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## Review of Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*.

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**Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002. xv + 371 pp. ISBN 0226349527 (paper).**

**Reviewed by Maud McInerney, Haverford College**

Amy Hollywood's *Sensible Ecstasy* is a challenging, provocative, original and occasionally frustrating book that considers the complex relationship between mysticism and sexual difference in the work of a series of important modern and postmodern French thinkers. The tenor of French intellectual life in the twentieth century has been, for the most part, resolutely secular, even anti-religious; Hollywood demonstrates, however, a profound fascination on the part of Georges Bataille, Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Lacan and Luce Irigaray not only with Christian mysticism but with particular forms of bodily devotional practice associated with medieval women. She argues that the medieval past (itself abjected, dismissed as a gap between more meaningful historical eras, intimately and inevitably implicated in the excesses and failures of religiosity), has been instrumental in shaping several major impulses in Western philosophy and psychoanalysis. Trained as a medievalist (her previous book, *The Soul as Virgin Wife: Mechthild of Magdeburg, Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart*, deals with the links between gender and apophatic mystical traditions in the late Middle Ages), Hollywood does not read medieval women writers through the lens of contemporary critical theory, but rather uses the texts of medieval and early modern women writers such as Angela of Foligno, Beatrice of Nazareth, Hadewijch of Brabant, Marguerite Porete and Teresa of Avila to read the works of Bataille, Beauvoir, Lacan and Irigaray, especially with reference to their understanding of the links between the body, sexual difference, and subjectivity.

*Sensible Ecstasy* is divided into three parts: "Georges Bataille, Mystique," "(En)gendering Mysticism," which is devoted to Beauvoir and Lacan, and "Feminism, Mysticism, and Belief," which develops an extended reading and critique of the issue of belief in the work of Luce Irigaray. At its best (and the best parts are parts one and three), the book invites an exhilarating re-engagement with the work of the thinkers, both medieval and modern, who are its subjects. For Hollywood, the central link between medieval female mystics and twentieth century French theorists is their shared investment in apophatic modes of speech. The distinction between cataphatic and apophatic modes of mystical communication in the Christian tradition goes back at least as far as Augustine; briefly put, the cataphatic tradition is visionary, celebratory, and insists upon the ability of words to serve as signs pointing toward divine truth, even if they must always fail to be identical with it. The apophatic mode of mystical speech, on the other hand, assumes the ultimate futility of language, embracing absence and paradox in the place of meaning, and thus anticipating many of the currents of twentieth century poststructuralist thought.

The first part of *Sensible Ecstasy*, devoted to a reading of the mystical in Georges Bataille, is especially provocative. Bataille has never been a particularly important figure in American feminist theory; this may be due to his explicit investment in the sacred (which he places in uneasy opposition to the religious in *Atheological Summa*), or to his sadism (practical? theoretical?). Hollywood is very good at unpacking the implications of Bataille's antireligious, bodily mysticism, less good at confronting the issue of sadism in his work. She is particularly

concerned to rescue Bataille from the charge leveled at him by Sartre in 1943: that his mysticism (what Sartre called his "black pantheism") amounted to escapism, to a rejection of history and its ethical and political imperatives. Hollywood argues that Bataille does not "desire to escape history and temporality but to engage with them differently" (35). He thus embarks upon a complex and not always consistent attempt to subvert a whole series of binary oppositions: "For Bataille, the contradiction between objective and subjective, like that between the fictional and the autobiographical, allows his theoretical texts themselves to become 'operations' of ecstasy; they continually erect and overturn distinctions between 'experience' and 'theory,' 'subjective' and 'objective,' 'inner' and 'outer,' making the writing of theory itself an erotic, mystical, religious exercise" (59). Hollywood makes this claim in reference to Bataille's putatively autobiographical *Story of the Eye* and his (in)famous meditation in the *Atheological Summa* on the photograph of a mutilated Chinese torture victim. She argues that both of these texts operate to produce "what Lacan would call *jouissance*, an ecstasy that goes beyond, dissolving the subject and those secondary formations of subjectivity--masochism and sadism--that attempt to protect it" (57). For Bataille, violence is philosophically essential to a notion of sacrifice separate from religious practice, but in the face of the global historical trauma of the Second World War, literal sacrifice becomes impossible; writing pain thus becomes the only possible response to history, rather than an evasion of it.

Bataille's fascination with physical suffering and abjection finds a reflection in Angela of Foligno's *Book of Visions*, which he was reading as the war began. Angela was a thirteenth century Franciscan tertiary whose devotional practice included not only fasting but much more abject behavior, such as eating the scabs of lepers. Hollywood claims that what Bataille finds in Angela is a perfectly apophatic religion which maps onto his own ontological quest: "The God of the mystics, Bataille suggests, is a God without aim, project, salvation, or knowledge--hence not God at all, at least as that concept is deployed within the mainstream of Christian theology and philosophy" (67). For both the twentieth-century philosopher and the thirteenth-century mystic, meditation on pain is a way of dissolving subjectivity by inducing a constructed traumatic experience. Hollywood argues persuasively that, where actual trauma victims need "narrativization, through which bodily memories are relived and reordered in meaningful narrative forms" (76), Angela and Bataille, like other medieval mystics, reverse the process, "moving through narrative memory in order, through imaginative recreation, to induce sensory and emotive suffering and horror in the face of catastrophic loss" (77). Bataille's meditation on torture victims functions, according to this argument, to "intensify and embrace guilt-ridden anguish" (79) in response to the atrocities of mid-century. For Hollywood, this becomes an ethics of catastrophe, an imperative to communicate what is, by definition, incommunicable: "Bataille desires to live within death's breath; he is compelled to witness (to) the other's physical dissolution, through which the chance nature of existence is made known" (87).

Hollywood explicitly acknowledges many of the problems in her reading of Bataille as a sort of ethical philosopher of sado-masochism. She ends the part of the book devoted to him with a brief comparison to a contemporary whose experience of atrocity was intimate rather than secondary, Simone Weil. Hollywood insists that "unlike Weil, Bataille refuses to believe in a loving, torturer God through whose sacrifice history will be redeemed" (110). She sees this refusal as profoundly ethical, which indeed it may be. Nonetheless, Hollywood's attempt to rescue Bataille from the charges made by Sartre (and Beauvoir, and implicitly others) is ironic on several different levels,

not least because it attempts the redemption of a thinker who rejected the very notion of redemption. This makes Hollywood's project seem quixotic in much the same way as Angela Carter's "Polemical Preface" to *The Sadeian Woman*, in which Carter argued that the Marquis De Sade was actually the ultimate feminist.

There is a great deal to be admired in Hollywood's reading of Bataille (as in Carter's of De Sade) but some major elisions and erasures ought to provoke us to question it more fully. For one thing, Hollywood's summary of the plot of *Story of the Eye* sanitizes it significantly. The narrator and Simone "stage a drunken orgy with other local youth, during which they sexually manipulate Marcelle," Hollywood remarks primly (47). In Bataille's text, the scene in question goes on for three pages and is obscenely explicit in its descriptions of intercourse, masturbation, fellatio, urolagnia, and a variety of other sexual practices, some of which defy labeling; the violence of the novel is equally explicit, and indeed the English translation has been the constant subject of attempts at censorship. Hollywood's paraphrase and her citation of the reflections of the second narrator rather than of the *Story* itself, distance the author (Bataille), the critic (Hollywood), and finally the reader from the most characteristic quality of the text, its extreme and obscene sadism. This distancing is partly deliberate; Hollywood concentrates, for the most part, on the masochistic impulses she sees as characteristic of both Angela of Foligno and Bataille, and which she links to practices (of devotion, of writing) which both communicate and control the trauma of loss through death. Angela is not, however, the only medieval figure with whom Bataille identified. His fascination with Gilles de Rais, sadist, necrophile, rapist and murderer of hundreds of children, troubles Hollywood's thesis profoundly, and indeed, Gilles haunts her footnotes and her epilogue rather as though he were the repressed struggling to return. There is a significant difference between Bataille's imaginative identification with the Chinese torture victim, which Hollywood is able to read as a form of bearing witness to the suffering of another, and his treatment of Gilles. Bataille published the documents surrounding Gilles's inquisition in 1965 as *Le Procès de Gilles de Rais*, and his interest lies not with the young victims of atrocity, but with Gilles himself as the manifestation of a perverted Catholic impulse toward sacrifice, ritual and excess. There are, no doubt, ways of negotiating this paradox in Bataille's thought; I wish Hollywood had attempted them. She notes, in her critique of Bataille's investment in his own "ecstatic anguish," that "it is not clear that who suffers is so radically contingent . . . differences in race, class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity make it more likely that members of one or another particular group will be the subject of physical torture" (95), but she herself seems almost to participate in this elision by repressing the victims (disadvantaged by class, by age, by history itself) of Gilles de Rais.

The second part of the book, "(En)gendering Mysticism," deals with Simone de Beauvoir and Jacques Lacan. In it, Hollywood's focus shifts from the status of the body in mystical and philosophical discourse to the question of gender. The mystical, she argues, is problematic for Beauvoir, who is both aware of its appeal, which she experienced directly during her devout Catholic childhood, and deeply suspicious of it. Beauvoir insists that women have been culturally constituted as the "Second Sex." Given such acculturation, mysticism has historically been one of the few avenues of self-expression open to women; but for Beauvoir, it is usually a blind alley (and indeed, this is how she, along with Sartre, understood Bataille's mysticism). In her fundamentally experiential and political worldview, mysticism can only succeed when it becomes active, fully engaged with the social world; Beauvoir sees this as happening only in the

lives of a very few extraordinary women: Catherine of Siena, Joan of Arc, and especially Teresa of Avila. The experience of other religious women such as Marguerite-Marie Alacoque, the initiator of the devotion to the Sacred Heart, or Madame Guyon, is assimilated by Beauvoir to hysteria; in them, mysticism becomes an obstacle to agency rather than a vehicle for it. Teresa, by contrast, transcends the weakness and passivity associated with femininity through her mysticism, controls the effects of that mysticism through the power of the will, and thus becomes "an existentialist hero for whom the force of her will in the face of death is sufficient to generate meaning, value and projects" (144).

Hollywood argues both that Beauvoir's "critique of femininity contains within it an explicit critique of masculinity" (139) and that her failure to historicize Teresa suggests a continuing desire for transcendence even after Beauvoir has decided that mysticism is a temptation to be avoided. According to this reading, it is the very cultural instability (impossibility?) of the feminine subject position that drives Beauvoir to engage in a more complex manner than her male contemporaries with both death and the absolute. Paradoxically, this ambivalent desire for subjection to some notion of the absolute operates to free Beauvoir from "dependence on the contingent recognition of others . . . who, all too often, fail her" (145).

Coming after her elaborate and impassioned reading of Bataille, Hollywood's treatment of Beauvoir seems a bit flat, and is rather repetitive, both substantially and on the level of sentences: "Teresa is the great exception" (132) to the general association of mysticism with narcissism; "Teresa is, for Beauvoir, the great exception" (143) to women's inability to take responsibility for themselves. One wonders whether this flatness is not perhaps due to the absence of the defensive zeal that characterizes Hollywood's enthusiastic attempt to recuperate Bataille. Beauvoir, after all, is not in need of rescue in quite the same way. The second subject of part two, Jacques Lacan, doesn't come in for the rescue treatment either; Hollywood is more critical of Lacan than of any other figure in the book, and not only for his well-known anti-feminism.

Hollywood's discussion of Lacan centers upon the analogic positions, in his work, of the feminine and the apophatic. In the Lacanian universe, "mysticism, as a quest for the absolute . . . encounters instead that which radically destabilizes subjectivity and meaning--mysticism seeks the transcendental signifier but discovers the paradoxical interplay of presence and absence through which signification is made possible" (149). Mystical absence functions in much the same way as "woman" for Lacan; as he puts it in *Seminar XX: Encore*, "there is always something in her which escapes discourse" (cited by Hollywood, 155). Hollywood notes that "Lacan's arguments are emphatically not grounded in a conception of women's 'nature' and its greater proximity to the 'mystical'" (151). Instead, she argues, sexual difference is for Lacan a function of language as it operates within the phallogocentric system. "Woman," the mystical, and the phallus are all symbolic sites upon which the male fantasy of castration and loss can be projected in order to support the myth of male primacy and power. Thus in Lacan's writing a notorious series of disarticulations (between women and "Woman," between the *a* and the *A*, between penis and phallus) mirror the disarticulation between cataphatic and apophatic language.

While Lacan's version of psychoanalysis is generally associated with scientific or pseudo-scientific modes of discourse (equations that look like algebra, diagrams that look like

geometry), Hollywood redirects our attention to Lacan's own interest in mysticism: "Lacan not only wants his audience to read mystical texts, but counts his own writings among them" (163). Hollywood paints a compelling picture of a sort of mystical anxiety of influence motivating the most self-dramatically egotistical of the French psychoanalysts. Behind Lacan, appropriated and/or erased to greater or lesser degrees, stands a series of shadowy mystics: Hadewijch of Anvers, a Beguine whose mystical texts Lacan recommends, Teresa, who appears only as her statue by Bernini, and finally Bataille, who goes nearly completely unacknowledged but whose influence, Hollywood argues, is profound (the weirdly intimate personal connections between the two men, who were married to the same woman almost simultaneously at one point, are traced in a series of footnotes (321-22)). The evocation of the mystical is linked for Lacan to the concept of *jouissance*, which Hollywood describes as an "anguished ecstasy in which the real, the recognition of the endless gap in being and the ceaselessness of desire, emerges" (166). Hollywood argues, however, that for Lacan, far more than for Bataille, this ecstasy is dehistoricized and depoliticized. For Lacan, lack becomes so theoretical that it stops looking like death, thus avoiding the messy physicality so present in Bataille's work. Even more problematically, as Lacan works to expose the phantasmatic quality of phallic logic (according to which subjectivity is founded upon the separation between the "object *a*" and the "A/Other," a separation which becomes confused or conflated with the equally crucial separations between *femme* and *la femme* and between penis and phallus), he reinscribes it: "as long as Lacan continues to use the language of castration, lack and paternity to name the gap in the subject, he continues to privilege masculinity and to uphold the very fantasy his work sets out to subvert" (168). For Lacan, as for Bataille, "we are all always already castrated, lacking, lacerated and split," even while "a fantasy of fullness and phallic plenitude is inscribed within this very account of subjectivity" (170). The difference between the two, Hollywood implies, is that Bataille at least attempts some confrontation with bodily rather than merely psychoanalytic trauma, with the ultimate loss that is death. Lacan's elegantly theoretical, even mathematical, formulations of loss operate to veil the obstreperous reality of suffering which so engaged the imagination of Bataille.

Just as Bataille stands (albeit unacknowledged) behind so much of Lacan's thought, Hollywood argues that Lacan himself is the influence against whom the Belgian philosopher Luce Irigaray struggles to reorient a psychoanalytic understanding of mysticism, sexual difference and death. In the chapters devoted to Irigaray, Hollywood's writing reclaims the defensive enthusiasm that characterized the first part of the book, on Bataille. (To be quite fair, some of the infelicities of style in the Lacan chapter may be due to the subject matter; perhaps it is simply impossible to write about Lacan without using the tired phrase "always already" six or seven times.) In the case of Irigaray, Hollywood undertakes to defend her from the charge of essentialism so often leveled at her by other (and especially American) feminists, and develops a reading that is rigorous, critical and yet at the same time admiring. Hollywood tracks the development of Irigaray's thoughts on mysticism over several decades and a series of influential texts, with particular emphasis on the chapter in *Speculum de l'autre femme* called *Lamystérique*, and the essays "Così fan tutti," "Belief Itself" and "Divine Women."

In general, it is the Irigaray of the earlier texts whom Hollywood finds most convincing. It is also in *Speculum* that Irigaray comes closest to late medieval women mystics as she argues that the feminized body of Christ allows a rare space for the development (albeit always abortive) of a

feminine imaginary within the male-dominated Western tradition. The image of the mirror itself (*speculum* in Latin), Hollywood reminds us, derives from the Christian mystical tradition and permits Irigaray to argue "both that women have served as the empty, passive surface in which men have seen themselves reflected, and that this mirror . . . can reflect men's words and images back with a difference. This subtle subversion marks the difference that is femininity within male-dominant society" (195). The emphasis on the body, on mystic touching (perhaps metaphorical, perhaps not), also links Irigaray to the Beguine mystics. She "understands language as caught in a logic of vision and representation that rests on the repression of touch, of embodiment, and so, she argues, of women" (196). It is from this position that Irigaray mounts her critique of Lacan, arguing that his "emphasis on castration, lack and wounding creates a rhetoric of impotence that a feminine imaginary must challenge" (203). For Irigaray, however, the Christian mystical tradition is insufficient to disrupt the mechanisms of male domination. As Hollywood puts it, "although the Incarnation may be the grounds for a new relation to language, the Christ of traditional Christianity does not save women but usurps their power, creativity and bodiliness through his feminized body" (205). She thus calls for the invention of a feminine divine which would arise from the deconstruction of male-dominated philosophies and permit the imagination of a fully empowered women's subjectivity.

At this point, Hollywood argues persuasively, Irigaray's project runs into two difficulties. The first is related to her understanding of the way gendered religious symbols work, and the second to her unquestioning acceptance of Feuerbachian presumptions of belief. As the work of Caroline Walker Bynum demonstrates, the mechanics of identification do not operate according to gender lines; St John of the Cross and St Bernard of Clairvaux are perfectly able to imagine themselves as feminized by love of Christ, while female religious are no more likely than men to identify with feminine avatars of the divine (Christ as mother, the Virgin Mary, Divine Wisdom as Sophia). There is no space in Irigaray's resolutely heterosexist vision of the universe for such cross-gendered identification. A further problem is raised by archeological evidence; it is by no means clear that women enjoyed greater social power in pre-Christian cultures that still had goddesses. In fact, many historians of religion have argued that the advent of Christianity permitted women to play a far more important and visible role in religion than had been possible in the Judaic or pagan Mediterranean. Irigaray's utopian vision of the feminine divine arises, Hollywood argues, from an "apparently uncritical acceptance of the Feuerbachian claim that religion is a projection and reflection of the ego ideals of its human creators" (211). While Feuerbach's critique of formal religion was enormously influential in the mid-nineteenth century, more recent scholarship has complicated the picture significantly, complications which Irigaray chooses to ignore.

Underlying this more or less willful ignorance of the way religion and religious symbols actually operate, Hollywood argues, is an even deeper problem in Irigaray's thought, the "fetishization" of sexual difference. Irigaray has regularly been accused of essentialism, of linking identity absolutely to bodily morphology: women are defined by their vaginas, men by their penises. Hollywood insists that this is to oversimplify the case. Rather, what Irigaray does is to fetishize sexual difference as the ground upon which the separation between men and women, which she sees as the fundamental schism in human society (an analysis challenged and often rejected outright by third-wave feminists, who argue for the equal importance of race and class difference); for Hollywood, fetishization is a more apt term than essentialism because it

describes a more complicated psychological process. Fetishism, after all, is about control, about the projection of fear (fear of death, fear of loss) onto a figure or concept which is other than the fetishizing subject; fetishized concepts in Irigaray include natality and maternity, both of which allow her to imagine a feminine divine which is entirely concerned with possibility, with creativity and potential rather than with loss or death. Paradoxically, Hollywood argues, it is the fetishization of sexual difference which allows Irigaray to deny "much of the particularity, specificity, and multiplicity of bodily experience, which includes both pleasure and suffering, possibility and loss, natality and mortality" (269). Hollywood demonstrates the way this process operates by elaborating parallel readings of the reception of Irigaray and the Beguine Beatrice of Nazareth. She argues that Irigaray is misread by her critics just as Beatrice (who was both the author of a mystical text, the *Seven Manners of Loving*, and the subject of a male-authored hagiography) was by her biographer. Both sorts of misreading are related to the body--thus the claim that Irigaray essentializes gender is based upon a literalization of the complex metaphors of her thought, just as Beatrice's hagiographer anchors her spiritual experience in her body in ways which her first person account does not. Both also, Hollywood argues, point to unresolved issues in the texts of the two women. Beatrice's hagiographer needs to invoke her suffering, hysterical body both in order to make sense of what she represses in her own account of her spiritual experience, and in order to repress his own corporeality, which is projected (as was so often the case in medieval religious writing) onto hers. Similarly, while Irigaray may not essentialize in the simplistic fashion of which she has been accused, by grounding women's experience absolutely in the female body, she does "fetishize sexual difference in response to the absence of women's autonomy and freedom" (267)--which becomes a way of refusing to deal with the realities of loss, of suffering, of death.

It is, finally, the question of loss which lies at the heart of Hollywood's book and which motivates its most ambitious claims and its most trenchant critiques. Angela of Foligno can confront loss because it is balanced by the transcendent presence (albeit only momentary) of a Christ who is to her utterly real; Bataille confronts it without the guarantee of the divine, which drives him to value suffering in an exclusive fashion that urges his logic "dangerously close to that of the serial killer" (276). Beauvoir, Lacan, Irigaray: all, according to Hollywood's account, fail in some significant manner to deal with the problem of loss, of mortality. "We are left," she writes in the conclusion, "with the problem of how to acknowledge trauma and loss and allow for mourning and recognition of 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). How this is to be done remains (necessarily!) unresolved. Hollywood's book, however, does operate to confront and make restitution for one very particular kind of loss; it recuperates the influence of the medieval past and of medieval women in particular on a powerful current in modern and postmodern philosophy. The impulse to rescue difficult ideologies (such as those of Bataille and Irigaray) will resonate profoundly with medievalists; this is, of course, what we do: we rescue fragments of the past from misconstructions based upon misrepresentation, we re-present difficult ideologies by freeing them from reductive generalizations. By removing Angela of Foligno, Hadewijch of Brabant, Teresa of Avila, Marguerite Porete and Beatrice of Nazareth from the marginal category of medieval women mystics in which they have so long resided and reinstating them as precursors of a powerful current in contemporary philosophy, Hollywood performs a major reconfiguration of the way we understand the Western intellectual tradition.