

# *Feminism, Abjection, Transgression: Angela of Foligno and the Twentieth Century*

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There is a structuring and de-stabilizing presence of the mystical experience in the contemporary discourses of feminism, psychoanalysis, and the literary avant-garde that has been overlooked by critics. This presence is particularly noticeable in the writings of three 20th-century intellectuals—writings which on one hand attempt to “demystify mysticism,” as it were, by presupposing the absence of God, while on the other hand they endorse the validity of mystical discourse by relying so heavily on its intertext. I will focus on the spiritual accounts of the blessed Angela of Foligno—who is usually considered together with Saint Catherine of Siena, and sometimes even above her, the foremost woman mystic of the Italian Middle Ages<sup>1</sup>—and on the eloquent references to her life and work in the writings of Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, and Georges Bataille. Given the vastness of their accomplishments, I will need to confine myself to some preliminary remarks which do not aspire to being exhaustive in either scope or depth. Nevertheless, at the risk of remaining somewhat superficial, it is essential to include all three writers in order to give a sense of the diversity of the modern discourses which in recent times have attempted to recuperate the female mystical voice. In this intertextual reading, I hope to raise the question of whether the mystical text may still speak intelligibly and meaningfully to us today (to our critical understanding if not to our spirit . . .), through its surprising dialogue with the writings of an anti-Catholic feminist, of an unbelieving psychoanalyst, and of an arch-anti-Christian.

In spite of her mystical greatness, Angela is little known. She lived most likely between 1248 and 1309 in Foligno, where she was married and had children. We do not know much about her life until the age of 37, when she undergoes a religious conversion and embarks upon her spiritual journey: in 1291 she takes the habit and makes profession in the Third Order of Saint Francis. She has several visions, the first and most famous of which occurring in the basilica of Assisi, where she lets out inarticulate shouts and falls in seemingly hysterical convulsions to the floor. Between 1290 and 1296 circa, Angela dictates to the Franciscan Brother Arnaldo the record of her spiritual journey, which leads her through thirty steps of harsh *imitatio Christi* as well as through an active life of teaching and service.

In addition to the influence of her writings, Angela herself had a notable personal influence during her own lifetime within a circle of friends and disciples, among whom is Ubertino da Casale (who celebrates her in the prologue of his *Arbor vitae crucifixae lesu*); tradition early handed her the title of “Magistra Theologorum.”<sup>2</sup> After her death, Angela was immediately acclaimed as “blessed” (although she was not officially recognized as such by the Church until 1701), but she was never canonized—even if the French, including Beauvoir, Kristeva, and Bataille, consistently refer to her as “sainte Angèle de Foligno.”

One must read the entire *Memoriale*—the first and most important part of her *Liber*—in order to better understand the kind of impact that it had through the centuries and recently on such diverse texts as *The Second Sex* (a feminist manifesto), *Powers of Horror* (a psychoanalytic essay), and *Guilty* (an experimental journal of World War Two). As is too often the case with mystical writings, any quick rendition of the *Memoriale* (which I will not even attempt here) inevitably falls into the danger of trivialization, and thus of reducing the activity of the spirit to bizarre quirks of “feminine otherness”: Angela’s erotic imagery for her frequent ecstasies, her harsh and painful imitation of Christ crucified, her self-abjection, and her odd relationship with food, for example, make her a “privileged” target for this kind of interpretation. The “official” Catholic panegyric alternative to this reductionism, on the other hand, is often too restrictive and equally facile. But the dangers of positivistic reductionism and of bleeding-heart hagiography can perhaps be avoided through the complex intertext of 20th-century French readings of Angela—as well as through some of the more sensitive historical research on the subject, such as Rudolph Bell’s, Elizabeth Petroff’s, and especially Caroline Walker-Bynum’s.<sup>3</sup>

The reference to transgression in my title is double, in that it refers both to the transgression operated by any 20th-century, unbelieving reading of a medieval, religious text, and to the self-conscious transgression inherent in the mystic’s prolix account of what she herself often describes as needing to remain ineffable: it cannot—and it should not—be told “non se può narrare,” as Angela negatively describes it.<sup>4</sup> Transgression is one of the primary modalities of avant-garde writing in France, but transgression is also what Angela refers to when she repeats time and again in her autobiography that she blasphemes when she speaks of God: “parme de bistemare in zìò ch’io dico,” “lo mio dire è più destruzere e biastemare che dire,” “onde dico che io biastemo,” and so on.<sup>5</sup> This belief that her language is blasphemous occurs often in her text: the mystic’s language becomes a self-conscious blasphemy both because of the daring imagery that she often adopts, and because she describes God’s ineffability in terms that may seem

offensive to human common sense. This double transgression, that will come up again with the work of both Kristeva and Bataille, is what I believe makes Angela's writings especially readable to the modern sensibility—but one must also keep in mind that the relationship of Angela's experience to her own text (both of which are described as transgressive) is mediated and therefore highly problematic. For example, since she could not write (at least in Latin), her *Memoriale* was dictated by her, in her Umbrian vernacular, to her confessor, Brother Arnaldo—who simultaneously translated it into Latin.

I have chosen to begin with Simone de Beauvoir, since her reading of Angela is without doubt the most simplistic one, and can therefore serve as a supplementary introduction to the problems presented by medieval mysticism to the 20th-century reader. *The Second Sex*, first published in France in 1949 and called by Toril Moi “the most important feminist book of this century,” includes a chapter entitled “The Mystic.”<sup>6</sup> Female mysticism is described as a major yet unsuccessful expression of women's ambition within the patriarchal order; although, Beauvoir claims, it is possible to integrate mysticism with a life of activity and independence, its particular intention must necessarily fail because it attempts to put woman in relation with “an unreality,” i.e. God. (But neither Bataille nor Kristeva, although they, too, are unbelievers, dismiss so easily the “reality” of God.) Beauvoir concludes the chapter by stating that the only way for woman to be truly free is through the projection of her liberty into human society, by means of positive action alone.

Although Beauvoir deals with female mysticism in general (i.e. nuptial mysticism or *Brautmystik*), and not specifically with Angela of Foligno, it is in fact to Angela that the argument refers through most of its quotations: Beauvoir describes and borrows from Angela's erotic vocabulary, her seemingly hysterical attacks, her ecstasy, her predilection for abjection, and her morbid emphasis on Christ's wounds and heart. This choice, which somewhat unjustly places Angela's writings on a generally low level of intellectual and theological accomplishment, is tied to what I believe is the principal fault of Beauvoir's argument: in a peculiar collusion with the ideology which she is seeking to overthrow, Beauvoir excludes from her discussion of female mysticism figures such as Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila, claiming that, because of their intense theological and intellectual preoccupations, they belong to “the rather masculine type,” and must therefore be classed with Henry Suso and Saint John of the Cross rather than with women like Angela. While these seek transcendence, what Beauvoir calls their “minor sisters” (usually exemplified in her argument by Angela of Foligno) merely desire “the redemption of their femininity.”

Certainly, one cannot deny the existence of a definite ranking within mystical experience and, correspondingly, within its description; yet to set the best of female mysticism apart from the rest and to classify it together with the work of male spiritual writers is, to say the least, critically objectionable and sexist (as well as historically inaccurate: there is not an unbridgeable abyss between the mystical writings of Catherine and of Angela, but rather, if anything, a difference of degree). Coming from one of the leaders of contemporary feminism, this statement proves particularly disappointing to the student of female spirituality, and should be contrasted with studies such as Caroline Walker-Bynum's, who points out that 13th-century women saints either ignored their own gender or else felt especially close to Christ's physical humanity (and thus also especially saved by the Incarnation) because of the medieval identification of women with matter.<sup>7</sup>

As can be expected, another one of Beauvoir's objections to the female mystical experience is the sado-masochistic character inherent in the more extreme forms of *imitatio Christi*. It is this diagnostic hermeneutics drawn from the vocabulary of psychoanalysis that provides a bridge between Beauvoir's reading of mysticism and Julia Kristeva's. The episode of abjection which Beauvoir quotes is Angela's drinking the water with which she had just washed a leper's sore: a scab of skin that got stuck in her throat tastes to her like the Eucharist. This is probably the very same scene that Kristeva has in mind when she mentions Angela (for her name comes immediately after a similar episode drawn from Saint Francis of Assisi's close contact with lepers). The description is indeed disgusting, and we recognize the abjection at work; but one must put it in its historical context, i.e., for example, the need for service to the lepers in the Middle Ages, self-discipline as one of the few forms of freedom for women (as the thesis of Rudolph Bell's *Holy Anorexia* underscores), and devotion to the Eucharist as the prominent concern of female religiosity in the 13th century (see Walker-Bynum).

Kristeva's reference to "sainte Angèle de Foligno" in *Powers of Horror* is cursory; yet it is clear that many points of her "essay on abjection" (the subtitle of her book) could be punctuated with quotations from the Italian mystic, and in fact examples drawn from mysticism support Kristeva's argument in more ways than one.<sup>8</sup> Kristeva's purpose in this book is to identify abjection as the revulsion, or the horror, taking place during the child's pre-oedipal attempt to separate from the mother and to acquire language: it is the rejection of corporeal modes (and particularly those that are unclean and socially unacceptable) that is entailed in the subject's full entrance into the symbolic order of language and society. But the unclean and the

improper can never be utterly excluded; they recur and disrupt, and must continually be harnessed if the subject is to define itself as such—if it is to have an identity within the symbolic order (the abject and the symbolic being set in opposition to one another). The abject is that which prevents neat lines of division and demarcation (so necessary to the symbolic order), and this leads Kristeva to a discussion of borderline psychological cases: it is as a borderline discourse that she introduces the relevance of mysticism, and the section of her book entitled “Qui tollis peccata mundi” deals with the concept of the abject as it appears in Christian texts.

Kristeva’s major point regarding mystical language is that its familiarity with abjection is the source, for the mystic, of an infinite *jouissance*, or a physical pleasure bordering on the sensual. In the introduction, Kristeva states that Christian mysticism has turned self-abjection into the ultimate proof of humility before God—but there is nothing particularly original in this statement, the mystics themselves say the same over and over again.<sup>9</sup> The mystic, then, rather than rejecting abjection, rather than expelling it and separating from it (as the “normal” psychic development of the human being implies), embraces it as the most appropriate place for communication with God, as a point of pure spirituality. Hence the borderline nature of mystical discourse: neither neurotic nor psychotic, the mystical subject and the mystical discourse put into question the opposition between conscious and unconscious, and rely on a sublimatory rather than on a rationalistic discursivity. This borderline behavior, although it may not be integrated in the subject’s consciousness, nevertheless manifests itself in certain symbolic practices.<sup>10</sup> Like Beauvoir, Kristeva observes that one could underline the masochistic economy inherent to this gesture, to this pleasure, but unlike Beauvoir she places this judgment in a justifying perspective by pointing out that the Christian mystic does not utilize this pleasure at the service of an institutional or of a symbolic power (such as, Beauvoir would probably claim, the patriarchal *status quo* and the Catholic Church as its appendage), but rather the mystic indefinitely displaces this pleasure in a discourse where the subject is reabsorbed in the communication with the Other (meaning God) and more generally with others (the mystical body of the Church, including the abject lepers). It is this communication which, as Kristeva remarks, could constitute grace.

A concept which is of primary importance to Kristeva’s analysis and which is closely linked to the abject is transgression, the crossing of the limits—which abjection, as a borderline discourse and as the underside of the neat symbolic order, is always about to carry out. It is only at the margins of mysticism, Kristeva claims, that the subtlest transgression of the law, i.e. the uttering of sin in front of God, can sound not as an indictment

but rather as the glorious counterbalance of confession as the avowal of belief.<sup>11</sup> Kristeva is a bit obscure here, as she is wont to be (and what I outlined above is only a personal, simplified interpretation of her dense writing, a clarification which takes the inevitable risk of reductionism), but her emphasis on the proximity between sin and holiness as it is explored by mysticism, i.e. on the marginality and potential transgression operated by mystical discourse, is also at the basis of such spiritually sensitive and critically sophisticated analyses of mysticism as Michel de Certeau's. In Kristeva's essay, the names that are given as examples of the mystical are Francis of Assisi and Angela of Foligno: through its borderline status and its critical relation to power, it seems to me that mystical discourse—as it is outlined, for example, by Julia Kristeva—could prove to be a position from which to rethink and reintegrate the psychoanalytic enterprise and its complicated relationship to faith.

One of the avowedly strongest influences on Kristeva's thought, and whose obsessions one can read between the lines of Kristeva's discussion of transgression, is Georges Bataille—to whom a section of *Powers of Horror*, dealing with transgression and sacrifice, is dedicated. But rather than discussing Bataille's fascinating work on sacrifice, let us turn to *Le coupable* [*Guilty*], his 1944 fragmentary record of the experience of war (in which he claims that he “won't speak of war, but of mystical experience”).<sup>12</sup>

A year before the appearance of *Guilty*, Bataille published the more famous *L'expérience intérieure*—translated as *The Inner Experience*. The title, premonitory of a major theme of *Guilty*, refers to mystical experience (chiefly ecstasy) as it occurs in the absence of a profession of faith. In this text, “sainte Angèle de Foligno” makes an important appearance, with a description of the little that is known about her life, together with some of her most famous visions.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in *Guilty*, which in many ways is a continuation of *The Inner Experience*, this introductory biographical discussion is bypassed, and Angela's text is used as the primary model for the attainment of ecstasy (while in *The Inner Experience* other mystics, such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, also appear). Bataille's discussion of Angela is probably the most complex of the three 20th-century interpretations considered here. Unlike Beauvoir and Kristeva, Bataille does not dwell on Angela's eroticism, her anorexia, or her masochism, nor is he intent on psychoanalyzing her language, for he seeks to imitate rather than to criticize the mystical pleasures at which she is his chosen model. Thus, he perceptively analyzes some of the more philosophically complex notions explored by Angela, i.e. transgression and the experience of negativity as necessary steps to access states of ecstasy—a form of pleasure which he claims is different from and in fact considerably superior to erotic pleasure:

“Mystical and erotic experience differ in that the former is totally successful. Erotic licentiousness results in depression, disgust, and the inability to continue. [ . . . ] In contrast, a promise of light awaits at the limits of the mystical outlook.”<sup>14</sup> – a statement which powerfully counterargues the tradition of identifying religious ecstasy with sexual climax.

Angela plays an especially important part in the first half of the text: the journal begins with the narrator’s reading, “on a crowded train standing up,” Angela of Foligno’s *Book of Visions*, her *Livre des visions* (the title of Ernest Hello’s French translation of Angela): he copies it out, “uncontrollably excited,” for “the veil is torn in two.”<sup>15</sup> The consequence of this ground-breaking reading—which, he claims, “has the power to shake [him]”—is that the narrator “suffer[s] from not being like *her* and coming near death.”<sup>16</sup> The proximity with death is tied to Beauvoir and Kristeva’s statements concerning the self-abjection entailed by mysticism: “mystical and ecstatic states [ . . . ] can’t do without certain extremes against self.”<sup>17</sup> But Bataille’s most outrageous claim in this text is that the achievement of ecstasy can be learned, that there is a method for attaining it, and that the achievement of ecstasy can dispense with any idea of God: the ecstasy of which Angela speaks—and Bataille, as we have seen, is quite aware that this ecstasy is different from the experience of eroticism—can be achieved by the non-Christian as well. The reason why it is described as ineffable is that, since it is not commonly experienced (and this is due to the concealment of its attainability by religious traditions), we lack the vocabulary to describe it—while in reality it is no more difficult or ineffable than eroticism or laughter.<sup>18</sup>

The narrator’s expression of the existential anguish self-consciously depends on the model of the mystic’s description: “Only the way mystics depict *their* condition,” claims the narrator, “can correspond to my laceration.”<sup>19</sup> Angela thus becomes a model not only for the anguished man’s experience, but also for the language with which that experience will be communicated: through a modernist play with mirrors, Angela’s *imitatio Christi* becomes for the narrator an *imitatio Angelae*. Bataille and Angela thus illuminate one another: as a French critic put it, “The meditators who attain very advanced states are still rare, and there are few testimonies as complete as Georges Bataille’s. The innate sincerity of his account, in spite of its being at times masked, should allow us to better interpret those exceptional states whose authenticity we have not always been able to recognize.”<sup>20</sup>

Clearly, Bataille’s position is very different from Beauvoir’s and Kristeva’s—a madman’s position, perhaps (how can one read some of Bataille’s texts and not think him mad? . . .), but one that must make us

wonder about the place and the value of the medieval woman mystic's voice for the 20th-century experience and its representation. In spite of Michel Foucault's contention that the categories of expenditure, excess, the limit, and transgression have been invented by the 20th century, he is one of the most notable 20th-century spokespersons for these very categories who finds his model in the writings of Angela's experiences.<sup>21</sup>

If Beauvoir can quote Angela of Foligno in describing and condemning the subjection of woman, if Kristeva can evoke mystical discourse to explain an experience—that of the abject—which every human being must go through to some extent, and if Bataille gives Angela the role of undisputed master of radical human experience and of its representation, then perhaps this 20th-century dialogue with medieval mystical discourse can provide us with an interpretive model which avoids both the pitfalls of the positivistic, or naturalistic, perspective (which hystericizes the mystical woman by making her the object of an equivocal psychopathology) and the outdated justifications adduced by the canonizers. I would like to end with a quotation from Georges Bataille's *Fragment on Christianity* published in appendix to *Guilty*: "Basically Christianity is only a crystallization of language. The solemn assertion of the fourth Gospel—*Et verbum caro factum est*—is in a sense this deep truth: the truth of language is Christian. If you assume man and language as doubling the real world with another world, imagined and available when evoked—then Christianity is necessary. Or if not, then some analogous assertion."<sup>22</sup> Through a (parodic?) staging of Christianity in his texts, Bataille opens up and makes visible its possibilities for transgression even as he explodes this very notion so as to make it include (paradoxically) the experience of the Ineffable.

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#### Notes

1. See for example the introduction to Angela's writings in the anthology edited by Giovanni Pozzi and Claudio Leonardi, *Scrittrici mistiche italiane* (Genova: Marietti, 1988) 136.
2. Paul Lachance, ofm, *The Spiritual Journey of the Blessed Angela of Foligno According to the Memorial of Frater A.* (Rome: Pontificium Athenaeum Antonianum, 1984) 404.
3. Rudolph Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985); Elizabeth Petroff, *Consolation of the Blessed* (New York: Alta Gaia, 1979); Caroline Walker Bynum, "Women Mystics and Eucharistic Devotion in the Thirteenth Century," *Women's Studies* 11 (1984): 179–214.



4. Ludger Thier, ofm, and Abele Calufetti, ofm, eds., *Il libro della beata Angela da Foligno* (Grottaferrata, Rome: Editiones Collegii S. Bonaventurae Ad Claras Aquas, 1985) 363. This is an excellent critical edition that gives Arnaldo's Latin text on one page and a contemporary Umbrian version on the facing page—for the *Memoriale* was very popular and it was immediately translated back into the vernacular.
5. 167, 385, 387, but see also 361, 381, 389.
6. Toril Moi, "An Intellectual Woman in Postwar France," *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) 982–88, 984. I will be referring to the English version of *Le deuxième sexe*, translated by H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) 670–78. Simone de Beauvoir's skepticism towards all things spiritual can be read in an early work of hers, which however was not published until fairly recently (having been rejected by Gallimard and Grasset during Beauvoir's youth): *Quand prime le spiritual* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979). In the 1979 preface, Beauvoir explains her motivations in writing the book: "I was rebelling against the spiritualism that had oppressed me for a long time, and I wanted to express this disgust through the story of young women whom I knew and who had been its more or less willing victims. I have insisted on the bad faith which seemed to me—and still seems—inseparable from it" (VII). One may of course wonder whether she is referring here to Simone Weil, her classmate at the Ecole Normale Supérieure . . .
7. Walker-Bynum, 203–06.
8. Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), translated into English by Leon S. Roudiez as *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987). The reference to Angela of Foligno and the discussion of abjection in Christian mysticism occurs on p. 149 of the French edition. By Kristeva, see also the essays dealing with mystical love in *Histoires d'amour* (Paris: Denoël, 1983), and her discussion of psychoanalysis and religion in *Au commencement était l'amour. Psychanalyse et foi* (Paris: Hachette, 1985).
9. Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, 13.
10. Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, 15.
11. Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, 153.
12. Georges Bataille, *Le coupable, Oeuvres complètes 5* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973) 235–392, translated as *Guilty* by Bruce Boone (Venice, CA: The Lapis Press, 1988) 12.
13. Georges Bataille, *L'expérience intérieure, Oeuvres complètes 5* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973) 7–189, 122–23.
14. Bataille, *Guilty*, 13. "I don't confuse my sexual licentiousness and my mystical life," 20; "First of all, we have to transgress prohibitions, a blind obeying to which is related to God's transcendence and our own humiliation," 20.
15. Bataille, *Guilty*, 11.
16. Bataille, *Guilty*, 16, 12.
17. Bataille, *Guilty*, 22.

18. "Not only is it [ecstatic experience] easy of access (a fact that religious traditions don't mind keeping hidden), but it obviously has the same nature as other common experiences. What distinguishes ecstasy is, rather, its relatively developed (at least in comparison with other forms) intellectual nature, *susceptible* in any case of infinite development." Bataille, *Guilty*, 138.

19. Jean Bruno, "Les techniques d'illumination chez Georges Bataille," *Critique* 195-96 (1963): 706-20, 720, translation mine.

21. Michel Foucault, "Préface à la transgression," *Critique* 195-96 (1963): 751-69, 766.

22. Bataille, *Guilty*, 134.