

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY STUDIES



German Mysticism and the Politics of Culture

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· INTRODUCTION ·

Love the gods and consider kindly those who are mortal.
Friedrich Hölderlin, *An die jungen Dichter*

Written over the span of more than a decade, *German Mysticism and the Politics of Culture*, a collection of essays on German mysticism, has been assembled with a focus on the gendered production, reception, and textual transmission of mystical teachings. Part One, entitled *Anamnesis*, opens with an analysis of a core concept of mystical experience, union with the Divine, and its transfer into erotic and secular language beyond medieval mysticism. Despite its secularization, Western language about erotic union never lost its aura of numinosity and transcendence; indeed, modern writers such as Anne Sexton (1928–1974) could retrieve even its Christian agents (Chapter One, *Unio Mystica*). Contemporary spirituality also still shuttles back and forth between medieval and modern mystical discourse, whether textual or mimetic, thus generative of multiple types of resonance and reiteration that force open the discursive clamps of either secularized “progress” or religious “decline”. For a German context, aspects of late medieval blood mysticism and its reemergence in the life of the stigmatic Therese Neumann (1898–1962) will serve as a case study of such reiteration.¹ As is the case elsewhere in this collection, Nazi Germany haunts the specifically “German-ness” of Therese Neumann’s mysticism and thus the

reception of her medieval predecessors. In either case, German-ness is both a place and a story told. On the biographical level, critical categories such as gender and authorial identity invite similar questions about *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Chapter Three, *Masculinity*, traces the displacement of male embodiment in the construction of a Carthusian mystic's authoritative persona, Dionysius of Ryckel (1402–1471), with a focus on site-specific cultic memory and masculinity. Chapter four contrasts the authorial self-creation of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim (10th c.) with that of subsequent generations of mostly German scholars. Hrotsvit is usually approached as a writer without a spiritual or mystical bend. The essay “Who is Hrotsvit of Gandersheim?” explores authorial self-reflection as much as it reclaims mystical elements in Hrotsvit's writings, especially so place-based mystical beliefs and practices.

Part Two, entitled *Love and Death*, begins with a recapitulation of the *unio mystica* motif, but in a new key, now moving from historiographical mimesis to an observation of existential processes of life-giving and death-dealing, of re/generation and destruction, may they be physical, emotional, or spiritual. Chapter Five explores an aesthetic of homoerotic desire in the work of the thirteenth century Beguine Hadewijch, with *Minne* replacing Christ as the soul's lover. Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight investigate the difficult and fraught relationships between women mystics and their male confessors and biographers. It has been argued that these relationships could often be constructive and supportive. Nonetheless, they were asymmetrically constructed by ecclesiastical law and educational systems to favor the role of confessor.²

The second part of the book title refers to a rather broad concept, that of cultural politics. The emphasis on cultural politics acknowledges that the transfer of mystical knowledge, a complex process *sui generis*, is inextricably embedded in time, place, language, and relationships. The production of abstract theological knowledge about mystical experience runs parallel to its lived presence on the ground, where it is vetted, negotiated, selectively remembered, and creatively re-envisioned in multiple life worlds. To complicate matters, mystical knowledge leaves only fragmentary evidence in its textual double due to its subjective and experientially based nature.³ Whatever medieval fragments we may be able to work with, we are dealing with texts that are the outcome of individual people and groups having negotiated varying degrees of religious knowledge, spiritual expertise, institutional politics, and the concerns of localized (sub-) cultures.

For the sake of mapping the contents of such situational historiography, the term culture is applied broadly as the irretrievable totality of the dynamics,

meaning, and practices expressed in social relationships through which religious and non-religious communities work out heterogeneous and frequently contested theories and practices of mystical spirituality. The textual workings and doings of such dynamics and practices are shaped by authorial strategies of remembering, reinventing, repressing, and displacing.⁴ “Unio mystica” (chapter one) thus offers a reading of such processes as they relate to the spiritually potent experience and concept of mystical union. In this case, the cultural memory trajectory and its ensuing expansion and transformation of the discursive field of ecstatic evocations of mystical union make way for other, no less searing descriptions of annihilation and bliss that retrieve a spectrum of loss and inequality latently embedded in earlier medieval descriptions. Sexuality and war displace the “God question”, women’s voices are actively forgotten and then again, actively reinvented.⁵

Generating a cultural memory of male-authored texts seems often to be the preeminent domain and indeed, the *droit du seigneur* of academic writers, theoretically (genealogically) conceptualized as *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, or reception history.⁶ The locally known but academically repressed memories of embodiment constitute a remarkable symbolic counter-representation of the life and work of the Carthusian mystic Dionysius of Ryckel. In contrast, a Western reception history of embodied female mystical writings resembles the stock exchange: it has bear and bull markets. Academic attention has waxed and waned in tandem with changes in European and/or American women’s social status, but also in a nation state’s need to utilize and always redefine its medieval cultural heritage.⁷ The essays on St. Elisabeth and Hrotsvit of Gandersheim (chapters four and six) consider the impact of first and second wave feminism in articulating violence against women (as in the case of St. Elisabeth and her confessor), and the nationalistic construction of a Latinate German past (as in the case of Hrotsvit). During the first feminist wave, for example, medieval women saints and mystics served both progressive and conservative cultural agendas. Alternatively defined as sexually repressed hysterics, victims of patriarchy, or model housewives, they provided a cultural code to process, absorb, and articulate massive social change.

Within the Church, the commemoration of medieval mystics fared better than on the outside – if the mystical teacher enjoyed canonical status. St. Gertrud, a member of the highly regarded Helfta nuns, and St. Elisabeth are a case in point. Other mystics, however, have languished in marginal ecclesiastical spaces – not quite saintly enough, not quite heretical enough. The life and memory of the German stigmatic Therese Neumann persists as the

center of an international cult yet still without the approval of the Vatican. Neumann's home town Konnersreuth, located near the Czech border, actively supports the cult with expertly tended local sites such as her home, her flower garden, and her grave. Busloads of pilgrims from across Europe and the US visit these sites annually to pray for her canonization and to ask for healing. Neumann's high culture reputation, however, is marred by medical controversies surrounding her stigmatic ecstasies and her ambivalent political status during the Nazi regime.

These case studies of reception history are fragile and tentative readings in their own right. In its classical definition by Hans Georg Gadamer, reception history engages the past and present in creative, selective, and impermanent acts of reading, unavoidably thus always also constituting a misreading of the past. As Gadamer noted, our historical horizon as interpreters of the past is contingent as much as it is a container of our contingency. He notes that

Just as the individual is never simply an individual, because he [sic] is always involved with others, so too the closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction. The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never utterly bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us.⁸

Gadamer's insight constitutes a critique and caveat of my own authorial standpoint. Begun in the early eighties in the United States, my reading of the works of medieval mystics has been informed by the interdisciplinary turn in religious studies and its corollary, an evolving feminist epistemology in the study of historical Christianity. An early monograph on medieval mysticism, *Ecstatic Transformation* compared then current transpersonal and humanistic psychology models with medieval descriptions of mystical states, especially Mechthild of Magdeburg's *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*.⁹ Emerging from the sixties' counter-cultural attentiveness to psychotropic drugs and altered states of consciousness, *Ecstatic Transformation* gauged the relevance of mysticism to a renewed interest in a spirituality of consciousness that was at same time critical of institutionalized religion and oppressive social norms, including sexism.¹⁰ If anything, what I have learned since then is that the tension between institutionalized power and non-normative life worlds is as critical to observe and to name today as it was then. Western gender analyses address new formations of consciousness, voices, and practices engaging the politics of culture, from Pussy Riot's concerts in religious spaces to Edward Snowden and the NSA.

The content of the essays in this volume remain anchored in the medieval time period that shaped my work on *Ecstatic Transformation*, ca. 1250 to 1350, the epoch which Bernard McGinn has characterized as an era of “new mysticism”. McGinn identified three interdependent characteristics of “new mysticism”: a revised relationship between monastic and lay lifestyles, new frameworks for gendered relationships, and new types of discourse.¹¹ McGinn underscored that a change in gender relations depended on the close collaboration between religious men and women. According to McGinn, such alliances generated the tortured paradox of “mutual enrichment” and the “monologic triumph of the authoritative male voice of ecclesiastical authority”.¹² The essays on Heinrich Seuse’s (1295–1366) literary association with Dominican nuns (chapter seven) and a comparison of two contemporaneous biographies of Marie d’Oignies’ (1177–1213, chapter eight) offer a close reading of such innovative collaborations – one within monastic walls, the other in newly formed lay movements.¹³

Whereas intra-ecclesiastical or institutionalized religiosity and its symbolic expressions were reproduced across time and space with an effort to minimize change of hegemonic status, the same is not true for the lived genealogy of medieval mystics and their teachings. As Michel de Certeau has argued, the losers in the monologic reproduction of ecclesiastical structures, canonical texts, and the increasing bureaucratization of theological education – always women, frequently mystics – remained culturally present in marginalized yet peculiar and fascinating ways. De Certeau wrote movingly about the voice and the continuing cultural productivity of these displaced carriers of ever shifting sub-cultures, noting that

they formed a solidarity with all the tongues that continued speaking, marked in their discourse by the assimilation to the child, the woman, the illiterate, madness, angels, or the body. Everywhere they insinuate an “extraordinary”: they are the voices quoted – voices grown more and more separate from the field of meaning that writing had conquered, ever closer to the song or the cry.¹⁴

De Certeau’s insights into the resilience of speech against the pressures to conform within a hardening domain of ecclesiastical orthodoxy resonates with the volume’s essays on Hadewijch’s homoerotics (Chapter Five) and Marie d’Oignies’ theological singing (Chapter Eight), thus demonstrating that acts of camouflage under pressure were already at work in earlier centuries. Running counter to ecclesiastical homophobia, Hadewijch’s lyrics celebrated female-identified love between women. Barred from ecclesiastical

privilege, the reformer, lay activist, and holy woman Marie d'Oignies is being remembered as preaching in song only – and not from a pulpit, but on a make-shift death bed next to the altar.

De Certeau's observations about the shift in mystical voice and in the cultural currency of mystical experience leads to yet another theoretical point of entry into the era of new mysticism, the subject of a mystic's authority and her ability to attract and sustain a circle of students, especially if she could not rely on firm institutional support. Sociologist Max Weber famously outlined three categories of exercising socially legitimate authority, which he named traditional, rational-legal, and charismatic leadership. Of the three types, only charismatic leadership was unequivocally open to women mystics between the thirteenth and fifteenth century. In examining issues of mystical authority, some of the essays in this collection thus describe qualitative aspects of what Max Weber aptly named the routinization (*Veralltäglichung*) of charisma.¹⁵ *Veralltäglichung*, the German term chosen by Weber, carries more nuance than its English translation. *Veralltäglichung* emphasizes the minutiae of daily life (*Alltag*), a becoming-ordinary of charisma in local life worlds, its translation into daily practices, mental frameworks, habits, and patterns.

With more detachment than de Certeau, Weber saw the disappearance of any type of charismatic leadership as socially unavoidable. He argued that "charisma is a typical phenomenon at the beginning of religious (prophetic) or political (conquest) rule, but it disappears in the presence of the force of daily life as soon as dominance has been secured and, most of all, as soon as it has spread among the masses."¹⁶ Transferred to the epoch of new mysticism, one may theorize that female mystics carried the weight of articulating and defining a new social order, the religious emancipation of a newly literate laity, yet precisely because of their sole dependence on charisma and the strength of preexisting patriarchal traditional and rational-legal systems of rule within and outside the Church, their *de facto* leadership could not but be temporary. In this case, dominance secured is a dominance re-secured: that of the ecclesiastical superstructure and its all-male hierarchy of representatives.

Nonetheless, processes of female charismatic routinization, as much as they signify female loss of authority, also generated processes of remembrance, whether subversive or orthodox. Weber identified several aspects of commemorating a charismatic leader. Due to the power of charisma, such commemoration is motivated by the need to create a lasting relationship with the charismatic leader beyond her death (what Weber coined a *Dauerbeziehung*). As an economist, Weber underscored the material and financial

benefits that commemoration of the charismatic leader could bestow on her followers. From beyond the grave, she would answer their prayers for good health, children, success in business, less time in purgatory, etc. Material benefits of a *Dauerbeziehung* for bureaucratic elites include profits derived from the sale of relics, tractates, and organized pilgrimages. Although Weber acknowledged additional intellectual (*ideelle*) benefits to the community of followers (in the case of the new mysticism, innovative liturgies, cosmologies, and theologies come to mind), he concluded that material benefits outweighed intellectual gains. Having less access to structural power, devotees derived less gain and commemorative impact over time than administrative elites dedicated to preserving a charismatic leader's memory to their own ends. This should give us pause, since much of our knowledge of medieval women mystics is largely dependent on the official archives compiled by the clerical class, whether biographies, transcribed spiritual writings, canonization documents, or heresy trial transcripts.

Although it is hard to argue with Weber's theses, processes of commemoration and routinization that form the basis for a *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of medieval mysticism contain voices and subjectivities that proved resistant to various kinds of high culture appropriation and mercantile recycling. Marie d'Oignies' clenched jaws, Hadewijch's ferociously and fatally attractive *Minne*, and Dionysius of Ryckel's dreamy evocation of boys are cases in point. Love and death exist in excess of the leveling force of bureaucratic memory: they interrupt it, reshape it, and reenergize it. The essays in Part Two, entitled *Love and Death*, suggest that a hegemonic commemoration of medieval mystical charisma can coexist with stories and fragments of stories that undermine routinization and a dominance re-secured, and, per de Certeau, with forms of discourse – as songs, as cries, but also as spiritual insights – that unhinge commemorative self-interest, be it conscious or unconscious, among academic historians, an increasingly secularized laity, or medieval bureaucratic elites.

Finally, there is the matter of Germany. Places and landscapes contain historical meaning and intensify processes of a sympathetic identification with the past. Indeed, place and landscape, to rephrase Gadamer, constitute another horizon “into which we move and that moves with us.” Earlier generations of scholars, beginning in the era of German humanism, searched for and found(ed) a collective German identity seemingly evidenced by the *Über*-accomplishments of mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–c. 1327), or St. Elisabeth of Thuringia, all of whom could be tied to emblematic German landscapes and cities: the Rhine valley,

Thuringia, Erfurt, Eisenach. As I argue in the case of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, the drive to establish a uniquely teutonic genealogy could prove so overpowering that it eventually eclipsed the authorial self.

An ethnocentrically driven *Rezeptionsgeschichte* of German mysticism extended into the Nazi era and beyond. The ideological proclamation of a Third Reich depended on proof for the existence of a teutonic Middle Ages, including its mystics. In the case of Therese Neumann, the re-emergence of medieval mystical phenomena such as stigmata and prophecies triggered paradoxical political repercussions. Hrotsvit's Gandersheim housed a forced labor camp during the Nazi era, and Neumann's Konnersreuth is located near the concentration camp Flossenbürg. To evoke medieval German-ness post-Shoah is difficult. In a study of German medieval mysticism and the politics of culture, matters of historical memory and place might mean nothing or everything.