and thus you will first say *heh*, in the middle of your head, and draw it within your head as if you were contemplating and see the centre of your brain, and its central point in your thoughts, and envision the letter *heh* inscribed above it, which guards the existence of the points of your brain (cited in Idel, 1988b, p. 36).

Here we see Abulafia working with the word for 'sea', blending it with its antonym ('dry land'), and extracting the divine Name (YH, or *Yah*) from the first and last letters of the blended phrase. We may also note the embodied dimension of the process ('Head and belly and torso . . .'), and the visualization of the single letter (*Heh*) within the brain. The context of the Hebrew words is the Exodus from Egypt, during which the sea was transformed into dry land (Exodus 14:15–31). The consequent passage of the Israelites through the sea — now dry land — is interpreted kabbalistically as referring to an ascent in spiritual level of being. The mystic ascends individually in parallel to the collective ascent from Egypt and the level of 'slavery'. Psychologically, the sea may be taken as a symbol of the unconscious, and the spiritual path is seen to entail entry into normally unconscious areas. Such interpretations properly belong with the discipline of depth psychology, which lies outside the remit of my article. Nevertheless, the extract serves well to illustrate the cognitive features of Abulafia's approach, and the clear objective — to attain a higher state — itself needs to be accommodated in psychological interpretations of this particular tradition.

It seems clear that the concentrative techniques and bodily accompaniments themselves would be likely to engender an altered state of consciousness. Indeed, Abulafia writes of a variety of effects characteristic of altered states, including warming of the heart, trembling of the body, the feeling of being anointed with oil, and experiencing seemingly out-of-body states. At the same time, the complexity of the linguistic technique presumably ensured that considerable discipline and focus were maintained. I have referred to the state which Jewish visionary mystics sought as one of 'controlled intra-psychic dissociation' (Lancaster, 1991, p. 155). There is a need to 'let go' of normal cognitive control in order that realities outside the range of everyday schemata might be experienced. Such 'letting go' implies a dissociated state in which the role of the ego is weakened. At the same time, descent into purely free play of the imagination is avoided by 'holding on' to the logic and detail of the linguistic practice itself. In the terms

Abulafia himself uses, the imagination is the domain of the *Satan*¹¹ and must be harnessed in the service of the Active Intellect, that aspect of mind which is shared between God and man.

The Psychology of Language Mysticism: Deconstruction and The Wheel

Twenty-two foundation letters. He placed them in a wheel, like a wall with 231 gates. The wheel revolves forwards and backwards How? He permuted them, weighed them, and transformed them. *Alef* with them all and all of them with *alef*; *bet* with them all and all of them with *bet*. They continue in cycles and exist in 231 gates. Thus, all that is formed and all that is spoken emerges from one Name.¹²

The *Sefer Yetzirah* describes creation as a process whereby God generates letter combinations from the primary matter of individual letters. A useful modern analogy is provided by the elements of DNA being permuted into forms which generate characteristics when expressed biologically. Abulafia equates this wheel of the letters with the highest sphere of the intellect, seemingly the Active Intellect.¹³ Accordingly, the Active Intellect represents both the fount of ideas emanating into manifestation and the level of mind achieved through successful practice of language mysticism. It is the sphere of union with the divine. The goal of Abulafia's language mysticism was indeed the achievement of such union and the consequential experience of *prophecy* which was attributed to the binding of the imaginative faculty to the Active Intellect.

Whether the Active Intellect can be usefully modelled in cognitive terms may be open to doubt. Aside from the problematic reductionism entailed, the concept itself seems to have undergone a number of transformations, especially during the mediaeval period which concerns us here. With this caveat in mind, however, I will return to the model presented in Figure 1. The model assumes that a sensory stimulus triggers multiple representations preconsciously. In the case of spoken polysemous word stimuli, for example, Pynte *et al.* (1984) and Swinney (1979) have demonstrated that a word's multiple meanings are activated simultaneously within 250 milliseconds. Depending on context, a single meaning subsequently enters consciousness, at which point the other, competing meanings seem to be inhibited. An instructive insight into the multiplicity at the preconconscious level is also given by the syndrome of synaesthesia, in which sensory modalities become confused — as when someone *hears colours*. On the basis of his analysis of the brain structures involved in the syndrome, Cytowic (1993) argues that it occurs

[11] In Jewish thought, *Satan* refers to the force which opposes an individual in their spiritual path. The concept differs somewhat from the more externalized view of Satan, or the devil, propagated through Christian Europe.

[12] *Sefer Yetzirah*, Mishnayot 2:4–5. *Alef* and *bet* are the first two letters of the alphabet, and 231 is the number of two letter combinations which may be generated from the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, ignoring reversals.

[13] In fact, this equivalence is established through the characteristic means of *gematria*, i.e., equating ideas through the numerical equivalence of phrases. *Yesh ra'el* ('There are 231' or 'Israel') = 541 = *sekhel ha-pu'al* ('Active Intellect'). *Gematria* depends on the fact that each Hebrew letter is also a number, *alef* = 1, *bet* = 2, etc.

when the normal multisensory preconscious activities are abnormally extended into consciousness. In other words, the syndrome is evidence for the view that prior to their articulation as stable, meaningful objects and events in consciousness, preconscious images and thoughts are represented in multiple fashion.

In Figure 1, the stage labelled 'examine' depicts this preconscious activation of multiple meanings. In a simplified diagrammatic form, representations connected with the centrally activated image, the pen, are shown to be activated. The image of a *wheel* of associations seems quite apposite to this stage. Normally, such associations will rapidly become inhibited as appropriate 'matches' are achieved, and the dominant image enters consciousness. The figure further conveys the role of 'I' in this process, for it is hypothesized that the dominant image becomes incorporated within the construction of the *unified 'I'*. Indeed, the everyday perceptual process is primarily driven by the need to perceive or think in terms of the categories relating to one's personal world. Contemplation, however, prolongs the 'examine' stage, bringing about consciousness of what are normally preconscious elements and, therefore, of a wider range of multiple meanings or associations (Lancaster, 1991). At the same time, the centrality of 'I' becomes attenuated since the Interpreter module's goal of a single, unified narrative with 'I' as central character is compromised by the multiplicity entering consciousness. As suggested above, the contemplative play of words and letters, as in the example cited from Abulafia, may be particularly effective in this regard on account of the role played by language in structuring the cognitive relationships between schemata.

'What is a "word"?' asks the twelfth-century *Sefer ha-Bahir*. 'That of which it is written, "A word fitly [Hebrew *afenav*] spoken" (Proverbs 25:11). Do not read "fitly" [*afenav*] but "its wheel" [*ofenav*].' In this answer we see another example of the use of pun to convey a deeper meaning. Whilst we might think of a word as a singularity, a signifier of a specific meaning, this mystical text points rather to the way in which the word opens into a fluidity of meaning. For the Jewish mystic, such fluidity of meaning represents a gateway to the Active Intellect, and therefore to union with the divine. Psychologically, opening to what would normally be preconscious strategies of association might be expected to detach the mystic from habitual lines of meaning. Ouaknin uses the term 'designification' to indicate the distinctive, rabbinic approach to language: 'By "designifying", ideas oppose all semantic actualization and resist becoming object-concepts of a discourse' (Ouaknin, 1995, p. 287). We have here a specific formulation of the more general concept of 'deautomatization' which Deikman (1966) proposes as the psychological foundation of all mystical experience.

The associative nature of Abulafia's technique is well represented by the *wheel* imagery in his descriptions:

And begin by combining this Name, namely Y-H-V-H, at the beginning alone, and examine all its combinations and move it and turn it about like a wheel returning around, front and back, like a scroll . . . (cited in Idel, 1988b, p. 21).

In the continuation of this extract, Abulafia refers specifically to the 'rolling about of your thoughts'. However, 'spilling the blood of the languages' is more

than mere word association, albeit of sacred words, for the intention is to ‘revolve the languages until they return to their prime material state’ (cited in Idel, 1989, p. 10), that is, until words no longer convey any cognitive meaning. In this we come to what may be considered especially distinctive in the language mysticism of ecstatic kabbalah, namely the sheer extent of deconstruction of schematic structures involved. Whilst numerous examples of word association, or substitution, may be found in these writings, the major intent was to deconstruct words to their constituent letters — the primary elements of language. This is the central thrust of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the most important source for all strands of Hebrew language mysticism. Individual letters were to be visualized, and chanted together with other letters, with little or no concern for semantic content. In this sense, language was used effectively to transcend the compartmentalisation of meaning normally ascribed to language.

I noted earlier the relationship between language and self. I suggest that the ecstatic state engendered by the complex of fasting, breath control, visualizations, and associative language techniques would have been likely to bring about alterations in the experience of self. Moreover, reference to the physical body was central to the entire practice since the *Sefer Yetzirah* assigns each letter to a specific bodily part. Given the importance of embodiment for our sense of self, I envisage this embodied dimension of the letters adding critically to the disturbance of the normal self experience (Lancaster, 1997c). Indeed, complex procedures were used whereby specific regions of the body were ‘energized’ through these correspondences with letters (Ouaknin, 1992). Whilst the given letter was visualized, or chanted, the corresponding body region expanded in the mystic’s awareness, pulsing with light or vibrating with the reverberating sound. For Abulafia, however, the emphasis lay on negating the experience of the body. Just as the letters were to be stripped of meaning, so would the mystic’s body become void of personal ‘ownership’. Abulafia writes of this parallel between deconstruction of language and that of the body:

Know that all the limbs of your body are combined like that of the forms of the letters combined one with the other. Know also that when you combine them it is you who distinguish between the forms of the letters for in their prime-material state they are equal . . . and with one sweep you can erase them all from a writing board. So too [with] all the moisture of your body and all of your limbs . . . they all return to their prime-material state (cited in Idel, 1989, p. 6).

As noted above, the letters were considered the agents of creation, and the assignment of ‘limbs’ to letters represents the connection between the mystic’s individual body and the collective body of the primordial Adam, that is, the archetypal human form as ‘created in the image of the divine’. We find here, then, two aspects to the alterations in bodily self inferred to accompany these mystical practices. The first, paralleling the deconstruction of letter combinations, is a deconstruction of self; and the second, paralleling the ultimate unity of the Name, entails a sense of union with the collective human form.

The encounter with self within this tradition, moreover, appears to have bridged normal bodily boundaries. A testimony left by an anonymous disciple of Abulafia describes reaching a stage ‘beyond the control of your thinking’ when:

[T]hat which is within will manifest itself without, and through the power of sheer imagination will take on the form of a polished mirror. And this is ‘the flame of the circling sword’, the rear revolving and becoming the fore. Whereupon one sees that his inmost being is something outside of himself (Scholem, 1961, p. 155).

Such cases of heautoscopy, whereby an individual sees their self before them (seemingly akin to what are described today as ‘out-of-body experiences’), were held to be a defining feature of the prophetic state. Scholem reports an anonymous author who ascribes to Rabbi Nathan the following:

Know that the complete secret of prophecy is that there arises suddenly before the prophet the form of his self standing before him, and he forgets his [normal] self and it is transported from him (Scholem, 1930, p. 287).

Although it is known that disturbances of the temporal or parietal lobes can trigger hallucinations of the experience of self, the question of what bearing — if any — description of the neural events associated with pathological states has on our understanding of mystical phenomena remains open. I consider that explanatory models focusing on the cognitive basis of these kinds of phenomena offer a more productive approach than those which focus primarily on neural structures since their functional emphasis potentially offers insight into the meaning of the phenomena. In the context of the model presented in this article, I speculate that attenuation of the normal generation of the *unified ‘I’* as a habitual constituent of mental activity can dispose the individual to diverse experiences of self, which may range from a loss of self to the kinds of displacement of the bodily location of self indicated in the above extracts. Such outcomes may arise for a variety of reasons and in a variety of frameworks, including ones that are transformational in a positive sense as well as those that are pathological. In the present context, my interest lies in the effects of contemplation and mystical manipulation of language.

In the model presented in Figures 1 and 2, the representations activated during the ‘examine’ stage are associated with ‘I’-tags, which are memory elements depicting the sense of self attaching to previous experience of these various representations. ‘I’-tags are, moreover, the memory elements in relation to which the unified ‘I’ is normally constructed (Lancaster, 1997a; 1997b). It seems reasonable to propose that when a broader range than normal of representations triggered during the ‘examine’ stage become conscious (through the contemplative process described above), there ensues a hyperactivation of ‘I’-tags. Given that the normal organisation of these elements into the *unified ‘I’* is attenuated, such hyperactivation of ‘I’-tags would eventuate in non-habitual self-related experience — the mystic might indeed see ‘his self standing before him’.

The notion that mystical practices alter the experience of self and its relation to the perceived world is hardly surprising. Mystical traditions generally concur in the view that the sense of the individual self constitutes some form of barrier to

spiritual ‘progress’, and that our conventional perception of the world is, at best, selective, and, at worst, delusional. Language is probably the primary tool in maintaining normal reality orientation, by which is meant an everyday sense of the reality of self in its relation to the body and of the physical–spatial world around one. It seems hardly surprising, then, that the deconstruction of language — ‘spilling the blood of the languages’ — practised over prolonged periods, would eventuate in a deconstruction of the schematic structures through which both the sense of the world and the experience of self are mediated.

It would be a mistake to conclude that Hebrew language mysticism is concerned only with such deconstructive processes, however. An equally forceful emphasis is on the ‘reconstructive’ use of language. This is evident in the appeals to a higher, or more inclusive, view of language, especially with regard to the divine Name and God’s own use of language in creation. I conjecture that by reconnecting deconstructed language elements with the various (and elaborate) permutations of the Name, the mystic is effectively substituting the all-encompassing divine Being into the role normally played by ‘I’-tags. Or, to put it another way, the ‘I’-tag system becomes subjected to the highest-order indexing system feasible — a kind of *transpersonal* tagging system giving a sense of one’s place in the divine mind. Such a proposal is necessarily speculative, but it is perhaps worth elaborating. The one element that is found throughout all strands of Jewish mysticism is contemplation of the Names of God. In the linguistic practices which I have been analysing, working with the letters of the various Names — visualising and chanting them, permuting them and expanding them — continually filled the vacuum left by deconstructing other, mundane, linguistic meanings. My proposal is that whereas in the developing individual the representation of ‘I’ plays the central role in memory, such that all conscious events or images become indexed by reference to ‘I’, for these mystics it is their representation of the divine — necessarily linguistic — which takes on such a central indexing function. This may indeed be the enduring psychological consequence of a mystic achieving awareness of the ‘I-ness’ of God (Idel, 1988a, p. 64).

Ultimately, the attempt to model spiritual meaning in psychological terms reaches the question of *belief*. At the least, and holding a perspective grounded in psychological science, the enlargement of the sphere of meaning implicit in such a transpersonal tagging system might be considered adaptive in a therapeutic sense, since the petty complexes associated with the mundane self system would be transcended (although a cynic might be concerned about possible dogmatic tendencies associated with the mystic’s image of the divine). Moreover, the loosening of the bonds of the schematic structure should result in greater creativity.¹⁴ Indeed, Abulafia’s extensive elaborations on the associations between words and concepts seem to me to be especially creative. He repeatedly enters into complex

[14] It is relevant to note in this context that the imagery of loosening and re-tying knots is specifically used by Abulafia: ‘He must link and change a name with a name, and renew a matter, to tie the loosened and to loosen the tied, using known names, in their revolutions . . . until the one tying and loosening will strip off from the stringencies of the prohibited and the permitted, and dress a new form for the prohibited and permitted’ (cited in Idel, 1988b, pp. 136–7).

codified linguistic and numerological systems of thought in order to draw out ideas which are distinctively compelling in their insight into the relationship between the divine and human spheres.

Such putative psychological gains hardly capture the mystics' own religious objective, however. Without doubt these mystics intended to realize their spiritual potential through union with the divine, and language was for them the essential medium for such encounter. A cognitive model cannot fully convey the notion of the human mind somehow extending into the transpersonal, or divine, realm. I am proposing that the preconscious elaboration of possibilities as modelled above, together with the emotional concomitants of entering an altered state of consciousness, may be keys for comprehending the psychology of the kinds of ecstatic states under consideration. However, as William James's studies of religious experience led him to conclude a century ago, there would seem to be a further dimension with which the mind connects in such states:

The further limits of our being plunge, it seems to me, into an altogether other dimension of existence from the sensible and merely 'understandable' world. Name it the mystical region, or the supernatural region, whichever you choose. So far as our ideal impulses originate in this region . . . , we belong to it in a more intimate sense than that in which we belong to the visible world (James, 1960, p. 490).

I am inclined to think that the spontaneity in the preconscious fount of associations may be some kind of window into such an 'other dimension'. I envisage trains of activity being generated by each and every image which enters the mind. Simple association ignites connected images which in turn incandesce, triggering ever more connections without the imposition of those limitations which arrive only with the sense of 'I'. It is a ceaseless preconscious effervescence which forms the kernel of the memory process. Perhaps this represents the central dynamic of the Active Intellect, that is, its real *activity*. At root, the spontaneous movement of the psyche — its generation of images and its incessant blending of forms in the fluid quest for meaning — is the essential spark of the divine mirrored within. The mystic seeks a vehicle with which to reach towards that spark, and for the Jewish mystic there is no vehicle equivalent, in terms of transcendent power, to the Hebrew language itself:

As far as man is concerned, the letters . . . by means of [their] combinations aid the soul to actualise its potential with much greater ease than any other means (cited in Idel, 1989, p. 6).

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