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Listening to An/Other Voice: Gender, Creativity, and the Divine in the Works of Female Christian Mystics and Women Surrealists

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LISTENING TO AN/OTHER VOICE:
GENDER, CREATIVITY, AND THE DIVINE IN THE WORKS OF FEMALE
CHRISTIAN MYSTICS AND WOMEN SURREALISTS

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Honors Council
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Inspiration for this thesis struck me as it did for the women surrealists and women mystics—suddenly and with great clarity. This past summer I read and reread Leonora Carrington’s short story collection. I had also learned about Saint Hildegard of Bingen in a history class and happened upon an article that questioned if her visions had been prompted by aural migraines. I began thinking about the connections between religious visions and the visions of artists, between creativity driven by a god and creativity driven by the perceived subconscious. Did Hildegard experience a connection with God, or simply an aural migraine? Is God’s image not created again, everytime we pray, in our own minds?

This thesis would have remained a fever dream if not for my incisive, critical, and ever-helpful thesis advisor, Professor Katherine Faull. I’m forever indebted to her for always finding something I can improve upon, always understanding me when I can’t seem to understand myself, and for always knowing exactly the right resources to draw upon. I have unlimited thanks to pay her and a large stack of books to return as well. I’d also like to offer my gratitude to Professor James Shields, first for asking me if I wanted to take on a Comparative Humanities major before I knew that it was even a major offered at Bucknell, second for being an incredible advisor, and third for being the only professor to tolerate me in so many classes over the past four years. I’d also like to thank Professor John Westbrook for offering me useful information about women surrealists always in the moment I needed it most.
I have an endless amount of love for my friends and family, who somehow listened to me drone on about women surrealists and indulged me in longwinded stories about women mystics—all without complaint. It’s unusual to find so many caring and intelligent friends in life and even more unusual to find your family members to be both caring and intelligent as well.
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ABSTRACT

This thesis will compare two groups, Christian women mystics and women surrealists, by analyzing select works by Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Leonora Carrington, and Dorothea Tanning. This analysis will involve a comparative, theoretical approach that draws connections between the way in which both groups utilize varying literary and artistic forms, symbols, and polyglottery. I will utilize Bourdieu’s terms of cultural production as a framework in which to better understand how women of both fields are used for their creativity and supposed connection to an/other, which is the source of inspiration native to each field, God and the unconscious. Post-structuralist feminist theory will be utilized to compare the two very distinct fields and time periods in their relationship to phallogocentrism and in the relationship between phallogocentrism and women’s creativity, sexuality, and suffering.

These findings highlight the struggle that women face in mediating between the members of their field and an/other. The position of mediator relegates women to their ability to express an/other for the inspiration of others. By denying them the ability to interpret their own visions these women may experience mental discord. However, attempting to find authority beyond mediating may risk their position within the field which is only afforded to them by their visions. The works of women in both fields, despite the immense gap in time, contain very similar religious motifs and depictions of erotic violence that represent the struggle to reconcile between their feminine and inferior bodies and the authority afforded by that same femininity. This thesis can be extrapolated
to apply to women of all time periods within fields driven by inspiration. Women who are reduced to their physicality are consistently exposed to this struggle with the status of mediator. Their ability to influence their fields, utilizing the subversiveness of their inferiority and femininity, is hampered by their position and the expectations associated with their womanhood. By recognizing the implications of reducing women to mediating within phallogocentrism, creative fields may be opened up, and women’s impacts within may be fully conceived.
INTRODUCTION

“And once again I heard a voice from Heaven instructing me. And it said, “Write down what I tell you!”
- Hildegard von Bingen, *The Book of Divine Work*

“I am in terrible anguish, yet I cannot continue living alone with such a memory… I know that once I have written it down, I shall be delivered”
- Leonora Carrington, "Down Below"

It is easy to say that there is no overlap between religion and modern art. It is difficult, yet perhaps more interesting, to seek out the similarities that exist between two fields which make loud and clear their desire to remain separate. The modern art movement rejected mass religion in order to search for something deeper and more inherent to human consciousness, or else to show that there was nothing to find at all. The religious field rejected that anti-religious sentiment and the inherent openness towards sexuality within modernism. Art and religion, though at times intertwined, seem to be at odds. The overlap, however, between the modern art field and the religious field counteracts this misleading narrative. Art, by taking root in inspiration, is led by the same force as religion. An/other can be defined as that inspiration which within religion stems from God and within art emerges from the unconscious. This inspiration then influences the form of, symbols used within, and language used to create works in both the religious and art fields.

The overlap between these fields is very visible when comparing Christian mysticism and the Surrealist movement. Mysticism as a movement requires the meditator to delve into a deeper state of being in order to access an/other, while Surrealism is the
practice of engaging with the unconscious in order to gain creative insight. The unconscious here is an/other, it is the inspiration within the Surrealist movement. The connection between these fields becomes even more pronounced when viewed through the Christian women mystics and women surrealists. Referencing Bourdieu’s terms of field, women as social agents inherently have less capital than their male counterparts in the religious and art fields. Because of this disadvantage, their choice of position is inherently lower and their habitus is associatively affected as well. Habitus is activated by the “schemes of perception and appreciation” which exist within a field (Bourdieu 344). It is that which defines your point of view and is based, partially, on your position in the field. Habitus is influenced cyclically by the “properties expected and even demanded of possible candidates” and by the “appreciation of the value each of them derives” from their position (Bourdieu 345). This cycle then expects women to follow standards of femininity and to appreciate the inferior position afforded by being a woman. In other words, women are unable to access equal positions to men, and the habitus afforded to them because of this position (and their status as women) instatiates women’s contributions to the field to be of lesser value.

While their work may be groundbreaking, their visions influential, their paintings exquisite, the habitus afforded to men due to their positions posits women’s works to be less important. Because habitus is “effectively realized only in relation to a determinate structure of positions socially marked by the social properties of their occupants through which they manifest themselves,” it becomes difficult to ever find authority for women
within these fields (Bourdieu 352). Men’s works will be seen as more valuable, and their higher positions will afford them access to greater social and economic capital. The habitus of these higher positions will disavow the contributions of women to be less important, and women’s positions in the field will be systematically lowered. This introduces a separation between social capital, which may be derived from the position taken in one’s field, and mental capital, which may be derived from one’s habitus as introduced through the field. Women struggle to find social capital in their positions, and struggle moreso to achieve mental capital. Though these women did find some power in their positions, ultimately they were forgotten to time amongst the onslaught of male names, and they often grappled mentally with the way in which they were viewed and used within the field. Bourdieu, in defining field, habitus, and the system of cultural production (which is certainly parallel if not connected to the religious field of production) makes it clear that a work of art cannot be separated from all else that contributes to the field. One must “understand works of art as a manifestation of the field as a whole” (Bourdieu 319). And so it is imperative to analyze the works of women Christian mystics and women surrealists by looking beyond their status as women at the influences which affected them and are strikingly similar.

Though there are many Christian women mystics and women surrealists who produced spectacular works, I have selected two from each group in order to better focus in on the connections between their lives, art, music, and prose. Of the women mystics, Saint Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179) was an commanding abbess who earned
sainthood and found social authority in her visions, and Mechthild of Magdeburg (c1207-c1290) was a beguine who used her visions to produce works of astounding verse and theology. Both women, in different ways, were able to develop their own consciousness, or selfhood, using self-restricting religious motifs and expectations. Hildegard produced a large body of work: her most influential, *Scivias* (1151), which is the book she composed of her visions and was endorsed by Pope Eugenius III, her symphonies and her moral drama *Ordo Virtutum* (1150s), her book on herbal cures *The Book of Simple Medicine* (1150s), a companion volume *Causes and Cures* (1150s) which contains observations on the female orgasm and sexuality, her own *Book of Life’s Merit* (1163), as well as the large collection of letters sent and received by Hildegard of Bingen which help to paint the picture of her life (Hildegard 14). These works offer at a glance an understanding of her interests, her studies, and the authority she was given by her visions. Hildegard began her religious career after being given to the St. Disibod monastery, where she studied under the head abbess Jutta whom she succeeded. Hildegard eventually, to much chagrin, let the St. Disibod monastery to form her own monastic church of St. Rupert (Hildegard 13). Despite the many people who found her practices unconventional or offensive maintained great relations with the church and the Pope and today her works are widely read, especially in her native Germany.

Mechthild of Magdeburg was a beguine for most of her life, meaning she lived a religious life of devotion without ever “joining an approved religious order” (Mechthild 1). She lived in a communal house with other like-minded women. The beguines as a
movement of religious women were slowly opposed by the church and most beguine communities were dissolved around the fourteenth century. There is not much known about her early life, after she entered the beguine community she wrote her own book of visions in the vernacular Middle Low German that was spoken and written in her area, The Flowing Light of the Godhead (1344) (Tobin 6). Though Mechthild was a mystic, the text of her book flip-flops between genres which makes it hard to categorize. Between the seven sections it jumps from autobiography to poetry, from vision to courtly-love poem. Whereas Hildegard utilized her visions for social authority and intellectual mental authority, Mechthild’s writings can be seen mainly as a source of intellectual and spiritual mental authority. Her works were translated from their original Middle Low German into Latin, where translators “toned down Mechthild’s criticism of the clergy and some of her erotic imagery” (Tobin 7). The use of the vernacular language of Middle Low German would have been unusual for a religious text at the time; it is interesting that her work exists and made an impact at all within the religious community. Despite our lack of knowledge about her personal history, her writings indicate much about the religious field of her time and its impact on her habitus.

Of the women surrealists, Leonora Carrington (1917-2011) is perhaps the best known woman author and painter. Carrington created quixotic stories and fantastic worlds composed of talking animals, ghosts, and bright colors. Although she grew up in England, she moved to France, then fled to Spain during WWII, where she spent time in a mental institute which she documents in the autobiographical and reflective Down
Below (1944). Carrington left Spain for Mexico where she spent the remainder of her life with a photographer, her two sons, and fellow surrealist woman artist, her close friend Remedios Varo. Carrington wrote one novel, The Hearing Trumpet (1976), about an old woman named Marian Leatherby who is sent to an institution for elderly ladies, and who then takes part in the end of the world, which is to be reclaimed by a great woman goddess. In her early twenties, Carrington was the muse of the middle aged Max Ernst, an influential male surrealist, and it was this connection which fully connected her to the Surrealist movement. Carrington wrote in English and Spanish, and her paintings reflect the different places she lived and her many life experiences. Her ability to portray the fantastic, as well as her mental illness, is both what makes her a memorable surrealist artist and what relegates her to muse.

Dorothea Tanning (1910-2012) is another woman surrealist who is well known for her broad scope of works, paintings, sculptures, poems, and autobiography that showcase an authoritative use of her status as femme enfant. Both Carrington and Tanning were at different points romantically entangled with Max Ernst, Tanning was married to him for the remainder of his life. Tanning grew up in Illinois, then moved between cities searching for her place in the artistic world. She eventually found the Surrealist movement, relocated to Arizona, then to France, then back to New York for the remainder of her life after Ernst’s death. She created a large number of paintings and drawings in the surrealist fashion, as well as soft fabric sculptures. Though she wrote short stories throughout her life, Tanning published a memoir in the 1980’s and then two
poetry collections, one in 2011 at the age of one hundred. Tanning’s paintings and sculptures bear a resemblance to the feminine form, though often distorted and stretched just to the brink of recognition. Her poetry exemplifies the world of a woman working in a patriarchal field. Despite renouncing the Surrealist movement, it’s undeniable that her pieces reflect the values associated with the manifesto’s dedication to the unconscious.

Within the history of art, women Christian mystics and women surrealists sought authority from the concept or figure of an/other; yet access to an/other was exactly that which denied them authority to begin with. Here authority can be separated into two forms, social and mental. Social authority is given by an/other by positively influencing habitus through access; therefore if women Christians had visions of God they were treated with more respect, and if women modernists were creatively-driven or otherwise mad they were treated as a muse. These positions which positively affect social authority may be considered as the position of a mediator, one who can access inspiration, an/other or the unconscious, and is respected in their field. The positions afforded by the status of mediator offer more freedom, more respect, and at times both. Mental authority is the sanity within one’s position that may be affected by the others in the field, by habitus, or by the field in and of itself. By this I am referring to the way in which women Christian mystics and women surrealists struggled with depression, madness, and mental strife because of their connection to an/other. To be a mediator of an/other is mentally constricting—the woman who is a mediator cannot be of or for herself. Her position becomes that of a mediator only, and her sense of self, and mental authority, may be lost.
The position of mediator, which supplements social authority, or social capital, and may detract from mental authority, or sanity, is contrasted by the position of the interpreter. An interpreter is one who can mediate without succumbing to the mental distress caused by being simply a mediator. An interpreter can utilize their connection to an/other; one may think of the difference between a mystic and a priest. Whereas a mystic becomes their visions, a priest may be trusted as an interpreter of God’s word and is within the church known for more than just their connection to God.

Though both groups of women (mystics and surrealist) have been analyzed extensively in their own right, they are seldom analyzed together using a comparative approach. The works of women surrealists have been analyzed in their relation to religious mysticism frequently, as the women surrealists often relied on religious symbols as a source of inspiration for their works. As their works contain overt references to the religious mystics, this analysis cannot be considered a comparative analysis linking women surrealists and women mystics. There are, as far as I have found, no works that connect the medieval women Christian mystics to the Surrealist movement. There are many links between Surrealism and Mysticism, but very few which analyze the works of the women in these fields. I found it most useful to refer to the works of experts in each separate field in order to draw connections. Caroline Walker Bynum’s works were some of the most informative on gender and sexuality in the devotion of medieval women mystics. These topics correlated almost directly to the field of women surrealists, and it was then easy to rely on the works of experts like Whitney Chadwick, who writes
extensively on gender and sexuality in Surrealism, as well as self-representation and creativity. By finding similarities in the analyses already done in these separate fields, it became easier to develop a comparative thesis and analysis using a theological approach.

The other theoretical discourse that informs my reading is that of modernist feminism. For example, the critique of phallogocentrism, as proposed by Jacques Derrida, deconstructs the position of the phallus as the center of truth. This is a combination of phallocentrism, which makes the phallus the focus and logocentrism which claims that language is the integral force in creating meaning in the world. By pulling the two together Derrida describes a system that, by generating meaning through language which is based on a phallic system of truth, undergirds a patriarchal system.

This society has been growing and developing since the world began to lose faith in the semiotic and in the wonders of the mystical. The mystical, the religious, nature, all that cannot be explained neatly in words is secondary to the phallic system of language. The woman Christian mystics who lived predominantly in the middle ages and early modern period would have been privy to the creation of this societal shift, from the mystical to the language-driven world of phallogocentrism. This shift can be identified as the shift from the porous self to the buffered self, in the separating of the self from the external world. The previous lack of separation was that which allowed for a strong belief in mysticism, religion, superstition, where internal visions can be as physical and real as in the external world. The change in mentality to the buffered self, which separates the internal from the external, occurred when “the economic dimension [took] on greater and
greater importance” (Taylor 229). Certainly, Hildegard was a bit before what most consider to be the time period that began the shift from feudal society to an economic-based society, but Hildegard was still at a heightened awareness of the increasing impacts of money and bribery within the church. Many of her letters of correspondence warn other clergy members of the dangers of corruption within religion. This shift also purported the “buffered identity, with its insistence on personal devotion and discipline, [which] increased the distance… to the older forms of collective ritual” (Taylor 156). To separate the individual from the communal ritual in the macrocosm is to separate the symbol from its system in the microcosm. This is inherently the creation of the symbolic without the semiotic. The desire for individual worship, as with the women mystics, can be seen as the beginning of this impetus towards phallogocentrism, towards separation from the porous self. The surrealist women artists, on the other hand, created works during the early twentieth century, which is well within the reign of the phallogocentric worldview. The way in which both groups of women created to subvert, intentionally or otherwise, the phallogocentrism of their time periods is insightful and often overlapping.

Both groups of women utilized the semiotic to find authority within their patriarchal fields. The semiotic and symbolic are defined with respect to Julia Kristeva’s groundbreaking work, Revolution in Poetic Language (1984), which defines the symbolic as masculine and the semiotic as that feminine and emotional system which lies beneath the symbolic. The symbolic is “established through objective constraints of biological differences and concrete, historical family structures” and forms a contract between word
and meaning (Kristeva 29). Therefore, words carry the weight of the societal constraints and structures that exist within their culture. The semiotic, however, lies beneath as “the precondition of the symbolic,” and is composed in the maternal chora which is described as a flowing and undefinable well of emotion and meaning (Kristeva 50). The use of the semiotic can break and affect the symbolic, and allows for the polysemy or multiplicity of meaning inherent in poetry, music, and changing language.

This thesis argues that surrealist women and Christian women mystics utilized the semiotic to break away from and realign the fabric of the symbolic of their fields. However, women in both the surrealist and religious field were presupposed to have access to the semiotic. A woman’s use of the semiotic then becomes an expectation, a part of their habitus, and a continuation of the symbolic system of the field. Regardless of the creativity of their work, the uniqueness, even the interest and popularity afforded, as an expectation associated with women it plays into the field’s symbolic association between women and an/other. It is this association that denies their work the thetic, or breaking power of the semiotic. This is why these women had so little effect on the symbolic register of their fields.

Though their impact on the symbolic was limited at the time they produced their works, there has been renewed interest in both the Christian women mystics and women surrealists with the rise in feminist theory. This renewed interest allows the semiotic to rupture the symbolic and “displace the universe of possible options” within the respected
field (Bourdieu 314). It is only with a recognition of presence and influence that the works of these women can have an impact on their fields and on our broader society.

Furthermore, these works can be analyzed with regard to the feminine symbology they utilized to speak about an/other and to their struggle to mediate for an/other and produce works within their fields. Within the argument of this thesis, the term *symbology* is to be understood as distinct from the *symbolic*. It refers not to the phallic contract between word and meaning but to the cast of verbal signs used by women creators to express the feminine chora. This symbology includes talk of uteruses, fallopian tubes, wombs, and mirrors. The mirror is perhaps not an expected term within this feminine symbology; however, the mirror has a longstanding symbolic connection to womanhood, femininity, and the process of mediating for an/other. Women mystics often refer to themselves as mirrors, *speculum* for an/other. This is the function of a woman mediator—to reflect exactly that of an/other and to do nothing more. Another term frequently used is *trumpet*, to be only a “trumpet sounded by the Living Light” of an/other and to do nothing more (Newman 21). To be a mediator offers women social authority, this is a position often available only to women, but also eliminates their mental authority, their authority to claim authority over their visions. They may mediate, but they may not interpret or use the words of an/other for their own purposes. Terms like vessel, trumpet, and mediator all fall back on the concept of the mirror, and women’s status as mirror. This female symbology, though it exists within the phallogocentric fields, is utilized by these women to express/access the semiotic.
Both fields, Surrealism and religious mysticism, expect of the women an enactment of erotic violence in order to access an/other. For women mystics the process of becoming closer to God consisted in diving deeper into the physicality of Christ. Caroline Walker Bynum, a scholar of religious women in the medieval period, describes in her work *Fragmentation and Redemption* how pain was the only venue for women to access the same religion as men. Embracing the inferior, in health, in body, was a way to feel closer to Christ. One could suffer as He suffered in order to understand Him. As womanhood was considered inferior, embracing feminine attributes and characteristics was a way for men to become closer to Christ. They could be meek, humble, submissive. Women, however, could not revert to this femininity, as they already embodied it, and so instead attacked their physicality. Their corporeal bodies became venues for achieving that closeness with Christ. Thus, “illness and asceticism were rather *imitatio Christi*, an effort to plumb the depths of Christ’s humanity at the moment of his most insistent and terrifying humanness- the moment of his dying” (Bynum 131). A woman’s insanity, sickness, or self-inflicted pain was a means to come closer to understanding Christ. Where social authority was denied, religious women relied on a painful form of mental authority, control over one’s body. Because of this, eucharistic devotion became a means for closeness to an/other. Women could consume the body of Christ at their own will, could worship the body of Christ, could fast or feast without the control or guidance of men. This devotion became a means of connection with an/other for women, who achieved authority “through intimacy and direct inspiration *rather than* through office or
worldly power” (Bynum 137). This violence is exemplified in the works of women mystics, who expressed their relationship with God using “the language of contemporary genres such as hagiography and courtly literature” as well as the *Song of Songs*, which similarly used romantic language to express the religious person’s relationship with God (Miller 41). By utilizing the symbolic contract of their field to express their own religious views, women mystics were subjugated to the “implacable violence (separation, castration, etc.) which constitutes any symbolic contract” and hindered their ability to reach higher mental authority (Kristeva 28).

The women surrealists encountered and expressed a similar form of erotic violence in order to better connect with an/other. Male surrealists first utilized violence against the woman’s body to find inspiration. Through the “stressed and dismembered, punctured and severed” bodies of women male surrealists could access the unconscious that they believed was to be found primarily through women (Caws 53). Male surrealists were known for their *femme enfants*, the young, creative women they utilized as muses. Many of these femme enfants were artists in their own right, yet their contributions to the field were swallowed by their influence on male artists. Marie-Berthe Aurenche was the first of these *femme enfants*, and she, like Tanning and Carrington, was romantically entangled with Max Ernst (Chadwick 33). Gala Eluard was the *femme enfant* and wife of Salvador Dali, who inspired him to create works of “erotic desire and feared impotence” (Chadwick 35). Lee Miller met Man Ray the same year, 1929, and was both his inspiration and work companion. Today, her “image, immortalized in photographs by
Man Ray, is better known today than is her own work” (Chadwick 39). These *femme enfants* were in large numbers artists as well as muses, but their status as the latter swallowed whole their respect as the former. One calls to mind in addition Dora Maar, Valentine Hugo, Remedios Varo, Rita Kernn-Larsen, Léonor Fini, Kay Sage, all women artists whose works were overshadowed by the patriarchal habitus of the surrealist movement (Chadwick). These female muses almost all eventually renounced Surrealism. The cause for this is perhaps the lack of recognition, the lack of authority, the violences purported by the symbolic of Surrealism. Women surrealists also produced works that dismembered and distorted the female form. This violence, like the violence of women mystics, is appropriated by the women surrealists as a means for mental and social authority. The distorted woman figure is “recreated through women’s eyes as self-possessed and capable of producing new narratives of the self” (Chadwick 11). For women surrealists, violence and illness were also ways to dive deeper into the unconscious, to better reach and express an/other.

The women mystics and surrealists needed to utilize the phallogocentric symbolic contracts of their fields to express themselves and find authority. The paradox of this fact, in that the symbolic contract negated their authority, brings to the forefront a struggle in the works of women. Both groups of women needed to manipulate minutely what they could from within their fields to change their position. To disrupt the symbolic, they needed to find grounds for rupture, though this was nearly impossible to find within their fields. Bourdieu notes the influence of parody, where ex-believers utilize the repetition
and manipulation of a critical piece of work as a “means of objectifying, and thereby appropriating, the form of thought and expression by which they were formerly possessed” (Bourdieu 313). Women surrealists and mystics utilized parody by expressing the patriarchal symbolic from their positions as women, and by subverting the expected meanings of their words used to express something different, something semiotic. Bourdieu does not talk about parody from within the field, as that doesn’t seem to exist. By analyzing the women mystics and women surrealists from beyond their time period, we can witness the parody of their words and works in the greater context of their field to understand their subversive context. It takes removal from the field to understand the impact of the women’s position and of their works of art.

Though the broader context of each of these fields is important for understanding what role these women played in society and how their works came to be, this analysis will not follow a historical comparative approach. Close readings will be utilized to better compare the works and status of women mystics and surrealists using a theoretical comparative approach. Post-structuralist theory will guide my analysis of how women are given authority or removed from authority due to their connection to an/other.
Chapter 1

Women as Interpreters: Consciousness as Social Authority

Introduction

Access to an/other tips the scales between social and mental authority, as increased social authority often restricts mental authority for women in these fields. Erich Neumann, in his works on the Great Mother archetype, questions whether the stimulation of the unconscious (or access to an/other) ends in “a loss of consciousness, or whether on the contrary the temporary reduction of consciousness by intoxicant or poison leads to an extension of the consciousness or personality” (Neumann 73). Leonora Carrington’s memoir of her time in a mental institute, Down Below both prompts and answers this question. Carrington finds social authority in her relationship with Max Ernst and in her status as creative muse; however, her mental authority suffers. She loses clarity and consciousness, and her social authority becomes the defining complex of her life. Though the memoir follows her rediscovery of consciousness, in the context of the Surrealist movement, her mental illness would serve as a way to access an/other. This would perhaps explain why Carrington waited until 1983 to publish the memoir—the gap in time allowed her work to be for her own mental authority, rather than to further her role as a mediator. By finding authority over her mental state, Carrington can, by the end of the novel, again reenter the Surrealist field but this time as an interpreter. Similarly, to
achknowledge Hildegard of Bingen primarily for her status as a “trumpet” is to erase her countless other accomplishments, and to erase her authority over her visions. Hildegard’s letters display her balance between mental and social authority. She was able to use her visions as a tool for social capital, which shifts her from the status of mediator to the status of interpreter. This ability to interpret allowed her to utilize her visions in order to reinforce her own ideas and to gain further social authority. Hildegard took authority of her visions in order to wield them at her own discretion.

Surrealism and Consciousness: Leonora Carrington’s rediscovery of consciousness in Down Below

Leonora Carrington’s work as a mediator between divine and earthly expression was both a source of inspiration for her artistry and a way to raise the feminine to a higher power from within a patriarchal field. Her works, once lost to the movement, are now celebrated and touted for their feminist and historical significance. Carrington’s status as femme enfant, and the ensuing damage to her mental health, was utilized as a way to access the unconscious that male surrealists so desperately wished to attain. Women were to be seen or to be the seer, but either way their visions were to be used as a tool for men to create their own works based upon that inner force that “may be the female body or Woman generally” (Baudin 87). Leonora Carrington’s works reflect an embrace of and reverence for this unconscious, while they also subvert the
phallogocentrism behind the male desire for her unconscious. Often for male surrealists “the lust for the hidden creative self [was] facilitated by, sometimes even sublimated into, the lust for women” and this lust turned women into mere objects (Baudin 88). This desire was inherent in the male surrealist gaze, which revered women as physical embodiments of the unconscious which in turn held erotic significance. The femme enfants’ statuses as young, dreamy women made them ideal for projecting fantasies and garnering creative insights.

*Down Below* is at once surreal and autobiographical; Leonora describes her experiences in a psychological hospital during a mental break and does little to conceal the fascinating and strange thoughts she had while there. Her depictions reflect her struggle to differentiate between her status as mediator and her capabilities as a surrealist artist, the madness caused by this split, and then the reconciliation she finds. Leonora Carrington uses her experiences with the unconscious to expand and break from the patriarchal surrealist culture. Her struggle to escape a mental breakdown both inspires and refutes her status as muse. Surrealists were interested in the mentally ill, whose “otherness” derived from the inability to discern between the real and the surreal made them more able to access the unconscious (Baudin 72). Leonora Carrington’s reflections in *Down Below* begin with this inability to differentiate between the surreal and the real and end when she discovers and insists upon separation and differentiation. Carrington takes both the traditionally female role as femme enfant and, by writing *Down Below*, the traditionally male role as interpreter of an/other. She flaunts this gender ambiguity using
a religious symbology, referencing, perhaps unconsciously, the works of women mystics who, as mediators of the divine, utilized the feminine power of vision to assert a masculine and empowered status within the church. Carrington’s ability to bounce between masculine and feminine versions of self reflect this, as women mystics and writers “either ignored their own sex, using mixed-gender imagery for the self… or embrace their femaleness as a sign of closeness to Christ” (Bynum 147). Carrington is able to escape her status as mediator to interpret, but only by discovering her own voice and recognizing her consciousness.

Carrington uses religion as a means to express her transformation within the mental institution. Her status as mediator is portrayed through religious symbolism, particularly in relation to the men surrounding her. This transformation is best seen in the anguish she experiences writing, in her descriptions of the macro and microcosm, and in her infiltration into the Holy Trinity. By replacing Jesus Christ, Carrington is able to rupture her life as femme enfant and become someone more. The imitation of Christ was a tool similarly used by women mystics in order to better their contact with an/other. By delving into their physicality, women could experience the pain and fleshiness of Jesus Christ. Carrington seems to follow this path too; she is at first in deep and constant mental and physical distress, and this draws her further into madness, however, her ability to replace Christ signifies a rupture with the mediator narrative. Carrington no longer needs to use illness, and her physicality, to access an/other.
The book itself, written years past her time spent in the mental institute, is described as something cathartic and holy, the same way in which women mystics felt compelled to share their own visions. Carrington writes of the “anguish” the writings cause her, yet she believes that once she writes it all down she “shall be delivered” (Carrington, "Down Below" 39). The phrasing, “to be delivered” holds both religious and feminist sentiment. There are the religious implications of deliverance, or salvation, that comes when someone of good faith confesses sins. Hildegard references the sense of relief that comes when she is able to express her visions. When she does not express her experiences she becomes “bedridden in [her] infirmities... unable to raise [her]self up” (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 19). Mechthild of Magdeburg similarly expresses the uncontrollable desire to express her visions, hence the title, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. She feels a “powerlessness” to “restrain [herself] as to [her] gifts” in the act of interpreting and describing her visions (Mechthild 39). This powerlessness is another facet of the female mediator; they are powerless to be anything other than seers, though we know from their writings and the histories of their lives that mediating for an/other was not their whole existence.

Carrington fears retribution and embarrassment at the cost of sharing her visions. She believes that her anguish over the retelling is her “ancestors, malevolent and smug, trying to frighten [her]” (Carrington, "Down Below" 32). While this could be simply a fear of sharing personal mental history, in relation to women mystics these words become a plea for authority, and trust, in her words. Her expressions of powerlessness and fear in
writing about consciousness are a tool of interpretation to increase authority. When Hildegard of Bingen initially wrote church officials to attempt to gain recognition for her visions, she spoke with humility and of the uncontrollable nature of her visions. She asks of Bernard of Clairvaux, an important voice in the church: “in your kindness respond to me, your unworthy servant, who has never, from her earliest childhood, lived one hour free from anxiety” (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 17). Hildegard’s anguish here, as Carrington’s, is a plea for the reader to take their writings seriously. The expressed anguish of being a mediator becomes evidence of interpreting and authority.

Carrington uses the egg as a crystal ball to reclaim her memories, as well as to see the entire timeline of the Universe. To Carrington, the egg is “the macrocosm and microcosm,” a tool with which to see things both near and far (Carrington, "Down Below" 19). The egg is a symbol also used by Hildegard of Bingen to describe the Universe. She describes and depicts a “vast instrument, round and shadowed, in the shape of an egg” (see figure 1, Hildegard, Scivias 93). This connection may be circumstantial or coincidental; Carrington studied mystics (although she focused particularly on Russian mystics) and she studied Jung, who included a number of references to Hildegard of Bingen’s work within his Collected Works (Clendenen 39). Hildegard of Bingen also makes reference to the macrocosm and microcosm, with the Universe as the macrocosm and mirror of the microcosm of man (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 107). She describes in a sermon how God “set the firmament with all its ornaments,” creating a Universe with eyes, the sun, ears, the wind, and then connected the world with “fire, cloud, and water”
like veins (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 108). Hildegard of Bingen also expresses the need for a feminine influence within the church. She claims her visions are a gift from God that were given to her, a woman, because the “Church had grown effete and womanish and... God had called the weak to confound the strong” (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 12). In the beginning of Down Below Carrington sees herself as solely a mirror, who’s “eyes became miraculously solar systems... in which everything was ideally mirrored by every gesture” (Carrington, "Down Below" 20). Though Hildegard calls herself a “trumpet” and a “mirror” for the word of God, she also interprets and reports her own visions, and uses these visions for authority. Carrington is making these references at first as only a mediator, and as only a mirror or trumpet. She eventually merges herself, the microcosm, with the macrocosm in order to bring “a woman’s microscopic knowledge” to the universe (Carrington, "Down Below" 45). This merge defines and begins the transformation that Carrington accomplishes across her time in the mental institute from mediator to interpreter, able to use her unconscious to gain authority, no longer simply a mirror.

It is the trip to the mental institute that first pushes Carrington to defy her status as mediator. She recognizes this trip as her “first awakening to consciousness,” albeit after being anaesthetized (Carrington, "Down Below" 22). The mental institute is where she begins to recognize her own power over herself and her self image. In the beginning of the memoir, Carrington sees herself as a protector of the city of Madrid, capable of exacting power over things beyond herself. She stands on balconies and looks down “at
the chained city below [her] feet, the city it was [her] duty to liberate” (Carrington, "Down Below" 15). This is the burden of being a mediator of an/other, the sense of duty she feels to share herself in order to save or inspire others. Carrington muddles what is real and what is in her head, for example believing the telephone ringing to be the “inner voice of the hypnotized people of Madrid” (Carrington, "Down Below" 20). Removed from Madrid and the burden she feels, she can begin to reconstruct her subjectivity.

Leonora is looked after by a cast of doctors and nurses both male and female. She is told by Frau Asegurado, her nurse, that she must answer her doctor, Don Luis, “according to his will” when he stands over her and speaks to her while she is strapped naked to a bed (Carrington, "Down Below" 28). Carrington is helpless and can do little other than listen to him and do as he says, yet she does not admit defeat and swears to herself that she “would never sleep and would protect [her] consciousness” (Carrington, "Down Below" 28). In this moment she refutes the way women were perceived within the Surrealist movement. Men of the Surrealist movement viewed women as “an object of their own dreams,” not as people (Kuenzli 18). An example of this is in the work “I Do Not See the (Woman) Hidden in the Forest” by Magritte, which composites a painting of a naked woman surrounded by photographs of men with their eyes closed (see figure 2). The title of the work of art is written within the piece itself, where the painting of the woman replaces the word. The piece reflects the state of woman as muse and fantasy rather than as person. Carrington is held in a position similar to the woman painted; she is surrounded, naked, by the male gaze. As in a male fantasy, it is implied that her actions
are to follow his will. Carrington expresses her intent to protect her “consciousness,” and this intent illustrates her desire to subjugate her status as solely a mediator of an/other, or, the unconscious. She is bound in a position that denies her any role beyond fantasy and projection. There were two roles of the *femme enfant*: to be seen and to act as seer. Carrington is able to shed this second role through the remainder of *Down Below* only by fully separating herself from her visions.

Carrington is given three Cardiazol shots by her doctor Don Luis, which cause her to convulse uncontrollably. The first injection physically transforms her, the shot forms an abscess in her thigh that prevents her from walking for months. These injections represent a manipulation meant to transform her from “tigress” to sedated woman by disfiguring her, as in the manipulated appearances of women in paintings done by male surrealists. These disfigurements were an act to reduce women, coming from the “male’s fear of castration and his fetishistic disavowals” (Kuenzli 25). By reconstructing women into something else entirely they could remove their subjectivity and sense of consciousness. Woman becomes an object.

Carrington assigns religious meaning to the male staff members of the institute, as well as to the rituals of her life in one room. These projections become a way for Carrington to avoid internal reflection and reformation. She turns her routine in the hospital into ritual, assigning innate meaning and sentiment to acts such as eating, dressing, and organizing her belongings. In her first few days at the institute Carrington is strapped to a bed, naked, lying in her own filth. Though unbothered by the mess, she feels
tortured by the sense that the mosquitoes that assail her are “the spirits of all the crushed Spaniards who blamed me for my internment, my lack of intelligence, and my submissiveness” (Carrington, "Down Below" 29). Again, Carrington assigns the condition of others to her own performance and feels remorse for her actions that have no real, significant impact on the whole of Madrid. This feeling, however, is different from the burden she felt initially in Madrid. Whereas previously Carrington felt responsible for Madrid due to her capabilities and power, now her responsibility is due to her incapabilities and her lack of power. Carrington, in rediscovering consciousness, is able to separate herself from the “powers” of her unconscious, or of an/other. This separation allows her to develop as an interpreter rather than simply a mediator.

It is important to note that Carrington believes Don Mariano and Don Luis are God and Christ, respectively. Her relationship with Don Mariano is one of spite and with Don Luis is one of fearful reverence. With his presence she feels as if she is sinking into a well, where “the bottom of that well was the stopping of my mind for all eternity with the essence of utter anguish” (Carrington, "Down Below" 40). The concept of a well, stopped with anguish is directly the opposite of Mechthild of Magdeburg’s flowing light of the Godhead. With Don Luis’ presence she comes to admit defeat, and resign herself to do what he asks of her as “the feeblest creature in the whole world” (Carrington, "Down Below" 41). Carrington eventually decides to replace Don Luis in the Holy Trinity. She believes that “Christ was dead and done for” and so she has to take his place as, without her, the Trinity had become “dry and incomplete” (Carrington, “Down
Below” 44). The moment she decides to replace Don Luis as Christ is also the same moment where she establishes the Down Below, a pavilion in the mental institute as “the Earth, the Real World, Paradise, Eden, Jerusalem.” (Carrington, "Down Below" 44). This delusion is what pushes her to heal and regain consciousness. There is “cathartic power” in the concept of the death of Christ; it is a moment of rupture between Christ, his Father, and life, and this representation of splitting is a major part of personal autonomy and the creation of a sense of individuality (Kristeva 133). The denial of these moments of splitting “leads to psychotic confusion,” while their dramatization is “a source of exorbitant and destructive anguish,” both of which are experienced by Carrington (Kristeva 133). For the mentally unstable Carrington, the death of Christ offers “imaginary support to the nonrepresentable catastrophic anguish” (Kristeva 133). Her choice to replace Christ allows her to fully rupture from her previous mindset.

While the death of Christ is at once a source of anguish it is too a “life-giving discontinuity;” though Christ dies, his sacrifice offers a stronger bond between humanity and God (Kristeva 130). Christ’s sacrifice becomes an offering towards a better future. Carrington, in a “first flash of lucidity” realizes that she must “re-establish contact between [her] mind and [her]self,” as her journey towards mental clarity is something she must do on her own (Carrington, "Down Below" 51). As she recognizes that her journey is for herself and “not the whole world,” she no longer holds the weight of all Madrid on her shoulders (Carrington, "Down Below" 51). She shouts at Don Luis: “I am not the public property of your house. I, too, have private thoughts and a private value”
(Carrington, "Down Below" 60). After her third and final Cardiazol shot, Carrington looks nearly dead, but when she rises she regains all clarity. The rituals she once performed lose their significance. This can be associated with the resurrection of Christ; as Jesus remained dead for three days, Carrington experienced the “absence of motion, fixation, horrible reality” three times before returning to clarity and learning that “Down Below were not Egypt, China, and Jerusalem, but pavilions for the insane” (Carrington, "Down Below" 62). Carrington is finally able to separate herself from her status as mediator of an/other; in the postscript of Down Below she marries Renato and is able to paint again for the first time since leaving Ernst.

Carrington, through her experiences at the mental institute, is able to redevelop her self-sufficiency and consciousness. Her status as mediator of an/other relegated her to the status of an/other; she was desired for her creative visions and closeness to the subconscious, but not for herself as a person. This status pushed Carrington to a state of madness. She was able to reclaim her consciousness and clarity of thought by recognizing her autonomy. The religious symbolism in Down Below is a way for Carrington to express the impacts men had on her mental authority. By rejecting this false religion and religious rituals, Carrington is finally able to see past her status as mediator of an/other in order to become a surrealist artist in her own right. The reflective nature of this work hints towards her new status as interpreter of an/other. Carrington can harness an/other to create works, but is no longer simply a femme enfant.
Wielding An/Other: Mediating as a Tool of Authority for Hildegard of Bingen

Hildegard of Bingen is an interpreter of an/other, she utilizes her visions without becoming solely a vessel for these words. She often refers to herself as a “trumpet sounded by the Living Light” and as a mirror of life (Newman 21). The word *speculum* was commonly used in this context. An anthology published of Hildegard’s prophecies in the 13th century was titled *Speculum futurorum temporum*, or *Mirror of Future Times* (Newman 23). The word *speculum* today carries an inherently feminine meaning, where the speculum is a medical device used to examine a woman’s vagina and cervix. This shift in meaning reflects well the shift in interpretation of Hildegard’s writing and visions over time. The term speculum becomes, over time, inherently gendered, performative, and relegated to a small sphere of influence just as the interpretations of Hildegard’s writings became more gendered. Her visions were showcased without reference to her broad sphere of social authority in the church of the middle ages.

The writing of Hildegard’s hagiography is also indicative of this transformation of interpretation across time. Hildegard herself wrote much of her own hagiography, a practice that was and remains unusual amongst saints. Her ability to write at all and her status as author of numerous books is far more unusual among other women saints. The *Vita S. Hildegardis*, her hagiography passed hands many times between writers: Volmar, Hildegard’s confidant and closest friend, passed away before she did; the first writer, Gottfried, began the text before Hildegard’s own passing but also passed away before her; the second, Guibert of Gembloux, returned to Gembloux before finishing the text at
Mount St. Rupert; and the third writer, Theoderic did his best to pull together a makeshift *Vita* (Newman 17). Hildegard is portrayed differently by each writer. The depictions of her shift from her own desired portrayal, as a prophet, to “aristocratic abbess,” and then to something of a “feminine bridal mystic” (Newman 19). The latter is a depiction that Hildegard would have most disagreed with, as Theoderic was “less concerned with her ability to speak for God than her privileged relationship with God, which is significantly gendered” (Newman 25). It is evident in both her own auto-hagiographic content as well as in her personal correspondences, captured in the multitude of letters she left behind, that Hildegard saw herself as both mediator and interpreter of an/other. Her status as woman defined her to be simply a receiver and “trumpet” of visions, but Hildegard defied this through her actions.

Though it took Carrington the extent of *Down Below* to develop the ability to both mediate and use an/other, Hildegard utilized both of these abilities throughout her life. She was able to consciously accept her visions from an/other, and then depict them in her writings in varying contexts for varying uses. Unlike other mystics who were thrown into rapture upon visions and lost themselves within an/other, Hildegard saw her visions while still “fully awake” (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 138). She was able to “experience the visionary life while retaining psychic integrity,” much like the reformed and healed Carrington (Clendenen 41). The influential psychologist Jung even used the contents of one of her letters as an example of “coming to consciousness,” a process that results in the “liberation of healing,” something similar to Carrington’s period of time spent in the
institute (Clendenen 51). Carrington, after her final Cardiazol injection, “regained lucidity” and was finally able to again take control of her actions (Carrington, "Down Below" 61). Hildegard warns against the complacency and lack of agency that Carrington experienced at first. She writes, in a written sermon in 1163 A.D. to the Clerics of Cologne:

Wake up! The misguided people of today have no idea what they are doing… In the beginning of this their seduction into error, they will say to women: “It is not permitted for you to be with us, but because you do not have good and upright teachers, obey us and do whatever we say, whatever we command, and then you will be saved.” And in this way they draw women to themselves and lead them into their own error. (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 115)

This warning seems almost to be written to Carrington and to other women like the femme enfants. Carrington wrote in Down Below of the way in which men tried to control her, and how she was “dominated, ready to become the slave of the first comer, ready to die” and led to error, as Hildegard warned (Carrington, "Down Below" 40). Hildegard utilized her visions as a means for authority and, though they led her to sainthood, refused to let them be the extent of her religious career. Carrington shows the process of coming to interpreting, while the personal correspondence of Hildegard of Bingen show the power of wielding an/other as a tool for social authority.
Hildegard created religious texts in the name of her visions, most prominently her *Scivias*, but her letters hint at other uses for her interpretations of an/other. Hildegard wrote from the voice of God when she needed further support for her actions. Her status as mediator here became a tool for convincing and for defending herself and her convent. These letters also express, as Carrington does, the need for a female consciousness.

Hildegard represents her visions using what Gillian Ahlgren describes to be three levels of literary formulae; the first, *reportorial*, refers to Hildegard’s direct representations of the vision, or exactly what she saw and heard. In the *reportorial* instance she acts as “the medium between the letter-writer and the source of her visions” and expresses the visions directly in this way (Ahlgren 51). The second, *instrumental*, is when Hildegard describes her visions directly, again, but this time referencing her inferiority. This “reinforces the divine nature of her message and her duty as a prophet to promulgate it,” and is the formula most often used in first-time letters to high-ranking ecclesiastical men (Ahlgren 53). The third and final is the *representative* form, in which Hildegard reports her divine message in the first or third person. This formula is used to help support her authority as a female leader, or *magistra* as she was often called, and acts to reinforce the powerful feminine influence that Hildegard felt was needed within the church at that time (Ahlgren 53). These formulae are used in different instances by Hildegard depending on her audience.

Guibert of Gembloux, the second writer of her hagiography, wrote to Hildegard often to ask questions about how she received her visions. He expresses awe at her ability
to maintain consciousness and stay “always alert and self-controlled” when “irradiated, as she herself declares, in a certain eternal light” (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 148). He asked: “Who has ever heard such things said about any other woman?” (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 150). He explained that “in her great loftiness, she transcends the lowly condition of women” and “is to be compared to the most eminent of men,” though Hildegard does not ever compare herself to any men (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 151). She instead reiterates her status as a “poor little woman” to make clearer her points of reasoning and to accentuate the grandness of her skills and visions (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 32). Guibert’s references to Hildegard’s self-control and status as woman highlight her unique mental authority over an/other. Hildegard’s comments reinforce this while simultaneously highlighting her unique social authority. Guibert’s confusion is not unfounded, Hildegard created an image for herself that was humble like other women, “lowly” like other women, and yet able to achieve an incredible amount. Hildegard’s language of inferiority allowed her this ability for achievement, as her supposed humility is what separated her God-given visions from being illusions sent from the Devil. Creating an image of inferiority thus gave credibility to her visions, and allowed them to be utilized to gain more authority.

There are many instances of Hildegard using her status as mediator to exert power and influence. One prominent example is in the loss of her best friend, Richardis of Stade, who was elected abbess at another diocese. Hildegard did all in her power to get Richardis back, writing letters to her Richardis’ mother and brother, the Archbishop of
Mainz, and even Pope Eugenius III. In each of these letters, Hildegard uses the varying formulae ascribed by Ahlgren to flaunt her social authority and assert the authority of her visions.

The first letter written by Hildegard to get Richardis back, written to Margravine Richardis of Stade, Richardis’ mother, is devoid of any visionary writing. Ahlgren found that Hildegard used the formulae far less often in her writings to women, and this piece supports that (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 41). This can be attributed to the highly personal nature of the letter, Hildegard has no reason to push the authority of her voice as abbess, though she does tell Margravine that the new position is “certainly, certainly, certainly not God’s will” (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 41). Hildegard also may not include a vision in this writing because Margravine, in her status as woman, has very little habitus in the religious field. The vision then would not be needed. Hildegard then receives a letter from Heinrich, the Archbishop of Mainz which essentially commands Hildegard to “release this sister immediately to those who seek and desire her” (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 42). Hildegard’s response invokes the third, representative formula and begins, powerfully: “The Bright Fountain, truthful and just, says” (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 42). The response is thus an establishment of Hildegard’s authority and power and an admonishment on the part of the archbishop; Hildegard makes clear that this decision was created “in the conniving audacity of ignorant hearts” and against His will (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 42). Although this third, representative formula appears to be Hildegard acting as mediator of an/other, the
deliberate intent of the letter pushes her vision towards the side of an interpreter. Hildegard may be a “trumpet” for divine words, but these divine words may also serve her a political purpose.

The letters continue after Richardis of Stade is installed in her new diocese. Hildegard writes to Richardis’ brother, Hartwig, the Archbishop of Bremen. Despite his high standing, Hildegard withholds any direct visions from God and similarly refrains from using any other mediating language. She writes personally, as she did to Richardis’ mother, though her message is more targeted and hints rather directly that she believes Richardis’ move is not so much a divine act than a ploy for money. She offers that if Hartwig were to help bring Richardis back, “God will give [him] the blessing which Isaac gave to his son Jacob [cf. Gen 27.27-29] and which He gave through his angel to Abraham for his obedience [cf. Gen 22.15-18]” (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 44). The use of religious sentiment is a small reminder of her status and close connection to God, but the letter remains a personal statement of her strong desire for Richardis to return.

More letters pass hands, the letter Hildegard wrote to Pope Eugenius III is sadly lost to history, but they end with Richardis’ death at the untimely age of twenty-eight. Hildegard hears of this through a letter from Hartwig, and she responds with tact and an aching heart. Here, Hildegard makes multiple references to visions received from “the Living Light” (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 49). These references follow the reportorial pattern and are used by Hildegard to express the divinity of Richardis and perhaps to help ease the pain of Hartwig’s loss, as well as her own. The first reference is to how she
“cherished [Richardis] with divine love” as God had told her to do “in a very vivid vision” (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 49). The vision is not explained and is used in a very different way than the representative divine message in the letter to Heinrich. Whereas those words were meant to admonish Heinrich and assert Hildegard’s authority, this vision is simply Hildegard acting “as the medium” between Hartwig and an/other, so he may hear what God thought of his sister from a divine source (Ahlgren 51). This vision also sets up for Hildegard to go into greater detail, as she does, in depicting how God favored Richardis. She references a “true vision” heard while Richardis was still alive concerning God’s favoring of her. She writes from the vision: “O virginity, you are standing in the royal bridal chamber” (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 50). This vision gives a reason for Richardis’ early passing; she was needed by God. Hildegard uses her authority as mediator of an/other here to offer condolences to Hartwig, and her authority as a vessel of God gives divine credibility to Richardis’ safe passing.

Her visions written about Richardis’ passing are also used as a source of mental authority. Hildegard uses the visions to better process her close friend’s death, and to comfort herself after a loss. Personal correspondences highlight this extra functionality of interpreting an/other. Though her Scivias must offer some instances of this personal reflection buried within religious text, her letters are one step removed from the more formal world of religious writing. This step back makes more clear the mental authority afforded by her visions of an/other. The correspondence itself, going back and forth for Richardis, is in order to save her from the whims of religious men. Hildegard thus uses
Another interesting piece of correspondence is between Hildegard and Elisabeth of Schonau, a contemporaneous female mystic. Elisabeth wrote to Hildegard a long-winded letter about her own visions and of people “who are saying many things about [her] that are simply not true” (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 98). There is a major difference to note between the way in which Hildegard and Elisabeth receive visions. While Hildegard is always fully conscious and unmoved, Elisabeth receives her visions in “a state of ecstasy,” as Elisabeth explains, and her visions can even impact her body. In one vision she is struck by God and suffers physically from the beating for “three days thereafter” (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 99). Elisabeth refers to herself as God’s “handmaiden,” a term used infrequently by Hildegard which holds a more feminine and courtly-love connotation. Hildegard responds to Elisabeth’s plea for help using the instrumental formula. She begins the letter by calling herself “a poor little form of a woman and a fragile vessel” (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 103). This serves to set up for a vision from “the Serene Light” which comes even before the end of the first sentence, Hildegard seems to wish to assert herself in this letter as nothing more than a mediator (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 103). She warns Elisabeth to remember that they are “fragile vessels, for they are only human” (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 103). She ends the letter by imploring God to “make [Elisabeth] a mirror of life,” and recounts her own weariness of anxieties and fears (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 105). The purpose of this
letter, though addressed to Elisabeth, feels self-serving. Is Hildegard consoling Elisabeth or reminding herself of her own humanity?

At times Hildegard writes directly, and in first person from God, but this letter is solely self-effacing. As Elisabeth would be a contemporary to Hildegard, and another woman, no less, Hildegard’s visions here do not fit the typical case as a tool for establishing authority. Instead, Hildegard writes her visions from a place of engaged consciousness. This is outwardly an expression of mediation, Hildegard is resounding “like the dim sound of a trumpet from the Living Light,” but the sound echoes only for herself (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 105). She reminds Elisabeth that they are fragile vessels of God, and though she too is often anxious and fearful, the visions she receives from God are rewarding enough. To believe that they are gods would be to exist like Carrington did initially, solely as a voice of an/other. Although Hildegard tells Elisabeth to be a “mirror of life,” this bit of advice also stands to remind Elisabeth that her visions are simply that, visions, and that she is still only human. Hildegard has a clear grasp on the separation between herself and an/other, and this is what enables her to so easily use her visions for social authority and to express them to a wider audience. Her advice to Elisabeth acts as words from one mediator to another, and to teach a mediator to interpret. By here using the voice of an/other for her own personal reflections, she is showing Elisabeth the same tools for mental authority.

Hildegard uses her mystic status as a tool to further her status as interpreter. Her letters of correspondence best represent the varying ways in which she is able to share her
visions in order to assert authority, share condolences and advice, and reflect internally. Hildegard separates herself as a mystic by the way in which she receives visions, consciously. This is what allows her the freedom to represent her visions using different formulae and to serve herself with her visions. The moments where Hildegard uses her visions to defend herself and her convent are some of the most powerful. When writing to Helengerus, one of the abbots of Mount St. Disibod, the institution which she fought to leave, Hildegard’s voice shifts from her own, to a vision from God, and back, with nearly indiscernible transition. We are only reminded that Hildegard is writing when she again asserts herself, writing: “poor little woman that I am, I see a black fire in you kindled against us” (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 33). The phrase “poor little woman” feels comical next to the authoritative tone of the previous paragraphs, lambasting Mount St. Disibod for their poor behavior. Hildegard, mediator of an/other may be a “poor little woman,” but when she utilizes her visions as interpreter of an/other, she is a force of authority to be reckoned with. Much louder than just a trumpet.
Chapter 2

Depictions of Erotic Violence: A Struggle for Mental Authority

Introduction

It is curious that both women surrealists and women mystics rely on visual signs which may negate mental and social authority in order to best express their visions. These visual signs are a part of the symbolic and rely on existing stereotypes within the field that purport women’s position of inferiority. For instance, erotic violence is a tool that is utilized in both the surrealist and mystic tradition by women to portray ecstasy and a closeness with an/other. When interpreted as part of the symbolic world, this erotic violence allows women to use their inferior physicality to come closer to an/other, however, this symbolic reading can be reductive. One question that has not been touched upon is how erotic violence may project an attempt to reconcile between authority to and connections with an/other. The physicality of woman is what makes her unable to gain any high position in the church, but it is also paradoxically that which allows her to be a mystic and to connect more closely with God. This is because, within the church, “woman was to man what matter is to spirit—that is, they symbolized the physical, lustful, material, appetitive part of human nature” (Bynum 147). Women could get closer to God or an/other by connecting more deeply to that physicality. Christ is the Holy Trinity link to this physicality. He represents the side of Christianity most in touch with
humanity, and so a connection to Christ through pain is a means for women to find that otherwise unattainable position of weight and respect in the church.

Whereas the prevalence of violence is understood as a means to connect to an/other through physicality, the sexualization and ecstasy of this violence is up for interpretation. It is at times romanticized, rejected, and ignored. The narrative that romanticization supports can “perform the patriarchal, ideological task of constructing the feminine,” while rejecting and ignoring eroticization does not fully represent the history of women in religion (Miller 28). In Mechthild’s work, eroticized violence has only been analyzed as a way to connect most fully with God. Pain is described as a “sensory bridge between herself and her Beloved” (McGowin 619). I wonder if this narrative simplifies the complicated relationship that Mechthild had with God and with religion. Despite being known as a woman mystic, her writings rarely focused on visions. Rather, she utilized the authority of her status as mystic to create a religious text based upon her own ideas. The erotic violence of Mechthild of Magdeburg’s *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* offers a path to mediate her own struggle in gaining mental authority. Violence is a means to better understand and come closer to an/other, and the *Song of Songs* romantic language she utilizes display her struggle to achieve this oneness with God.

Dorothea Tanning similarly produced a body of work that contains both works of love, non-physical, and works of abject sexuality, with violent or dark undercurrents. Her early works portray the unconscious of the feminine, and her middle works often display
a softness of feminine form contrasted against nature. Her sculptures, done mainly from the late ‘60s to the early ‘70s portray not this love but a form of sexual violence. The sculptures are soft, in fleshy tones, and are mutilated to take the shape of a broken human form. The erotic violence in Tanning’s work can be seen as an attempt to reconcile her desire for connection with an/other, or the unconscious, and her inability to achieve this without the sexualization and violence expected of her due to her position. Tanning, like Mechthild, utilized the sexuality afforded to her by her field to express that struggle to gain closer access to an/other.

**Erotic Violence in *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*: Mechthild’s Struggle to Find Mental Authority in An/Other**

Though scholars have spent quite a bit of time analyzing the violent, sexual depictions within medieval women’s writings, it is not often further explored *why* the women are creating these depictions. For instance, I may explain that I throw things when I am angry because it feels satisfying, but this does not explain why I am angry. It only explains my reaction to this feeling. The simplest explanation for why Mechthild, and women like Mechthild utilized erotic violence is as a way to achieve higher sanctity, as in a “fully active fusing with the death agonies of Christ” (Bynum 48). But what about these particular, and varied, displays of erotic violence? Do different displays, between different characters, represent varied and nuanced means of achieving sanctity?
Mechthild depicts many different types of love, most notably in her dialogues between Love and the Soul and in conversations between the Soul and God directly. This pure, directed love is that which is most often eroticized and violent, the love between them is expressed using a physicality that for women mystics was the “sensory bridge between herself and her Beloved” (McGowin 619). The dialogues between Love and the Soul display Mechthild’s struggle to understand and justify the need for pain and suffering in religion. These dialogues do not serve to further the narrative that for women, love must be violent; rather, they give Mechthild the authority to analyze her own experiences with pain and suffering in a religious context. The violence associated with love here is not in order to unite pain and eros but to remind her of the love of God, even in the presence of pain. The erotic violence in dialogues between the Soul and God represent Mechthild’s struggle for mental authority. Without the presence of God she feels as though she is just a woman in body, a corporeality of physicality. The presence of God, and the use of eucharistic imagery and devotion, grant her a greater religious authority with an/other.

Eucharistic devotion is an underlying feature in much of the violence that Mechthild portrays. The consummation of the eucharist was first a way for women to embody Christ, but it could also be a way to achieve authority. Religious women could supercede the authority of religious men by taking the eucharist as they wished. Some women mystics would take it every day, against the authority of the men at their church, or fast on only the eucharist. Others would fast from the eucharist, driven by a sign from
God. These choices were some of the few that women could make, often with reprimand from the men of authority. These choices could be supplemented by an ecstatic experience, as the “special spiritual significance” associated with mysticism was a form of authority that even a beguine like Mechthild could achieve (Bynum 135). Though this authority could come to be seen as the way Mechthild achieved her closeness with an/other, the authority given to a mystic was external rather than internal, or social rather than mental. She could be placed higher than a priest but her womanhood would still keep her from achieving the religious height of man. Mechthild uses eucharistic devotion to explore her habitus in relation to social authority. Consuming Christ becomes a way to ingest and muse on that physicality which was part of the religious understanding of both Jesus Christ and women.

In the interactions between Love and the Soul, Mechthild utilizes the ritual of communion to express her own hopes, fears, and expectations within a religious life. The first dialogue between Love and the Soul follows the tradition of courtly love, the two greet each other and express their need for one another. While in the original Low German Mechthild addresses them both with the title *frouwe*, this equality is made unbalanced when Lady Love greets the Soul as “Mistress and Queen,” denoting her to be superior (Mechthild 39). The Soul is given by Lady Love all that she can ask for in return for all that Lady Love has “taken” (Mechthild 40). Mechthild makes it clear that the Soul feels at first attacked, and so Lady Love reminds her of all that she has given her. The two utilize a form of eucharistic devotion. The Soul tells Love: “you have devoured my
flesh and my blood.” To which Love replies: “Mistress and Queen, you have thereby been purified and drawn into God” (Mechthild 40). This puts the Soul at the center of a eucharistic ritual, seemingly unwillingly. The Soul then calls Love a robber, and as reparations, Love offers herself. This compensation is enough, and by taking Love, the Soul is able to “demand God and all his kingdom” (Mechthild 40). The pattern at play here is confusing, and toys with Christ’s narrative as redeemer of mankind. It turns Christ as the eucharist into a reluctant hero, thankless at that. Mechthild uses eucharistic devotion to show the way in which a reluctant Soul may gain access to heaven by allowing true love to enter. And yet, there remains no thanks for Love. The passage of this thanklessness, and the transition from here across the text between the Soul’s relationship with God and the Soul’s relationship with Love highlight the imperfection of religion and inconsequence of human existence. There is a distance between the way the Soul and Love acknowledge and understand one another. As both the Soul and Love are represented as women, it’s interesting that they must utilize each other to achieve religious ascendence. While men could “embrace the female as a symbol of renunciation,” women needed to dive deeper into themselves and their physicality to become closer to God (Bynum 179). The thanklessness here could to represent the distance that Mechthild may feel as a religious woman, and her struggle to reconcile between being a woman and being God’s bride.

The distance between Mechthild as woman and Mechthild as God’s bride is expanded in the second narrative between the Soul and Love, where Love explains that
violence is what bounds the Soul to pure love and allows her to eventually be given to
God. Love has “hunted [her], trapped [her], bounded [her], and wounded [her] so deeply
that [she] shall never be healthy again” (Mechthild 42). Just as women surrealists were
believed to be closer to the unconscious for their status as women, and for their illness or
madness, the Soul is closer to God for being wounded and ill. Physicality, and a sinking
into this physicality was the way for women, like Mechthild, to become one with God.
Her body is both the path to heavenliness and the reason for her inability to reach God.
The Soul must reconcile with this fragmentation and utilize it to gain access to a higher
power. When Love speaks to the Soul, it is with disdain, and yet it is to promote the need
for the Soul to be God’s bride. Love says: “I’ll steal you from your body/ And give you
to your Lover” (Mechthild 43). Mechthild is grappling with the trappings of her body and
her desire to be a bride of Christ. If her soul must be stolen from her body, than it does
not wish to be removed. And yet, Mechthild is “weak with longing” (Mechthild 43). The
Soul attempts to use Love as a mediator between her and God, her letter to God is
“written out of [Love’s] mouth,” but this is not enough (Mechthild 43). Love tells the
Soul that she must find the seal for this letter herself. Mechthild recognizes that her
closeness to an/other relies not only on expressing the word of God, and love for God, but
also in her own authority over and understand of this religious experience.

Love’s interaction with Dull Souls best displays the frustration that Mechthild
feels about the struggle to be a woman in body trying to find a path to holiness. The Dull
Soul is comfortable in its human body. It asks: “how am I supposed to stay well if I take
on the burdens you involve?” (Mechthild 88). Love replies that God will not let the body perish, as long as the Soul feasts on nothing but Him. To allow the Soul to love allows her to “rise to the heights of bliss and to the most exquisite pain” (Mechthild 88). Emily McGowin, in her work on erotic violence in Mechthild’s *The Flowing Light*, explains Mechthild’s depictions of erotic violence by claiming that a soul divided between God and earthliness is one that feels pain, and that this pain will be gone once the soul is “joined with her glorified body in heaven” (McGowin 620). This, however, does not explain the “most exquisite pain” that the Soul expects in the heights of bliss. Mechthild finds pain here, even in the bed of love with God. This pain is not so much derived from “a soul divided in its loyalty” but from a soul that is divided between womanhood and pure love for God (McGowin 613). Love offers a confusing closing bit of wisdom, telling the Dull (but now enlightened) Soul: “if you want to have love, you must leave love” (Mechthild 89). This is the loss of love for one’s corporeality, fleshiness, which must be subjugated to the same pains as Christ himself for a woman to achieve the height of glory. And yet it is still evident that Mechthild does not expect the pains for a woman to end only in pure love.

In Book III, the Soul complains to the Bride from *The Song of Songs* in The Old Testament. This depiction of love between Bride and God is what spurred the immensely popular genre of erotic, religious love. The Soul laments what “pain she suffers” being a maidservant of the Love of God on Earth (Mechthild 108). The Bride teaches the Soul about moderation of love (or lack thereof), for when she is so “inebriated” by love she
“cannot even think of [her] body; for love commands [her]” (Mechthild 109). She tells the Soul to become this inebriated with Love of God as, if she can manage this unrestrained and base form of love, she “shall never go to ruin” (Mechthild 110). The Soul’s response to the Bride was a great example of this erotic, violent, and seemingly limitless form of love for God:

Mistress Bride, I have such a hunger for the heavenly Father that I forget all cares. And I so thirst for his Son that it removes me from all earthly desires. And I have such a need for the Spirit of them both that it goes beyond the wisdom of the Father, which I cannot grasp; and beyond the Son’s suffering, which I cannot bear; and beyond the consultation of the Holy Spirit, which I cannot receive (Mechthild 110).

By becoming so inebriated with Love the Soul can escape the confines of a woman’s physicality, but then she also loses her sense of mental authority.

Mechthild ends this chapter with the line: “whoever becomes entangled in longing such as this must forever hang blessedly fettered in God” (Mechthild 110). This statement is an obligation that comes from being beyond the body, beyond corporeality. The Soul must hang, in a Christ-like fashion, “blessedly fettered in God.” Her religious zealousness comes at the expense of what grounds her to earth, but it also denies her the ability to understand the words of God. This is the rejection of consciousness in desire for an/other. To be the most faithful soul, the soul of the purest love, for a woman is to be an empty vessel for the Holy Spirit. Mechthild, in passages like this one, grapples with the
disjunction between her own power over mental authority and that of which she writes. She receives the consultation of the Holy Spirit, in vision, and clearly grasps the wisdom of the Father, as she details in *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. Passages like this, between the Soul and the Mistress Bride from *The Song of Songs* hint at Mechthild’s mediating standpoint between an/other and her own consciousness. She depicts a desire to be the ultimate *speculum*, or reflection of God, yet feels tied down by both the desires of her body and her own desire for the authority to interpret an/other.

Feminine consciousness seems to be an affront to her desire for God, and so there is violence against it and an almost erotic desire to be melded with God, which becomes a way to fuse her consciousness to him. Mechthild grapples with her desire to be just a trumpet, to be just a bride, and to not be a woman physically. Ecstasy becomes desire not for physicality but for that metaphysicality which is denied to religious women. Mechthild’s depictions of The Soul’s desire to be only with God, a hunger and thirst that removes all physical sensation, is a form of pining for something that she struggles to achieve. The Soul’s lack of body is what Mechthild hopes to achieve when she isolates herself as a beguine, when she sinks into the physicality that allows her to find an/other. To forever hang fettered in God is to be like Christ and to lose the part of the Soul that dwells in the body. Mechthild claims that “the number of pure virgins is small” (Mechthild 139). The erotic violence with which she depicts this chastity, to be “humbly silent and lovingly suffer distress” for God, highlights the struggle to achieve pure
virginity within the womanly physical form (Mechthild 139). Mental authority comes at
the price of a complete connection to an/other.

**Dorothea Tanning and Distortion:**

**Erotic Violence in a Yearning for, and Creation of, Authority**

If it isn’t too late
let me waste one day away
from my history.
Let me see without
looking inside
at broken glass.

-Dorothea Tanning “Sequestrienne”

The artwork and poetry of Dorothea Tanning hint at the same fragmentation that
exists in the work of Mechthild of Magdeburg. Both women portray an eroticism that is
often viewed as the glory and ecstasy of gaining access to an/other, while the associated
violence and physicality is often described as the need for women to dig deeper into their
humanness to achieve such ecstasy. This description minimizes the internal struggle that
these women faced between their desire for a higher spirituality and their reliance on
earthly bodies. Dorothea Tanning’s works span the entirety of her lifetime, and they vary
and change across decades. Though all of her works display feminism and the female
body, certain periods portray different elements of this physicality and reveal different
elements of female fragmentation. Her artwork often features mutilated female forms,
much like the male surrealists she was surrounded by. For the men, this mutilation was a way to further objectify women. One could cut up a woman and reveal her to be only the fleshy, faceless objects one wished they would be. Objectification was a means to gain inspiration, as one may learn about botany in the dissection of a flower.

Tanning’s portraits portray a strange sort of power in this mangled form; the female body is at once capable and rendered unrecognizable. Her pieces that interest me most are those that remain faceless, where the female form is assailed by her brush. Her soft sculptures as well, created mainly between the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, reflect a sexual violence in the shape of something undeniably domestic. *Hotel du Pavot, Chambre 202* is perhaps her strongest example of this (see figure 3). Tanning creates a mock hotel room alive with these figures of soft, fleshy form that seem to meld with or emerge from the furniture, walls, and fireplace. Tanning’s poetry, created at the end of her life in the late 90’s and early 00’s, reflect on the fragmentation that her paintings portray. What the image cannot achieve her writings grapple with and attempt to reconcile. As with Mechthild of Magdeburg, the struggle to mediate between female physicality and an/other was a source of inspiration as well as a source of mental discord.

The same dichotomy between male and female that plagues a majority of the religious world affected the very anti-religious surrealists. This was the dichotomy of “positing man as writer and interpreter of signs and woman as muse and text” (Munson 20). Male Surrealists depicted the “unruly woman” as “dismembered, mutable, eroticized;” by breaking women down they could hope to witness and experience the
otherness that women were supposedly composed of (Chadwick 11). This otherness is the same access to an/other as in Mechthild of Magdeburg; their physicality and femininity was the root to attain and deliver an/other. This was internalized by women of both fields, who saw their physicality as a means to achieve enlightenment. For instance, Mechthild isolated herself in order to delve deeper into her physicality to connect with that of Christ. Tanning expressed a similar need for isolation in the creation of her art. She needed to work “alone. Self-consciously, uncompromisingly alone” (Caws 91). This isolation was a path to inspiration. Inspiration would “spill out” of her head and onto the canvas, as Mechthild’s inspiration did for her writings (Caws 91). The second half of Tanning’s career was not defined by Surrealism, she left the movement officially in 1955, but her works still present the fragmentation of a surrealist woman. This fragmentation, as with the women mystics, is something to grapple with for inspiration and connection to an/other, something ingrained in the culture of her field. Mechthild was not a nun and was not bonded to Christ by any religiously significant bonds, but her connection to Christ existed much in the same way that Tanning’s connection to Surrealism existed in her marriage to Ernst and her desire to express her emotions in erotic violence.

Tanning’s violence reveals the same anxieties of Mechthild’s in the struggle between physicality and access to an/other. For mystics, self-harm and the language of violence was in “an effort to plumb the depths of Christ’s humanity at the moment of his most insistent and terrifying humanness,” while for women surrealist violence represented the desire to overcome the narrative of male surrealists and to show that they
could be “self-possessed and capable of producing new narratives of the self” (Bynum 131, Chadwick 11). Tanning portrays a violence against the female form that was often visible in the works of male surrealists. Her soft, fabric sculptures much resemble the doll sculptures created by surrealists Hans Bellmer in the 1930s, and her paintings of fleshy bodies cut up and manipulated bring to mind the pieces of André Kertész series Distortion, of the 1930s, that stretched and distorted images of women’s bodies beyond recognition (see figure 4). These surrealist artists manipulate the feminine form beyond recognition—it is a curious choice on Tanning’s part to recreate, consciously or subconsciously, these pieces. The choice to depict distorted feminine forms in the same manner of male surrealis...
maturity (Caws 64). As Tanning ages she struggles or perhaps knowingly refuses to represent the female body as whole and defined.

It’s interesting to note that Birthday, though a self-portrait of sorts, is not denoted as such. Her piece titled Self-Portrait (1944) is instead a landscape where she stands, very small, looking out at the landscape Sedona, Arizona where she had moved with Max Ernst (see figure 6). The piece reminds me of Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (1818) by Caspar David Friedrich (see figure 7). It is Romantic and full of affect, one gets the sense of what Tanning is feeling despite being unable to see her face. The difference between Self-Portrait and Wanderer is in both the size of Tanning and her stance. Whereas the young man in Wanderer has one foot ahead of the other, approaching the cliff, and is dressed as of high society, Tanning stands still and is dwarfed by the nature that surrounds her. She is not poised to jump, but to contemplate. For surrealist women as with women mystics, the body was seen as inferior to the soul, yet was attributed to women as their source for inspiration. Physicality created a tension between the role of woman as speculum, or mirror, and the fear that “behind the elaborate productions that stage the feminine as Other there lies only emptiness” (Chadwick 29). The emptiness of Self-Portrait is indicative of this fear, her body faces the openness of the landscape as if to express that that landscape is what exists inside. To stand on this cliff is to recognize and struggle to understand and accept what being a woman means, and to question whether there is anything beyond access to an/other.
Tanning’s works vary in color, but almost all contain the female form twisted, distorted, and recognizable only in fleshy tones and feminine shape. One of her prints, *Premier Péril* from *Les 7 périles spectraux* (1950) shows a feminine form, face covered by long, flowing hair, body shadowed by a long and paper-like gown (see figure 8). She enters a book with a candle, lit, and the candle creates shadows across the first open page. Though her arm is through the cover of the book, which is shaped and depicted as a wooden door, her body remains outside. The image articulates the desire to access the knowledge and light of an/other, as well as the way in which the feminine form prevents this attainment. Women saw Surrealism as a way in which to escape the “inhibiting confines of middle-class marriage, domesticity, and motherhood” (Chadwick 5). These confines are also, however, the things which made women of the time period desirable and seen by society. Surrealism provided a door for escape, yet within the field women were still restricted by their femininity. Her hand, appearing as a shadow holding the light, gives the impression that she is able to achieve and access this knowledge. And the page is open and visible to the viewers of the print. However, the woman is blocked from view. This is what it means to be a vessel for an/other, a trumpet. Woman can access an/other, elucidate an/other, but are not to interpret it on their own. Certainly, Tanning struggled to grapple with the “specularization of the body in Western representation” (Chadwick 30). The print is swamped in blue, and the woman’s hair, an important piece in identifying her as female, the unattainable sheet of knowledge, and the far off horizon
are the only elements that remain white. Woman is the blank page, a horizon of inspiration, but she is not able to interpret an/other.

*Sequestrians* (1983) is a piece that exemplifies Tanning’s use of distortion in her paintings in a way that portrays erotic violence (see figure 9). It is a wonderful parallel to her poem, “Sequestrienne,” published in 2002, which is used as the epitaph to this chapter. In the poem, Tanning asks: “who am I but a sobriquet, a teeth-grinder, grinder of color, and vanishing point?” (Tanning “Sequestrienne”). The painting *Sequestrians* contains a spectral image in the distance, a sort of face made of two ghostly eyes, so vague it appears to be perhaps nothing at all. There are a few definitions to attempt to make sense of the connection between this painting and this poem. “Sequestrians” could be a reference to the word “sequestration,” which means to forcibly take possession of something. “Sequestrienne” could also be a reference to this same word, or to the words “sequester” and “equestrienne,” the former which means to hide oneself away and the latter which refers to a female horseback rider. Analyzing the painting *Sequestrians* in terms of sequestration gives the painting power. Tanning is taking back the image of the female body, distorting it under her own terms. However, by connecting the poem and the painting, we find the image of a woman who is hiding behind her femininity.

The poem becomes a wish to be completely in control of her own consciousness. She remembers a time “of middle distance, unforgettable, a sort of lace-cut flame-green filament to ravish my skintight eyes” (Tanning “Sequestrienne”). This is evocative of the eggshell and flesh of the painting, the bright and warm green that holds the feminine
figures as if on a cloud. Tanning, in an interview towards the end of her life, notes the obsession with society in which “everything [women] do which is inexplicable must be reduced to sexuality” (McCormick 37). This reduction is performed on both their works and their bodies. Tanning reflects on the reductions performed on her for being “pretty.” She tells girls who are born pretty: “if creativity stirs within you… be prepared for a large dose of frustration, both from within and without… and then ask yourself if you will ever know what you really are” (Tanning, *Between Lives* 279). This inability to know oneself is the “broken glass” of “Sequestrienne” and the distorted figures of *Sequestrians*. She looks onward, as a ghost at the vanishing point, at those woman figures that are now undefined by their femininity. Fragmentation comes for the women surrealist out of the internalized “refusal of bodily and psychic fixity” (Chadwick 14). Women are rendered useless (other than for sex) in their physicality yet expected to have access to some deeper, unknowable an/other. Tanning looks on at bent, expanded, feminine forms relaxing. One form looks directly at the viewer, perhaps taunting, or perhaps as an expression of the taking back, the sequestration of the feminine form. The poem “Sequestrienne” is a reference to being tethered to her female body, she is “bound, unquiet, a shade of blue in the studio,” much like the blue woman from *Premier Péril*.

Tanning’s art reflects this constant struggle to desire access to an/other while existing within the female body. Her sculptures are means to subvert the common interpretations of women based on their physicality, however, the violence of these sculptures also hints at an internal struggle between what it means to be a woman and
what it means to have access to an/other. Her dive into sculpting was inspired by the disconcerting, and highly influential electronica musical piece Hymnen in 1968. While listening to the piece, Tanning envisioned the fleshy forms that would come to exist as “fugacious they would be, and fragile, to please me, their creator and survivor” (Tanning, Bailly, Morgan 301). The sculptures were to be the physical embodiments of the figures in her paintings. While Tanning created many of these sculptures, Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202 (Poppy Hotel, Room 202) (1970-1973) is the largest ensemble, a showcase of five sculptures that emerge from the walls and furniture of a hotel room. The décor is scant, noticeably missing a bed, and the room is lit by a single strung lightbulb. The room, on its own, is jarring. It feels as though you’ve opened a door that was meant to remain closed. The fleshiness of the figures, and the way they are strewn about, emerging, is the most disconcerting. The forms can be seen as a representation of the expectations of a woman surrealist, in form, and the desire to escape these expectations. The figures are headless, not conscious. While some, those emerging from the walls, have human shape and skin tone, the figures that are grounded contain no human identifiers other than fleshiness and a vague semblance to limbs.

The grounded figures represent the woman who has submitted herself to her physicality; she has become part of the domestic sphere that she is predestined to exist within. There is a melding of woman with job, form with function. The sculptures themselves are made by feminine means; they are made by hand with a sewing machine. Bellmer’s Dolls were created using hard materials, like wood and plaster (see figure 10).
His forms were also far more perverse and exploitative—they were often photographed with “little white socks and the black patent leather shoes of young girls” (Bottinelli). His were representations of erotic violence from the male surrealist perspective: exploitative, traumatic, to inspire and scare using the female body. Tanning’s figures may reproduce Bellmer’s fragmented form, but they do so from the female perspective. They represent the hopelessness, lack of authority, lack of voice, to express the struggle of existing in a female body, using a female body. The figures on the ground are less human than furniture, as they are the woman who has lost her ability to interpret an/other and has become only a woman in physicality. By existing solely as that prescribed physicality, she has given herself over to what men see her as.

The forms on the wall are still more human, in color and in shape. They appear to be attempting to leave or are just entering the domestic sphere. The exiting form is being embraced by another fleshy form in a way that denotes an erotic violence. The entering form is rounded in either feminine curves or a curved, pregnant stomach. These represent the female image as “a juggling of incompatible roles, a balancing act, a series of performances” that leave women fragmented and struggling to find inner authority (Chadwick 12). While physicality grants a woman access to the surrealist world, as in the femme enfant, it leaves her with limited mental authority. By using her physicality as a means to amplify an/other, she loses her consciousness, and thus, her head. The wall figures are elevated, perhaps to express that they are closer to their own sense of self, which is light. They are also rupturing the walls of the hotel room, as surrealist women
attempted to rupture the phallogocentrism of the Surrealist movement. This was often in vain, as a majority of the women either renounced Surrealism or were relegated to the status of muse. The exiting wall figure is entangled with another form; but this should not render it inhuman. It is through objectification, and in existing solely as a trumpet for an/other that women are reduced to furniture, fleshy, unidentifiable objects of domesticity. In *Hôtel du Pavot, Chambre 202*, Tanning depicts the struggle to maintain consciousness in a movement where women were relegated to their physicality. The figures that float above and drift in and out of the room represent that woman who is attempting to utilize the semiotic yet is still constrained by the world of the semiotic. Like Carrington, Tanning is attempting to rupture the standard symbolic contract but this thetic break is hindered by her status as woman within a patriarchal field. The semiotic is ignored or otherwise negated because of her femininity. By using the feminine form, she is diving deeper into this physicality, but the final product is one that offers critique and personal struggle rather than mere sexuality.

Tanning’s art represents the struggle to assume authority that existed for the women of the Surrealist movement. The Woman of the Surrealist movement, as expressed from the male perspective, was to be “so shot and painted, so stressed and dismembered, punctured and severed… almost always unarmed, except with poetry and passion” (Caws 53). The women of the movement had to work actively from within this sphere of influence, where their bodies were their purpose, without succumbing to the mentality of objectification. Tanning represented this within her works using the violence
of distortion against female forms and bodies. She depicted the struggle that women artists faced in being “marginalized and effective, excluded yet present” in life and in the politics of a philosophical and artistic movement (Chadwick 6). The body, a means of reaching an/other, was also a means of inferiority. Tanning epitomizes the struggle in being legitimized and reduced for the same works of art—where she is expressing an/other she is sexualized, and where she is sexualized she is referred to as muse.
Chapter 3

A Feminine Symbology: Use of the Semiotic to Subvert the Symbolic

Introduction

The struggle between the female form and devotion to an/other is the physical embodiment of the struggle to overhaul the symbolic utilizing the semiotic. Women relied on a feminine symbology to attempt to subvert the symbolic contract of their fields, but it was their habitus as women, and their position as mediators, that denied their work any subversive power. Does lack of recognition lead to madness? What does control over the semiotic mean if its expression does not lead to change in the symbolic?

The women surrealists and women mystics relied heavily on the symbolic to create; they used field-specific words and concepts to better express their ideas within the framework of their fields. The use of this system of symbols is what allows them to be designated under their titles, surrealist and mystic. Language, however, and its uses within a specific field, does not come without the burden of meaning. Bourdieu notes that “their relationship to the manipulation of symbols in language, which is inseparable from their relations to power, is different according to their gender, according to the body they bring to the encounter, socially constructed as that body is” (qtd. in Kintz 91). Women within both fields are subjected to the symbolic references that are associated with language, and thus with each symbol. For Hildegard of Bingen to describe the church as a woman “balanced on her womb in front of the altar” is to rely on the field-specific
relations between church and femininity, rebirth and Christ, and to Mary of Magdalene (see figure 11, Hildegard, *Scivias* 169). Though it is easy to dismiss visions to one symbolic meaning, that of the patriarchal religious sect, this dismissal denies the works of women mystics and surrealists of the semiotic potential in their writings. A symbolic reading makes Hildegard’s analogy quite simple; the church is feminine so it may birth new churchgoers, and care for them as by a mother. By recognizing the semiotic within Hildegard’s work, as with the women surrealists, the task becomes to pull apart the varying meanings and polysemic root of her visions and writings to discern more than just the what of her writings. The church, balanced on her womb, may be a way for Hildegard to explore the tension between the importance of chastity as well as the innate, human desire for children. What is the difference between Hildegard raising her nuns and a woman raising her children in the light of God? The world of the semiotic, which is behind language, may hold a deeper, feminine truth.

For Kristeva, a connection too strong to the semiotic, which was pre-castration and thus related only to the mother, could lead to mania and melancholy. For women surrealists and mystics, madness and depression were desired as ways to get closer to an/other. There is an endless loop here: in creating art, women utilize the semiotic, but becoming too ingrained in the semiotic brings one to a point of pre-castration, which can lead to madness and depression. This madness and depression is read by men as a particularly desired trait in muses, and their works are then read according to the established symbolic order. Feminine symbols equal madness equal muse. This is the
eternity of a woman artist, whose poetic language is meant to subvert the common symbolic order of their field and instead contributes to it. The use of an extensive female symbology, in eggs, wombs, fallopian tubes, both expresses a semiotic meaning and reinforces the established symbolic order. This is why, though an/other was their tool for success and authority, women mystics and surrealists were often unable to affect change within their fields.

**Hildegard and the Ordo Virtutum: Subversion is a Dish Best Served Cold**

Kristeva notes that music is one of the “nonverbal signifying systems that are constructed exclusively on the basis of the semiotic,” and it is important to note the role that music played in the works of women surrealists and mystics. Rhythm could be utilized as a source of inspiration, a means to propel a narrative, or as a way to better express visions from an/other. Tanning was inspired to create her sculptures by music, Carrington utilized song and poem to shape the narrative of *The Hearing Trumpet*, and Mechthild wrote lines in rhyming verse. Hildegard of Bingen was particularly attuned to the semiotic in music, as she composed many songs based on the music heard in her visions. Hildegard composed the *Ordo Virtutum*, a morality play which was highly unusual for its time (Dronke 147). The play follows the plight of a soul, or Anima, who is tempted away by the Devil, but later returns to the Virtues and is protected by them against the Devil, who tries once more to draw her away. The framework of the play would be unusual as part of religious ceremony, in particular the structure which contains
simply virtues, a soul, and the devil rather than any biblical characters. Hildegard may have performed this play for visitors at the convent, though this has been the subject of great debate. Scholar Peter Dronke, one of the first to study and translate the *Ordo* extensively, questions this debate, as he does not “know of any other medieval play which survives with its complete music where scholars have doubted that the play was performed” (Dronke 155). This debate fits clearly into the narrative of women as *reproducers* rather than producers. To analyze Hildegard’s musical compositions to be entirely original, and to be effectively performed, would be against the established expectations of women.

Hildegard utilizes religious symbols within the play paired with a musical structure to create a semiotic piece which subverts the expected religious narrative. As always, Hildegard used the authority of her connection to an/other to gain permission to produce such a work. The nuns of Mount St. Rupert were primarily rich, young women who were dressed in expensive robes and often wore their hair down and unbound. This is seen best in a letter received by Hildegard from Mistress Tengswich, who talks of the “strange and irregular practices” of her “virgins stand[ing] in the church with unbound hair… from noble, well-established families” (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 25). In performances of *Ordo*, it is presumed that her nuns would be dressed in this attire, with the “highly-wrought diadems” that Hildegard decided were an appropriate display of chastity (Lightbourne 50). She claims, in a letter to Guibert of Gembloux that “all the ranks of the Church have bright emblems in accord with the heavenly brightness, yet
virginity has no bright emblem—nothing but a black veil and an image of the cross. So I saw that this would be the image of virginity…a white veil… a circlet with three colours conjoined into one… and four roundels attached” ” (Lightbourne 50). It is impossible to understand or interpret the play without this background of defiance; Hildegard, though a beacon of religious deference, was also a symbol of feminine, churchly indulgence.

Hildegard chooses Humility to be the queen of virtues, a rather unusual choice given the time period. Humility as a virtue of high esteem was not particularly popular until the late Middle Ages. For example, depictions of the Madonna of Humility, where Madonna sits on the ground cradling a baby Jesus, did not become popular until the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century (Meiss 435). Hildegard makes reference to the Virgin Mary specifically when the Virtues, singing, refer to Humility as their “glorious queen, gentlest mediatrix,” a word which in the church refers to Mary’s status as mediator in Jesus Christ’s redemption (Dronke 165). The use of the term mediatrix subverts its standard symbolic meaning and, within the semiotic context of her convent, gives it one of authority. Hildegard is here glorifying her own power as mediator and trumpet of an/other by relating it to the power of Mary. The influence of this designation of power to mediator was expansive; beyond her initial portrayal of Humility as the queen of the Virtues, the genre of Humility and Madonna of Humility grew and expanded. However, her subversive influence was lost; although her portrayal was an amplification of authority for women, the trope of humility became an opportunity to glorify Mary’s maternity, and furthermore reverence for Mary diminished rapidly in the
early Modern period and beyond (perhaps in part due to the increasing inferiority of maternity and femininity in western society).

Though Hildegard may only be glorifying her abilities as a trumpet for an/other, the Devil’s role in the play heeds another interpretation. Hildegard the sinner, as seen through the eyes of contemporaries like Mistress Tengswich, was accused perhaps most often of pride in her desire for a separate convent (Mount St. Rupert), affluent nuns, connections within in the church, and ability to travel with ease. She muses on these accusations and perhaps on her own potential for sin most notably in her letter to Elisabeth of Schonau, a contemporary woman mystic. She warns Elisabeth that the Devil tempts many women like themselves “with the many afflictions which distress a blazing mind longing to soar above the clouds, as if they were gods, just as he himself once did” (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 104). Hildegard is open with Elisabeth, letting her know her own inner thoughts, when she may “cower in the puniness of [her] mind, and [is] greatly wearied by anxiety and fear” (Hildegard, "Correspondence" 105). Hildegard reminds Elisabeth to be a “mirror of life,” and this reminder is as much for herself to remember and avoid falling into the sin of pride. In Ordo Virtutum, the Devil acts on the Soul’s weakness in pride, telling her to “look to the world: it will embrace you with great honor” (Dronke 165). It is interesting to note that both Hildegard’s letter to Elisabeth and the Ordo Virtutum were written after the passing of Hildegard’s closest friend, Richardis von Stade. Hildegard was heartbroken after Richardis left Mount St. Rupert due to what she believed was a web of religious politics, and wrote letters to anyone she could to get
Richardis back. Richardis’ death was a final, devastating loss. It has been hinted at by scholars that perhaps Hildegard was influenced by this loss, though the timeline of experiences, and as to when she may have performed the *Ordo*, is hazy (Potter 206). To base an understanding of Hildegard’s struggle between humility and pride on her relationship with Richardis alone negates her lifetime of experiences toeing the brink of pride. *Ordo Virtutum* is an exemplification of that struggle which Hildegard seldom makes known. The use of virtues, the devil, and a lost soul gives Hildegard a venue to explore the semiotic from within the symbolic; she can use her vernacular of religious symbols to better understand her own emotions.

In a semiotic reading, the *Ordo* becomes a shield against pride, much like how the Virtues come together to protect the returned and penitent Soul as “redemption’s shield. All of you, warriors of Queen Humility” (Mechthild, *Ordo* 175). In seeking to avoid pride, Hildegard can assert the power of humility, which explains this virtue’s prominence. Dronke suggests that the play may have been performed on the day of the consecration of the Mount St. Rupert convent, the move to which was renounced by the monks of Mount St. Disibod fervently. This disapproval certainly did not come without admonitions (whether public or private) of pride and greed. The performance of this play would be both a portrayal of her own humility, an admission of the soul’s ability to fall into sin, and a shield against further pride. The Queen of Humility is treated in a similar manner to Hildegard. She is in charge of the virtues, clearly, as Hildegard was in charge of the other nuns. Upon a fresh encounter with the Devil, the reformed Soul asks of
Humility: “come with your medicine, give me aid!” (Mechthild, Ordo 177). Hildegard was known for her healing abilities and extensive knowledge of herbs. Earlier in the play, the Devil taunts Humility, telling her that there is nothing she can give her followers. Humility reminds the Devil of his place, after which the Virtues tell him: “as for us, we dwell in the heights” (Mechthild, Ordo 165). If the play is in defense against the monks at Mount Disibod, perhaps this reminder of who is in “the heights” (referring metaphorically to a local mountain recently moved to?) acts to explain who the Devil really is. Humility gives the final battle cry to bind the Devil, which leads to the finale of the play where the Virtues implore the crowd to “bend your knees to the Father, that he may reach you his hand,” as Christ is weary that “all [His] limbs are exposed to mockery” (Mechthild, Ordo 181). Hildegard had previously warned the monks that it was God’s will which compelled her to create her own convent. Ordo Virtutum acts as both an authoritative and spiritual shield against pride.

Within the play, the virtues use religious symbols that follow the Great Mother archetype as described by scholar Erich Neumann. This archetypal theory supplements the Jungian psychology of the Mother Goddess archetype, which influenced Kristeva’s work on the semiotic. Kristeva notes that denying the symbolic world altogether, as some feminists might, could lead to hysteria and depression, as this would realign women with the all powerful mother as in the world before castration (Kristeva, “Women’s Time”). There are two stages that Kristeva describes in the development of the subject, and these are the mirror stage and castration, the former of which is unimportant in this case. At the
beginning, the mother is everything, and so, as the center, she is the phallus. The process of castration detaches the mother from the phallus and “transforms semiotic motility onto the symbolic order” (Kristeva, Revolution 47). A denial of castration consumes the world in the semiotic, and does so associatively in the world of the great mother archetype. Jung similarly describes the mother-complex, in which a woman is consumed by the feminine. The struggle between the Soul and the Devil encapsulates a bit of this complex, and utilizes the symbols of the Great Mother archetype.

The Soul, though at first happy, begins to lament to the Virtues: “it is too grievous for me to fight against my body” (Mechthild, Ordo 163). She is overwhelmed by her female form, and though the Virtues try to save her she desires only to “cast off” the dress of maidenhood assigned to a religious woman (Mechthild, Ordo 163). On a symbolic level, this is Hildegard depicting a young maiden who is struggling with pride and lust. The Soul’s struggle with the Devil, however, can also represent a struggle with the mother-complex, which is so closely linked to a pre-castration state. The Soul tells the Virtues that she is doing God no injury by simply enjoying the world as He created it. The Virtues mourn for her innocence, implying the things she may do with the Devil, who offers her the world. A woman with a mother-complex is one whose “only goal is childbirth… Even her own personality is of secondary importance” (Jung 167). Personality is forgotten by this woman, much like how the Soul forgets and neglects her Virtues for the Devil. When the Devil returns to the play to reclaim the Soul, who has found her light again, he verbally spars with Chastity by reminding her that her “belly is
devoid of the beautiful form that woman receives from man: in this [she] transgresses the command that God enjoined in the sweet act of love” (Mechthild, *Ordo* 179). The Devil, in representing the negatives of the Great Mother archetype, chooses to draw attention to the immaculate conception of Mary. This furthers the idea that the Soul is fighting against a mother-complex and that draw towards motherhood and childbirth which negates all of the other qualities of a woman. The Devil connects feminine to vessel, which is to Neumann the “most elementary experience of the Feminine” (Neumann 39). By rejecting the Devil, Hildegard rejects the Great Mother archetype as well as the mother-complex.

*Ordo Virtutum* is much more than simply a “cloister drama, rooted in its own splendid isolation from the snares of the world” (Potter 206). The drama that unfolds is rooted in the symbolic world of religion and subverted by Hildegard’s use of the semiotic. The polyphony of the Virtues create a chora that is broken by the “grating and dissonant nature” of the Devil’s speech, though this intermingling of the semiotic singing and the symbolic spoken word of the Devil allows for subversion to take place (Lightbourne 49-50). Hildegard roots her play in the traditions of her religion, establishing what’s been considered an ancestor of all English morality plays (Potter). However, her production of the play, as well as her use of the symbolic subverts tradition. The subversive presentation of her nuns in this play, which was performed at the induction of her controversial new convent, while utilizing the traditional religious context, is a fascinating application of authority to the semiotic. Similarly, Hildegard
contradicts the phallogocentrism of the mother-complex with her polyphony of Virtues; their use of music is semiotic and their grasp on the Soul indicates a relinquishing from the patriarchal grasps of society.

**Flipping the “Trumpet” Inside Out: Subversion in Carrington’s *The Hearing***

*Trumpet*

Just like Hildegard of Bingen, Leonora Carrington tactfully intersperses her works with the semiotic. Like many of the women surrealists, her works bear qualities that are at times mythological, sexual, and violent. Carrington has perhaps the best grasp on the narrative form out of the women surrealists; her pieces are quixotic, fairytale-like, and hold the most renown today. The humor within her pieces can be deflective or subversive. Women surrealists often utilized “irony, humor, and confrontation to problematize their position within Surrealism” (Chadwick 11). Kristeva notes that women are just beginning to come to terms with the “implacable violence” of the symbolic contract, like that of the patriarchal Surrealist movement (Kristeva, “Women’s Time” 28). This impels a split: women are “compelled either to submit to the public language of patriarchy or to invent private languages that kept them marginalized by asserting the uniqueness of their femininity” (Chadwick 11). Carrington places one foot in each path, choosing to utilize the invented, private language of female surrealists to subvert the public language of the Surrealist movement. She utilizes religious symbols to
curate her own feminine symbology, relying on the reader’s faculties of transposition that allow for jumping from one signifying system to another, and allow for polysemy, or the multiplicity of meaning associated with the semiotic (Kristeva, Revolution 60). Whereas Hildegard’s Ordo Virtutum is semiotic in form and performance, Carrington’s works, in particular her novel The Hearing Trumpet, are semiotic in composition and construction.

Carrington’s personal history makes religious symbology a fertile field for subversion. Though she never outright rejects any religion, she has said of the patriarchal nature of religion: “You look down one day to see that they have bounded your feet” (qtd. in Byatt xii). Carrington was brought up Catholic, as was Remedios Varo, her long term friend who was also a surrealist artist and who rejected Catholicism (Byatt xi). Carrington was also influenced by male-oriented mythologies like that of King Arthur's search for the Holy Grail. She leaves a trail of breadcrumbs in her writings to hint at the stories and people that influenced her. For instance, the postman who ultimately delivers the main character, Marian, details of the Holy Grail in The Hearing Trumpet is named Taliesin, which is the name of a Welsh bard who is believed to have been a companion of King Arthur. In one legend, a servant boy Gwion helps a witch named Ceridwen to stir a cauldron for a year and a day. When he accidentally ingests some of the potion, he gains immense knowledge and attempts to flee in fear of punishment by the witch. The witch chases Gwion, turns him into a grain of corn, and then eats him. Ceridwen finds herself pregnant after eating the boy. After he is born, she throws him into the ocean in a leather bag. When he is discovered, he is renamed Taliesin and becomes the greatest bard in
Britain (“The Life of Taliesin the Bard”). This story is winked at within The Hearing Trumpet in Marian’s transformation at the end of the book. Carrington twists traditionally patriarchal narratives to ones where the female characters may “belong to an earlier matriarchal version associated with fertility rights” (Byatt xv). Her story becomes a palimpsest of matriarchal myths over patriarchal myths over the matriarchal chora that ebbs and flows beneath the symbolic.

The Hearing Trumpet combines an extraordinary number of plotlines into one whimsical story about a 92-year-old woman named Marian Leatherby, who is shipped away by her family to the “Well of Light Brotherhood” institution (Carrington, Trumpet 16). Here, she meets a cast of old woman and the despot in charge, Dr. Gambit. Marian is introduced to the tale of a heretical saint, Doña Rosalinda della Cueva, Abbess of the Convent of Santa Barbara of Tartarus, as well as to the Queen Bee who is to rule the world once again after the poles shift and the Holy Grail is returned to her from the clutches of “worshippers of the Revengeful Father God,” more commonly known as Catholics (Carrington, Trumpet 184). One symbol most notable within the story is Marian’s hearing trumpet, gifted to her by her best friend Carmella who has psychic powers. The hearing trumpet she is gifted portrays Carrington’s ability to weave the semiotic into longstanding religious symbols. Women’s role in patriarchal fields is explained best through this idea of the “trumpet.” Women are to be trumpets of an/other, as with the women mystics and women surrealists, and they are reproducers, not producers. Kristeva speaks of women’s time, wherein the female subjectivity “essentially
retains repetition and eternity from among the multiple modalities of time” (Kristeva, “Women’s Time” 16). Women may reproduce what men have made, but not create on their own. The hearing trumpet that Marian is gifted allows her to hear, to retain, and not to act as a mouthpiece. A hearing trumpet performs, in essence, the exact function that opposes what was expected of women surrealists and mystics.

Carrington also discusses the use of visions towards gaining authority and what happens when a woman conforms to the symbolic contract of an exclusionary field. Natacha, one of the other women in the institution, sees “visions,” which the other women deem to be crock but which Dr. Gambit respects highly. This encompasses both the mother-complex as well as the depression and mania that accompanies a submission to an exclusionary symbolic, as in Hildegard’s Ordo Virtutum. Carmella, Marian’s best friend, determines her own life path and is gifted with true psychic visions.

Though she never makes a physical appearance, the Abbess Doña Rosalinda della Cueva makes a lasting impact on the story’s subversive content. Something unstated yet noticeable, and certainly worth discussing, is the Abbess’s distinct parallels to Hildegard of Bingen. Both women run their own convent, run things their own way, explore without restraint, and fulfill roles typically unattainable for religious women. Just as Carrington borrows from the tales of male mythologies, she utilizes Hildegard of Bingen’s life to add another layer of subversion.

These components make The Hearing Trumpet a story certain to be volatile, however, the impact of her story is weakened by its semiotic content, and its inability to
reach the symbolic field it aspires to subvert. Just as Hildegard negated her own subversiveness by performing her play within the confines of her church and within an expected feminine context, Carrington softened the blow of her tale by writing it in her standard, fairytale form. The expectations associated with this feminine writing form eliminated the ability for *The Hearing Trumpet* to generate any change in the symbolic. This is perhaps why she published it so long after its creation. The text was circulated “underground,” lost, published in French, and then finally published in English in 1976 (Byatt viii). This buffer in time acts as a tool to assist the thetic break created by the semiotic in her work. The changes in language remind me of the way in which Mechthild wrote her text in her vernacular German, despite Latin being the standard language for religious texts. Carrington must then express her ideas ascribing to the symbolic contract of each language, and account for the way in which her word choice might affect her story’s subversiveness. Language allows for a manipulation of the field’s symbolic contract, as each version of the story then affects the field through different language-associated polysemy.

The first time Marian puts the hearing trumpet to her ear, she is assisted by her best friend Carmella. She asks: “Can you hear me, Marian?” to which Marian thinks: “Indeed I could, it was terrifying” (Carrington, *Trumpet* 7). This is Marian’s first exposure to the semiotic. Kristeva describes this moment of language acquisition, and to how men and women must “demystify the identity of the symbolic bond itself, to demystify, therefore the *community* of language as a universal and unifying tool” (qtd. in
Kintz 92). The hearing trumpet becomes a tool for demystifying. Marian may now hear and fully understand what others are saying about her. Her hearing trumpet allows her to “bring out the relativity of her symbolic as well as biological existence, according to the variation in her specific symbolic capacities” (Kintz 92). Kristeva describes this demystification as a tool against misinterpreting language as a whole, as men and women approach language differently. Carmella warns Marian to keep her trumpet a secret as someone might take it away if “they don’t want [her] to hear what they are saying” (Carrington, Trumpet 8). As a tool for discovering the semiotic and for better understanding the differences in the sociosymbolic contract, it comes as no surprise that Carmella would need to warn Marian of the trumpet’s dangers. The upheaval of a societal contract is always bloody. Marian uses the trumpet most often to spy. It is interesting to note that when she speaks with her friends she most often does not need the trumpet, as they speak loud enough for her to hear. She calls herself at times “armed” with her hearing trumpet, and she even begins to carry it “hung on a cord, Robin Hood style” (Carrington, Trumpet 89, 161). Marian’s ability to hear, and to hear only for herself, becomes a weapon against the dominant discourse. It is due to eavesdropping with her trumpet that Marian is able to discover a murder within the institution, is able to revolt against Dr. Gambit, and is able to uncover her access to the semiotic.

Marian entices the other women, besides Natacha and Van Tocht (who they are revolting against) to hold a hunger strike. The denial of food is a move not unlike the women mystics and their fastings on the eucharist. They assemble at the bee pond, where
they begin to chant for the Queen Bee. Marian notices bees buzzing late at night over the water of the fountain. She hears this “in some dormant part of [her] consciousness,” but then begins to wonder if “it were not some acoustic peculiarity produced by [her] hearing trumpet” (Carrington, *Trumpet* 146). The return of the Queen Bee to power at the end of the novel assures us the reality of the sounds she hears through her trumpet. Marian, through her hearing trumpet, is able to regain her ability to access and harness the semiotic. The symbolic world that surrounds her is no longer the only world in existence. The strange, mythical happenings that tumble forth from the end of the novel represent this shift from a wholey symbolic world to one that utilizes the semiotic. Musical chanting is a way in which the women harness the semiotic.

Kristeva calls the semiotic “that which also destroys the symbolic” (Kristeva, *Revolution* 50). Returning the semiotic to the symbolic world is to create a “second-degree thetic,” which is the phase that separates a subject’s image from its’ selfhood (Kristeva, *Revolution* 50). A second thetic would re-rupture the symbol in order to create a new joining, or contract based upon a polysemy. The world within *The Hearing Trumpet* is destroyed by the semiotic. There is a new ice age, and the Queen Bee returns to power. Jung discusses how the Logos “eternally struggles to extricate itself from the primal warmth and primal darkness of the maternal womb; in a word, from unconscious” (Jung 178). If this is the case, Marian’s journey through the novel, with her hearing trumpet, represents a return to the warmth and darkness of the maternal unconscious. She is tasked with choosing, at the climax of the novel, between walking up towards the sky
or down below, and she chooses to follow “the warm wind that blew from within the earth” (Carrington, *Trumpet* 171). Down below, she finds herself stirring a big iron cauldron. “This is Hell,” she says, “but Hell is merely a form of terminology. Really this is the Womb of the World whence all things come” (Carrington, *Trumpet* 172). This is the final breakdown between the symbolic world and the semiotic world. Kristeva mentions that a submersion in the semiotic, or a return to a pre-castration state may lead to mania or depression, and Carrington represents this when Marian must boil and eat herself in that iron cauldron. Marian wonders “from a speculative point of view… which of us [she] was” (Carrington, *Trumpet* 176). The use of the term “speculative” here is unnecessary; one may wonder if Carrington wished to use it on purpose as a connection to the term *speculum*. In fact, Marian then finds a piece of polished obsidian which she says she intends to use as a mirror. Then, she looks “into the mirror” and see the faces of Abbess Doña Rosalinda della Cueva, the Queen Bee, and herself (Carrington, *Trumpet* 176). The function of woman is no longer *speculum*; just as the trumpet was inverted to be for woman, the mirror becomes a tool rather than function. After returning from this underworld, Marian no longer needs the trumpet to hear, as she has “developed a premonition of sound which [she] could translate afterwards through the trumpet” (Carrington, *Trumpet* 187). With the rise of the semiotic world, the world of the *chora*, Marian can hear beyond the symbolic without her trumpet.

Natacha and Mrs. Van Tocht, two of the other old ladies in the institution, represent the first of two problems Kristeva notes that come with the revolt against the
oppressive sociosymbolic contract. This problem arises from the question: “What happens when women come into power and identify with it?” (Kristeva, “Women’s Time” 26). These women who are given power within the system, and enjoy it, further a move toward “leveling, stabilizing, conformism, at the cost of crushing exceptions, experiments, chance occurrences” (Kristeva, “Women’s Time” 27). Mrs. Van Tocht and Natacha believe in and follow Dr. Gambit’s religious views. Mrs. Van Tocht calls Natacha “the Pure Vessel through which unseen powers are made manifest” (Carrington, Trumpet 50). She then chastises Marian for being too prideful, to which Marian responds by talking about herself even more. Mrs. Van Tocht and Natacha’s allegiance with Dr. and Mrs. Gambit’s makes them “possessed” agents of the violence of the sociosymbolic contract: as they are unable to decide anything for themselves, they becomes a part of the contract to “combat what was experienced as frustration” (Kristeva, “Women’s Time” 28). For their adherence to Dr. Gambit’s rules (and for the money donated by their families) Mrs. Van Tocht and Natacha are able to take cooking classes. It is there in the kitchen that they are able to poison Maude, another resident at the Institute. Dr. Gambit’s teachings value a mastery over vice and habit, as well as a control of emotions. Jung discusses the way in which a mother-complex may impel an “unconscious will to power” that grows greater and more violent the less a woman is aware of her own personality (Jung 167). Natacha and Mrs. Van Tocht move closer to violence the longer they are under Dr. Gambit’s rule. Natacha at one point gives Dr. Gambit a “Message from the Great Beyond which was bestowed by a tall bearded man… ‘Tell Georgina Sykes that if
she goes on spreading vicious gossip… her ever-decreasing chances of Salvation will be petrified forever’’ (Carrington, *Trumpet* 63). Georgina Sykes is not at all drawn to the power promised by conformity to the sociosymbolic system of a field that values women as trumpets. She tells Marian: “Natacha Gonzalez stinks… she invents cosy chats with saints as tall as telephone poles. It all comes to the same thing, power and more power. It is a jolly good thing for humanity that she is shut up in a home for senile females” (Carrington, *Trumpet* 81).

Carrington uses the character of the Abbess Doña Rosalinda della Cueva as a figure of subversion. The inclusion of such a character is unnecessary without an understanding of the context of another famous disruptive Saint, Hildegard of Bingen. The story of the Abbess takes up a large chunk of the book and her presence, as a “nun with a very strange and malicious face” gives the story it’s most sacrilegious and subversive edge (Carrington, *Trumpet* 36). Carrington utilizes tropes of the medieval women mystics; Abbess della Cueva is represented to be somewhat agender, just as the women writers “either ignored their own sex, using mixed-gender imagery for the self… or embraced their femaleness as a sign of closeness to Christ” (Bynum 147). Whereas the male was definable, “the female was a less marked category; it was more often simply a symbol of an almost genderless self” (Bynum 175). Carrington takes this to the extreme with the Abbess, who cross dresses to travel but also embraces her own sexuality. Her story of coming to power is similar to that of Hildegard’s—she attends to the old abbess’s death alone and comes out immediately after as the new abbess, just as Hildegard did
with her mentor, Jutta. Rosalinda has “extensive knowledge of herbs” like Hildegard, supervises the nuns in questionable religious rituals, and holds a library of rare and “often wicked” books, to which one might recall Hildegard’s writings on the female orgasm (Carrington, *Trumpet* 98). Rosalinda performs rituals using the “Musc de Madelaine,” which is a powerful aphrodisiac “said to have been excavated in Nineveh and found beside the mummy of Mary Magdalen” (Carrington, *Trumpet* 99). When consumed, “she would turn a luminous blue and levitate over the altar while the nuns swooned with the overpowering vapours” (Carrington, *Trumpet* 100). This description is another pulled from the time of the medieval mystics; Bynum discusses how “watching sisters sometimes saw the bodies of mystical women elongate or levitate and swoon in ecstatic trances” (Bynum 191).

Carrington’s use of a Hildegard-like figure as one member of the matriarchal holy trinity (composed of the Queen Bee, the Abbess of Santa Barbara de Tartarus, and the women themselves) is fascinating and subversive. Her inclusion requires the reader to have a full grasp on polysemy; one must know of Hildegard and also know her own subversive history. The story of the Abbess becomes a reproduction, but a reproduction within the context of the semiotic. If “consciousness can only exist through continual recognition of the unconscious,” Carrington is forcing consciousness on the reader by requiring a heavy understanding of the symbolic and semiotic meaning behind each religious symbol in her story (Jung 178). The relegation of this text to a “classic of fantastic literature” (as stated on the back of my copy of the book) furthers the idea
posited by Kristeva that “even the protest or innovative initiatives on the part of women inhaled by power systems are soon credited to the system’s account” (Kristeva, “Women’s Time” 27). Carrington sought desperately not to be considered within the Surrealist movement, but she was still working from within its power system. By using Hildegard as an archetype within her story, Carrington restricts herself both to the archetype of the Great Mother as created by Erich Neumann, and to the same system of struggle for authority that Hildegard faced. By using the symbols of their fields, they may be able to subvert standard associations by means of the semiotic, however, the expectations of women in their fields to utilize an/other, which is so closely linked to the semiotic, refutes their ability to subvert.
CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have discovered compelling connections between the women surrealists and women mystics. By comparing two groups of women from entirely different time periods, the way in which phallogocentrism affects women’s habitus, position, and ability to achieve authority within an inspiration-driven field becomes apparent. I have argued that Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Leonora Carrington, and Dorothea Tanning are united by their struggle to find both mental and physical authority as mediators of an/other, a position which denies women their consciousness. To be a mediator, of God or of the unconscious, is to reproduce the word of an/other and reinforces the idea that women cannot produce works of their own. These women all defy the rules of this position by finding ways to assert authority as interpreters despite their inferiority. This authority, however, comes at a price. By finding ways to interpret for an/other, these women risk their ability to achieve authority and risk their respectability in the field. To remain as a mediator is not without its own problems. Women who do not find the authority to interpret an/other risk losing their mental-stability and personality. This is an extension of both the depression Kristeva describes in remaining within the semiotic, and the mother-complex Jung describes when a woman is so deeply involved in her feminine side that she loses all sense of her own selfhood.

The women mystics and women surrealists utilized a variety of tactics to avoid falling on either side of this fine line, towards lost identity or lost reputation. Hildegard of Bingen used her visions as a tool to gain social authority in her correspondences. The
varying ways in which she represented her visions in these letters were a tactic for displaying her religious importance; for instance, Hildegard would reference her own inferiority as a way to lend credence to her voice and visions. She would write from the voice of God directly when her own authority was not strong enough to convince. Hildegard would also use her visions and religious writings as a means to find mental authority, to avoid becoming merely a trumpet. Her writings could be a place to muse on her own shortcomings, or could act as a shield against threats of pridefulness or sin. The *Ordo Virtutum* is a great example of the way in which Hildegard could contemplate her own struggles with mental authority and vie for social authority through the polysemy of the religious symbols found in her field, which in her hands take on new, semiotic meanings.

Post-structuralism questions binaries, such as Kristeva’s use of the symbolic and semiotic, in order to clarify how meaning is constructed by a system which utilizes a sign. For instance, the sign of a bird is affected in Surrealism by the system’s associations between Max Ernst and his bird alter ego, Loplop. An analysis of Leonora Carrington’s work, *Bird Superior, Portrait of Max Ernst* necessitates a post-structuralist approach to understand the symbolic associations between Ernst, his bird-like coat, and the Surrealist system’s patriarchal hierarchy (see figure 12). Carrington, like Hildegard, relied on the symbols of her field in order to subvert the symbolic. Her ability to subvert the surrealist field came only when she was able to remove herself from the position of mediator. Carrington in *Down Below* portrays the transformation from mentally unstable mediator,
or *femme enfant*, to interpreter of an/other. By rediscovering her own consciousness, Carrington was able to begin to subvert the symbolic associations within the surrealist system, as in her book *The Hearing Trumpet*. Despite this conscious use of the semiotic, Carrington’s texts had little effect on the patriarchal hierarchy of Surrealism. As a woman, Carrington’s connection to the semiotic would be expected and desired as a source of inspiration. Any subversion would be misinterpreted as a use of an/other, which explains Carrington’s place in popular literary history as a woman who writes zany but simple fairytale-like stories. By publishing *Down Below* and *The Hearing Trumpet* far past the end of Surrealism she offers the texts a chance to be subversive from outside the confines of the movement.

Dorothea Tanning, another member of the Surrealist movement, was further constricted by her position as wife of Max Ernst, one of the most renowned and celebrated Surrealist artists. This cemented her status as *femme enfant* and made it more difficult for Tanning to find mental authority. Tanning’s works became less clear, more abstract, as she entered and then exited the movement. They also took on qualities similar to those of male surrealists. In her paintings, Tanning manipulated the female form nearly beyond recognition, often with an underlying sensation of sexualization. This reproduction of the male surrealists’ works at first seems to submit to the idea of woman as trumpet, reproducer, but they offer viewpoint into Tanning’s struggle to find authority in the female form, despite it being the reason her position is inferior. As with the Christian women mystics, women were to use their bodies to get closer to an/other,
though their femininity was exactly what prevented them from ever gaining a complete connection with an/other. The women surrealists could use their femininity to inspire others but were not expected to inspire themselves. Tanning’s creations which utilize the feminine form highlight this tension in fragmentation. Her ability to depict this struggle for authority is what allows her to surpass the mediator position.

Mechthild of Magdeburg, a beguine in Germany, similarly faced this struggle to reconcile between the female body and her connection to an/other. Her social authority, in her ability to write religious texts, was driven by her position as a mystic, but this social authority could not translate to a closer connection to God. Mechthild relied on depictions of erotic violence, like Tanning, to represent this struggle for mental authority. This erotic violence, which is symbolically read as Mechthild’s attempts to dive deeper into her physicality to find ecstasy with God, may be read as a way for Mechthild to attempt to reconcile between her female body and her desire to be closer to God. Her struggle for religious authority is further identified in the use of her vernacular German rather than the standard Latin used in religious texts. Mechthild was able to produce her works, but only in an inferior language, as this was all she knew. She was revered for her visions amongst the other women in her community, but her inability to find mental authority made it hard for her to accept any form of support. Mechthild dove into isolation in order to feel closer to an/other, perhaps because of this struggle for authority.

In recognizing this connection between women of two entirely separate inspiration-driven fields, we can begin to understand the impact that the mediator
position has on women in any and all creative fields. This allows us to offer these women recognition for their silenced and reduced works while also offering avenues for women who still wish to work in their fields a chance to be more than interpreters. Hildegard of Bingen and Mechthild of Magdeburg stayed within the religious field, but found female-driven communities where they could exist with support and assert authority. Dorothea Tanning and Leonora Carrington left the Surrealist field and developed their artistic abilities under their own names, attempting to rupture from that patriarchal hierarchy to find new authority. We should be able to address the way in which the mediator position affects women so as to offer them an avenue within their fields to subvert, without forcing exit for authority.

An obvious example today can be found in the women who create within the hip hop field. These women are often torn apart critically for every element of their lyricism, their bodies, and their personalities. Women in hip hop are treated as mediator. They may be rapped about, used as bodies for objectification in music videos, but may not use their bodies or voices for themselves. We have very limited examples of women in hip hop, though this is beginning to grow whether because of the increased popularity of hip hop or increased presence of women rappers in mass media. The line between social acceptability and mental stability is toed constantly by these women, whose lives are broadcast both externally by gossip columns and internally by the often personal lyricism known to hip hop.
One immediately thinks of Nicki Minaj as a modern day example of a woman in hip hop. She’s known for her accessibility in popular culture and is simultaneously disregarded for it, her obsession with chart rankings left her with an unusual amount of criticism, contrary to the way in which mainstream male rappers are received (Battan). Despite her confidence, Minaj is subject to the same authoritative struggles that faced the Christian mystics and women surrealists. Her attention to appearance highlights the same need for physicality to dive deeper into her field’s culture—Minaj is known for her absurd outfits and deatable use of cosmetic surgery. Similarly, Minaj is able to display the struggle for mental authority within the hip hop field most prominently in her use of a diverse cast of “alter egos” in her rap music (“Wiki Minaj”). Her two most prominent alter egos Roman Zolanski and Harajuku Barbie play to the two extremes of this struggle, the former who is outspoken and harsh and the latter who is an airhead and speaks softly, sexually. This dichotomy is on display quite evidently in Minaj’s verse in the popular Kanye West song “Monster.” Her rap verse juxtaposes Roman against or beside Barbie. It is interesting to note that in the music video to the song, Roman is holding a pink-haired, dress-wearing Barbie hostage, while Roman is wearing a bondage-esque outfit. Roman makes direct references to her pink hair, “thick ass,” and a “ménage” between her, Kanye West, and Kanye West’s ex-lover, Amber Rose (Minaj). Despite Minaj’s outspoken feminism she struggles not to engage in the feuds typical between rappers, and her feuds are also primarily with other female artists. By holding her feminine side hostage Minaj uses eroticized violence to highlight her struggle to reconcile between her
femininity and her authority within a patriarchal field. Other women rappers in the field fall privy to similar struggles with authority like those that afflicted the women surrealists and women mystics. Cardi B, for example, who skyrocketed on the charts with her single “Bodak Yellow” is engaged to fellow rapper Offset of Migos, and her alleged pregnancy has been a hot topic in celebrity news. By masking Cardi B’s success with her engagement and reproductive capabilities, we subject her to the same invisibility afforded to women surrealists and mystics—Cardi B is to be remembered only for her body and her relation to another man in the field.

As feminism continues to grow and change shape, there has been increased focus on the way women are allowed to embrace their bodies. Social media platforms, such as Instagram, have molded around this form of body feminism and allowed women to showcase their bodies to immense popularity. By showcasing their bodies on social media for popularity, women begin to fall under the status of “muse,” where their position in the social field, on a whole, is determined by their physicality. A continuation of this culture without an understanding of the way in which mediating effects women will prevent change for women in society and will prevent a change in habitus. This comparative study between women in time periods that bookend phallogocentrism offers proof as to the widespread impact to habitus by femininity, and the struggle for those who wish to find their own authority despite that habitus. As we continue and will continue to use language in our daily lives it is important to consider the ways in which a phallic system prevents women from achieving equality, particularly within creative-driven
fields. Social media purports that a woman’s body is her only tool for success and may be a tool for inspiration for others. It is fascinating the way in which American culture may deem these social media “influencers” who use their bodies for success to be “fake,” but may then buy into their personal brand for inspiration. We must utilize what we know about phallogocentrism to avoid falling into the trap of mediating. Without recognizing this, women will continue to find themselves locked in the cyclical nature of the mediator, reinforcing and reestablishing the patriarchal symbolic system.
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Art works


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Hildegard of Bingen. *Mother Church*. Circa 1150.

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Secondary Sources


Print.


APPENDIX

High resolution versions of each image are available at:
http://humn.omeka.bucknell.edu/omeka/collections/show/6

Fig 1. The Universe (Hildegard)

Fig 2. I Do Not See the (Woman) Hidden in the Forest (Magritte)
Fig 3. *Hotel du Pavot, Chambre 202* (Tanning)

Fig 4. *Distortion #147* (Kertész)
Fig 5. *Birthday* (Tanning)

Fig 6. *Self-Portrait* (Tanning)

Fig 7. *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (Friedrich)
Fig 8. *Premier Péril* from *Les 7 périles spectraux* (Tanning)

Fig 9. *Sequestrians* (Tanning)

Fig 10. *Doll* (Bellmer)
Fig 11. *Mother Church* (Hildegard)

![Image of Mother Church](image)

Fig 12. *Bird Superior, Portrait of Max Ernst* (Carrington)