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SENSIBLE ECSTASY

A review of Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

AMY HOLLYWOOD, in her book *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*, suggests that medieval mystics are alive and well in the thoughts and fantasies of contemporary thinkers, and she wants to know why. What is it that we (scholars of religion, philosophers, psychoanalysts, and feminists) want from people who confuse us with claims that God is present in our suffering words and our suffering bodies? Hollywood argues, the contemporary concern for mysticism—especially bodily, emotive mysticism—is part of a desire (and nostalgia) for a time when ritual addressed the trauma of inevitable loss, and the suffering body was the site of divine presence. She makes this argument by examining how Georges Bataille, Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Lacan, and Luce Irigaray take up the work of medieval, female mystics.

The problem with Bataille, according to his critic and peer Jean-Paul Sartre, is that his experience does not lead to anything—no meaningful human projects thrust into the future, no confrontation with the absurdity of history and experience; in short, a self-indulgent mysticism. On the contrary, Hollywood argues, Bataille's work shatters the self and engages history in a way Sartre could not imagine. One way Bataille does this is through his novel *Story of the Eye*. Bataille's novel is a collection of sadomasochistic stories coupled with mystical mimicry and a self-reflexive commentary that posits and disrupts an autobiographical self by raising more questions about the identity of the novel's author than it answers.

Bataille imitates Angela of Foligno's identification with the suffering body of Christ in her *Book of Visions* as a way to create his own meditative practices in his *Atheological Summa*. He meditates, however, on a photograph of a Chinese torture victim as an act of self-laceration that, unlike Angela's meditations, results in no ultimate salvation. This act, Hollywood contends, produces a community between Angela and Bataille, Bataille and the torture victim, and Bataille and his

reader. Furthermore, the meditation engages history, rather than escaping it, because it suggests that nothing but chance keeps the viewer from suffering the same fate as the torture victim.

The voyeurism of such a practice is, nevertheless troubling, and Hollywood makes no apologies for it. She observes that Bataille's mystical model changes in his later writings and instead of miming Angela's identification with a tortured Christ, Bataille's writing, especially in *Guilty*, becomes an apophatic series of confessions that resemble the form of Mechthild of Magdeburg's *The Flowing Light* and Augustine's *Confessions*. Unlike these Christian thinkers, however, Bataille's confessions reveal and communicate inner experience, a terrifying and joyful self-laceration that stimulates no dogma of cosmic salvation. Inner experience, Hollywood argues, is not a flight from reality but is one possibility for engagement with it.

Engagement and action are precisely what concern Simone de Beauvoir. The philosopher, novelist, and feminist claims that mysticism and eroticism have historically been the paths available for women to justify themselves. Both options inevitably fail, however, because they hide a woman's self-love and project it onto an illusory other. Patriarchal culture gives no support for women's self-regard; thus, female subjectivity cannot become autonomous or reciprocal and is unable to engage in meaningful projects.

Teresa of Avila is a mystic who breaks this pattern. Beauvoir's attraction to Teresa stems from the mystic's agency, which is manifest in two ways: the control she exerts within her mystical experiences and the objective actions in the world that those experiences inspire. Other female mystics passively (but often painfully) experience the presence of God within their bodies. According to Beauvoir's reading, Teresa in her mystical experiences consciously and actively responds to her lover, God. Furthermore, these experiences enable Teresa to found a Carmelite order and to establish convents throughout Castille, France. For Beauvoir, who doesn't believe in God, it is this kind of transcendent action that justifies mysticism.

Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan does not appeal to any specific mystic, but he does insist in his *Seminar XX:Encore* that the goal of psychoanalysis is a mystical and feminine *jouissance*. In Lacanian terms, when psychoanalysis succeeds in detaching the imaginary from the symbolic by revealing that the *object a* is not the *object A*, (the known object of desire is not the Other of consciousness which stimulates desire) the real emerges in an experience of anguish and ecstasy via a language that affects the body materially (or speaks from the body). This experience is deemed feminine because within phallic discourse (the symbolic realm generated by patriarchy) woman represents what is partial and lacking. It

is deemed mystical because psychoanalytic discourse acts like a negative theology by showing that language does not secure the object and source of desire, the *object A*, the Other. By critiquing the patriarchal symbolic and imaginary, psychoanalysis, in Hollywood's view, one can contribute to the projects of feminism, despite Lacan's personal distaste for feminism. Yet, Lacan's thinking does not go far enough in this direction. His negative identification of woman coupled with his vocabulary of lack, castration, and paternity, reveal that he is too much under the sway of the phallic symbolic he tries to subvert. Hollywood implicitly asks: Is not a symbolic that privileges neither gender possible? She hopes so.

Luce Irigaray, however, would be content with a feminine symbolic and a feminine religion as means to support female subjectivity. A genuine female subject provisionally emerges, according to the philosopher and psychoanalyst, in medieval Christian mysticism. Women mystics discover their freedom through (sometimes erotic) relationships with Christ, the feminized, embodied, son of God. But this is just the start. Irigaray thinks that sexual difference itself can be the means for realizing a "horizontal transcendence," (212) based upon the recognition of human finitude and an openness to the other. The problem with this vision, for Hollywood and many of Irigaray's other readers, is that it critiques the patriarchal, monotheistic divine only to replace it with another, feminine divine, thus raising the issue of belief. In other words, Irigaray questions the process of belief when its object is the male God and she insists that women need something in which to believe—sexual difference. Such a thought has drawn accusations that Irigaray is a biological essentialist. Hollywood rejects this view, but she does think that Irigaray fetishizes the concept of sexual difference, using it to avoid full recognition of inevitable suffering.

To shed some light on this process of fetishization and the controversy it stirs, Hollywood compares it to a specific occurrence within medieval mysticism: the discrepancies between the hagiography of Beatrice of Nazareth, *The Life of Beatrice*, and Beatrice's own text, "On the Seven Manners of Loving God." In Hollywood's reading, the anonymous hagiographer fetishizes Beatrice's suffering by seeing her mystical experiences as bodily and the result of meditational practices. There are no meditational practices in Beatrice's text, and she insists union with Christ is an inner experience. Hollywood takes this discrepancy to be a symptom of the larger 13th and 14th century conflicts over who interprets (and, thus, controls) the writings of female mystics. She also takes it as a model of how Irigaray's texts have been received by her critics. Irigaray's critics go looking for an essentialized, female body in her writings, but none is there. She does, however, essentialize sexual difference (a fetish in its own right) in a way that invites such criticism.

Hollywood concludes by noting the relevance of medieval, female mystics for contemporary feminist thought. She agrees with Irigaray that when separation from the mother (in psychoanalytic terms) is thought of as lack and loss, then women become identified with suffering and the body. The pleasures of the body and the memory of pleasurable union with the mother are forgotten. Irigaray seems to forget, however, that the body suffers all kinds of losses, not just the loss of the mother. For Bataille, inspired by Angela of Foligno, it is through trauma that the real emerges. But Hollywood is wary of a logic that can appear to sanction violence with an emphasis on ecstasy and at the expense of compassion. The problem that these issues raise for her is "how to acknowledge trauma and loss and allow for mourning and its bodily effects without forcing women and other oppressed people to bear the weight of this work through their symbolic association with the mortal body, and without succumbing to a valorization of trauma as the sole site of the real." (277)

Hollywood makes four specific suggestions. First, without losing sight of gender differences, we need to reject claims that the dual-sex difference primarily constitutes human subjectivity. We should also be able to define loss in such a way that it does not define human embodiment. Along similar lines, we should recognize the limits of politics, understanding that political efforts will never completely prevent suffering. Finally, Hollywood contends we need public sites for embodied rituals of mourning. Critically reading the texts of female, medieval mystics confronts us with the paradox of the persistent desire to transcend the body coupled with the realization that religious transcendence occurs through the body. Neither religion nor politics alone can adequately deal with this paradox.

My meager summary does not do justice to Hollywood's book. It displays an informative and impressive mastery of diverse material: Christian mysticism, psychoanalytic theory, Continental philosophy, feminist theory and theology. The work, however, suffers from such mastery. Presenting itself as a unified text ("the history of this twentieth-century fascination with emotional, bodily, and, and excessive forms of mysticism" [5]), *Sensible Ecstasy* does not give a coherent argument that threads all of its chapters. This lack would be no problem, except that the text does not allow itself to be fragmentary or simply incomplete. It struggles after a comprehensiveness that it cannot deliver and that its subject-matter puts to question. In other words, Hollywood does seem to realize the irony of mastering the thought of thinkers who insist that the writings of mystics continue to be valuable precisely because they elude our mastery.

I do not suggest that Hollywood's writing—like that of Bataille, Lacan, and Irigaray—should mime mystical writings (Is such a fantasy allowed in Anglophone academia?). But *Sensible Ecstasy* would be far more readable and

stimulating to thought if it were a collection of essays.

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