

Christine Libby
Indiana University Bloomington

Failures in Ecstasy

Abstract

This paper proposes to rethink the somatic and affective reverberations of ecstasy, in a celibate religious context, as a way of expanding the horizons of sexuality beyond an acts and identities paradigm. Focusing on the medieval mystic text *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* written by Mechthild of Magdeburg in conjunction with Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, I argue that shifting attention to the way negative affect resonates at the limit of the ecstatic experience allows for a queering of the territory of affect by moving beyond the isolated "subject that feels" towards what I am calling the mystic assemblage.

Sex and Negative Affect

Anyone who has listened to Taylor Swift's album 1989 doesn't need to be reminded of the easy connections between sex, relationality, and negative affect. Her alternating narratives of hope and despair, success and failure are aptly summed in the song "Blank Space" where she declares to her new love interest "so it's gonna be forever, or its gonna go down in flames." These two relational extremes have been on my mind a lot lately. Medieval mystic texts are saturated with the highs and lows of despair and ecstasy. However, what is less clear is the affective significance of such extremes.

In this paper, I argue that shifting attention to the way negative affect resonates at the limit of the ecstatic experience allows for a queering of the territory of affect by moving beyond the isolated "subject that feels" towards what I am calling the mystic assemblage. Or put another way, this paper explores the relational possibilities that adhere around failure and negative affect. In order to map this argument I have divided my inquiry into three sections. First, I consider how modern queer theorists such as Jack Halberstam, Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman have been thinking about failure,

negativity, and affect. Next, I turn my attention to the past to examine how a thirteenth century mystic, Mechthild of Magdeburg, understood and articulated her own experience of intimacy and estrangement. And finally, I gesture towards what I see as some connections between the apophatic strands of medieval mysticism and the queering of negative affect.

Part 1: *The Queer Art of Failure*

Jack Halberstam's text *The Queer Art of Failure* lays out a panoply of potential insights generated from thinking failure and queerness together. Halberstam begins with the seemingly audacious claims that failure offers tangible benefits to those who succumb to it and that failure may, in fact, be something worth actively pursuing. Halberstam explains, "While failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life."¹ In this sense, failure acts as an anecdote to paltry narratives of success through positive thinking. Here failure is not strictly negative. Rather, Halberstam argues that it produces a different type of optimism, one that is able to resist the hegemony of success and open up new ways being and alternative relational communities.

Expanding on this point, Halberstam makes another move, positing failure as a tactic of resistance deployed by non-normative communities. This is where the connections between failure and queerness become the most lucid. Throughout the book Halberstam is interested in "the cluster of affective modes that have been associated with

¹ Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

failure...that characterize new directions in queer theory.”² These new directions include an embrace of negative affect, the spaciality of being beside (rather than above or below), and a commitment to run down the prospects offered by the unbearable. This notion of the unbearable indexes a state of relation that is not focused on repair or wholeness.

In their coauthored text, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman discuss sex, negativity, and the possibility of change. At the outset, they suggest that sex, as a site of encounter, extends the prospect of relational and affective innovation because it threatens subjects with unbearable confrontations. These confrontations appear when one reaches a limit in ourselves or in another and often put us at risk of being inundated (overwhelmed) psychically or emotionally.³ To their mind, the negotiations individuals embark on to mitigate intimate estrangement offers insight into the negative affect that is so often avoided.

Rather than skirting around negative affect, Berlant and Edelman find value in remaining in the midst of the tension and uncertainty that characterizes so much of relationality. As they put it, negative affect and the unbearable offer “the possibility of a life not governed by the logic of repair.”⁴ And this is where sex comes in. Sex signals an encounter that threatens to put us off balance. And, importantly, for Berlant and Edelman sex is expanded beyond the act of sex itself. They use sex to signal intimacy, relationality, conversation, desire, fantasy, or any number of other things that pop up in their dialogue. Mostly though, they talk about sex as encounter. And in particular, an encounter that has the potential to move one beyond the mundane, to usher in surprise.

² Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 23.

³ Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), vii.

⁴ Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, xv.

These descriptions of sex and surprise are akin to the way medieval mystics describe ecstasy and the divine encounter. For example, talking about surprise Edelman writes, “With its etymological link to being seized, overtaken, or taken over, surprise defines the encounter with what disrupts our expectations by breaking through the defensive barriers associated with routine.”⁵ Likewise, Mechthild of Magdeburg, talking about her encounter with God writes, “God’s true greeting, coming from the heavenly flood...has such force that it takes away all the body’s strength and reveals the soul to herself...then she soars to further to a blissful place which I neither will nor can speak.”⁶ There is a link here between medieval and modern circulation around the notion that excess and surprise act as components of contingent relationality and sexuality.

Part II: Negative Affect and Estrangement in Mechthild

The celibate medieval mystic may strike modern readers as one of the few historical characters who can safely be left out of discussions of sexuality. However, in her recent chapter on sexuality and mysticism, Constance Furey persuasively argues that mystic texts invite us to rethink the connections between sexuality, embodiment, and relationality. Beginning with a rejection of the popular move to align mystical texts with the erotic rather than the sexual, Furey writes, “Mystical sexuality is about the intense pleasure and pain that bodies inflict and receive and about the ecstasy, standing outside oneself, the breathless arousal and rhythmic satisfactions that come from, and in, this

⁵ Berlant and Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, 120.

⁶ Mechthild and Frank J. Tobin, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 40-41.

experience.”⁷ Furey’s insight pushes back against the simplistic interrogation of whether or not mystics had sex in hopes of facilitating new understandings of medieval and modern articulations of sexual desire, fulfillment, and lack. Sexuality, in this schema, can be expanded to incorporate a diverse landscape that includes a variety of relational configurations, bodily responses, and affective intensities.

In this section, I explore what medieval mystics have to offer to the conversation about negative affect, failure, and relationality. Mechthild of Magdeburg’s text *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* is an exceptionally relevant text because negative affect appears throughout the text, often in surprising ways. Mechthild’s text presents the relationship between the soul and the divine as the tale of two lovers. And like any love affair, the relationship is not always sunny. At the outset she recalls a conversation between herself and divine Love wherein she accuses love of doing her a great disservice. Love’s response to these allegations is to offer herself once again to Mechthild. Of course this only doubles the problem back on itself. Love is the reason Mechthild experiences such suffering in the first place but she seems to be satisfied with this exchange. She loses everything but she gains love. Despite this hopeless resolution, Mechthild find her self continuously attracted and repelled by the figure of love. Her life is structured by this constant alternation of longing and satisfaction. As the narrative progresses, readers follow Mechthild through the highs and lows that accompany her love affair with the divine. The main problem is that the soul and the divine cannot remain with one another continuously. And predictably, during these periods of separation Mechthild is overcome by negative affect: melancholy, lovesickness, and languor.

⁷ Constance Furey, “Sexuality” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, eds. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 331.

At first Mechthild attempts to recuperate these negative affects. For example, after her initial experience of the divine “greeting,” a term used by Mechthild to describe a state of intimate ecstasy, she hopes to remain in perpetual union with God. Unfortunately, the divine thwarts her desire. She writes, “Just when the game is at its best, one has to leave it. God in full vigor speaks: ‘Young Miss, you must go down.’ She shudders and laments her banishment.”⁸ These periods of separation leave Mechthild in a state of distress she describes as intense suffering. While away from the divine she experiences strong affective disturbances that cause her to question love itself.

These periods of separation and banishment are described as akin the longing a new bride feels when she finds her husband gone. For example, in Book 3 she writes, “When the faithful bride awakens, she thinks of her lover. If she cannot possess him then she begins to weep. Alas, how often this happens spiritually to God’s brides.”⁹ Here Mechthild validates her melancholy affect as she opens up a relational space populated by others who share her experience (how often this happens to God’s brides). Mechthild’s melancholic isolation is challenged by her participation in a larger affective community.

As her text progresses, Mechthild’s task is to slowly learn to accept these periods of separation. Both the divine and Mechthild experience a host of negative affects in response to their separation. But throughout the text the unbearable elements are never fully resolved. To the contrary, the fluctuation between presence and absence, ecstasy and despair remain a touchstone of the text. If any remedy is proposed it an embrace of negativity and estrangement.

⁸ Mechthild and Tobin, *The flowing light of the Godhead*, 41.

⁹ Mechthild and Tobin, *The flowing light of the Godhead*, 112.

For example, meditating on the absence of god, Mechthild of Magdeburg writes, “After this came constant estrangement from God and enveloped the soul so completely that the blessed soul said: ‘Welcome, very blessed Estrangement. Fortunate I am that I was born—that you, Lady, shall now be my chambermaid, for you bring me unusual joy and incomprehensible marvels and unbearable delight as well.’”¹⁰ Rather than seeking to return to a state of union, Mechthild finds in this new state of estrangement, a host of unknown affects. She experiences unusual joy and unbearable delight. This suggests that by embracing separation from God she becomes aware of novel ways of being. Furthermore, her separation allows her to conceptualize an alternate form of relationality with the divine that is not mediated by the continual repetition of ecstasy.

Mechthild’s text highlights the complicated relationship between the desire for union with the divine and the failure that attends all attempts to sustain such ecstasy. Attention to her reconfiguration of the boundaries of relationality through an embrace of negative affect suggests a new way of thinking about how intimacies work. Sometimes the surprise afforded by and to the way affective intensities and residues pass between and among mystic bodies suggests a more expansive way of understanding the parameters of relationality.

Part III: The Surprise of Negative Affect

I want to conclude by thinking briefly about a surprising connection that can be drawn between Halberstam’s work on failure and the mystic embrace of the unbearable. The interpretive key I use to link these two together is found in the idea of stupidity.

Halberstam’s work utilizes a variety of seemingly banal sources, movies like “Dude

¹⁰ Mechthild and Tobin, *The flowing light of the Godhead*, 154.

Where's My Car," children's cartoons, and silly animations to surprise readers into new understandings of the possibilities inherent in failure. The text also lauds failure for its ability to undermine cultural and societal expectations, especially in the context of reproductive futurism and oppressing expectations of surrounding femininity. But much of this work is done under the guise of stupidity. For Halberstam stupidity represents a certain kind of absence – the absence of memory or the absence of wisdom – which leads to a new form of knowing.

From the mystic vantage point this work might be better described under the moniker of the *via negativa*. Apophatic theology, *via negativa*, confronts the dilemma of how to describe the ineffable and transcendent divine using a series of negations or unsayings as explanatory mechanisms. The practice of unsaying acknowledges and emphasizes the transcendence and unknowability of the divine via an ever-expanding acknowledgement of the insufficiency of language. Both of these techniques, stupidity and the *via negativa*, work to challenge common assumptions about knowledge and learning. When the *via negativa* is expanded to the affective realm it allows the mystics to both reinterpret experiences and introduce new forms of affective interpretation to the familiar tropes of despair and failure. For many, the desire to remain in a state of isolation from the divine may seem like the stupidest way possible to achieve union with the divine. But Mechthild holds out the possibility that this reversal lands her exactly where she wants to be.