

Response to Amy Hungerford, "The Literary Practice of Belief"
Tom Ferraro, Duke University

Amy Hungerford has me asking, what might be at stake in reversing the terms of her chapter's strong dialectic, from "the literary practice of belief" to "the belief of (literary) practice? By this reversal, I mean to distinguish between "the articulation of knowledge," profoundly mental and discursive, that Hungerford effectively investigates in the Marilyn Robinson and Left Behind novels, and the myriad ways in which habits of devotion, especially the body in witness, make for ways of knowing, both orthodox and wayward. "For belief has not dropped out of lived religion in America even if it has dropped out of 'lived religion.'" Amen, Amy: but what happens if we begin not with the common folk, as so wonderfully here, but with the virtuosi, as happens--so often--in the vernacular theologies of other writers and other arts, since time immemorial but post-1964 especially?

"I wanted to write a novel about a woman so in love with God that anything else seems second-rate." When asked to explain the inspiration for Mariette in Ecstasy (1991), Ron Hansen, who at the time was a daily communicant (may still be), who believed in and thus meant to put into practice a form of writing that he calls "sacramental" (surely, still does), underscores his protagonist's affect, not her thought process; her fierce courting of spiritual sublimity and with it her fierce self-cultivation of spiritual virtuosity, thus not her ordinariness (with no issues of conscience or ethics or social action anywhere in sight); and by extension, his own commitment as the bearer of aesthetic witness to making her experience of ex-stasis fully present, in the theological sense. How he does so is--as Hungerford avers, we lit types still affirm form as content--is what I am after: belief as an evolving, other-involving God-incarnate thing.

Hansen's protagonist, Mariette Baptiste, is a 17-year old postulant in a convent in upstate New York, 1906. Mariette is very well educated, indeed something of a precociously doctrinal sophisticate, but also with a smart mouth, a messed-up childhood, and astounding ambition, who professes her desire to share in Christ's pain as intimately as heaven will allow, and who in so doing, with Dame Julian of Norwich and Thérèse d'Avila as her models, would appear to take the bride of Christ regime--especially the honeymoon part, which she desires to be unending--more literally than the Church ever had in mind. Mariette becomes a sensation, manifesting the signs of stigmata, to the point where she is seen, and needs to be handled, either as a saint or as a trouble-maker of the first order--and the text, in present tense, is intercut by a later interrogation, inviting us to join in judgment.

Surprise #1: Locating the reader as eavesdropping voyeur, in much the way of the nuns, Hansen absolutely refuses the reader direct access to Mariette's consciousness, to her interiority: she is constantly speaking or writing of the convictions underlying her actions, but we never get into her head, which frustrates the Abrahamic urge to take "sincerity" as a necessary condition of sainthood. The issue for many readers becomes, do I believe that Christ gave Mariette stigmata? a transfer of responsibility from text to reader ("our freedom is very dear to God), but one in which divinity is a question not of

God's presence per se but of a special election, God's presence in a woman ("embodied by me, but not mine"). The theological question that emerges from Hansen's rendering of Mariette's practice is an extension of Christian orthodoxy in what I like to think of as a Pagan-Marian direction: how might female sexual desire be salvific--Mariette's body-in-love as the re-vesseling of Christ's redemptive grace--without being, in the biological sense, reproductive? The text courts, even solicits, such possibility whether or not Mariette understands what she is doing, though it would appear she does.

What Hungerford cites as "power relations" are structured into the very conditions of possibility in the novel, which is almost--but not quite--one with the hermeneutics of suspicion (Marx, Freud, and Biochemistry). Not only is Mariette learned in medicine and equipped for self-mortification--thus rigorous scientific skepticism of the hand wounds--but Hansen incisely, and with a luscious nastiness, insinuates an entire array of political motivation and psycho-social determinations: the protofeminist threat that direct female access to the deity poses to the male monopoly of the sacraments; the vaulting of the female hierarchy within the convent, which includes a passive-aggressive rivalry with the prioress (her convent "mother"), who is in addition her biological older sister; the socio-political manipulation of Christ-directed heterosexual jealousy and nun-directed lesbian desire within the convent; intimations of a history of father-daughter incest in the Baptiste family, including a very precocious young female sexuality; and good ol' adolescent self-delusion. In short, whatever Mariette does, it is very, very much overdetermined; which means, of course, that whatever Mariette really believes, we also have every form of evidence to regard spiritual consciousness as symptomatic of and in service of other, larger, more modernly "believable" forces. It would seem, then, that belief--and spiritual accountings more generally--have indeed gone the way of Lacan, Foucault, and de Beauvoir.

But Mariette in Ecstasy is written in such a way--you need to read it to feel this--that even demystification is divinely charged, pregnant with sacramental insinuation--yielding a delicious sense, even growing conviction, that Mariette is God's chosen vessel not despite the fact that she is psychologically abused, ethically oblivious, and power-hungry to the max but because she is all those things. The literary investigation of power, Hansen's way, not only means that the welcome mat is out to modern secularists and postmodern debunkers and faith-holders of most stripes (a catholicity of readers with the small "c") but that the erotics of suspicion becomes itself a mode of divinely spirited knowing, in play with the reader. What Hansen's prose is really after, then, is not the suspension of disbelief, since it slips back and forth eerily between demystification and re-mystification, but the erotic grace that is generated by the reader's own experience of Mariette, a form of the Spirit (call it "lived religion") to be felt in the "postmodern" present generated by Hansen's virtuosic rendering of Mariette's virtuoso piety, a piety as fleshed as it is mind-full, and as flawed as it is inspired. Mariette's extraordinary pursuit of extraordinary sainthood, set at the very last moment of pre-modernity, and constituted by a woman's desire for Christ, is offered, by Hansen, to the common reader, today, as sacramental possibility: aesthetic communication in the secular age as not-at-all-secular communion. In Amy's useful formulation, thought still matters even here, perhaps especially here--it shapes Mariette's pursuit, subjects her to the convent's judgment, and

tutors our understanding of what, ultimately, is going on. But the novel's "made presence" does not rest on what is in the mind of Mariette--which, after all, in the final analysis, only an omniscient God can testify for sure.

Grazie, Prof. Hungerford, for the instigation and the exemplification.