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St Gertrude's Synecdoche:
The Problem of Writing the Sacred Heart

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St Gertrude was reluctant to acquiesce to the Lord's demand that she write an account of her mystical experiences for others to read. "I thought it so unseemly," she confesses, "to write down all these things that I could not bring myself to listen to the voice of conscience and kept on putting it off."[1] Yet , fortunately, her Legatus memorialis abundantiae divinae pietatis (The Herald of Divine Love in its usual English rendering) was written despite her reservations, and has survived. How did Gertrude manage to overcome her qualms? This paper proposes to explore the way in which deployment of one central symbol, that of the sacred heart of Christ, invests Gertrude with both the authority and the ability to write in seemly fashion about God.

Gertrude was born in 1256 to unknown parents near modern Eisleben in eastern Germany. At the age of five she was given as a child oblate to the convent of Helfta, a thriving intellectual community which also included, as Gertrude grew up, the well-known mystics Mechthild of Magdeburg and Mechthild of Hackeborn. Gertrude was from childhood one of the community's most scholarly members, a prodigy in Latin rhetoric, more an intellectual than a mystic until she underwent a profound conversion experience at the age of twenty-five. After that, though she continued to write prolifically (prayers, spiritual exercises, scriptural exegesis), she began to receive regular holy visions which, being such private dealings with God, she did not at first write down. When she finally made up her mind to do so, eight years later, she produced what is now Book 2 of the Legatus. (Books 1 and 3-5 were apparently compiled by other nuns at Helfta, probably largely at Gertrude's instigation or dictation.) Book 2, on which I will focus for the purposes of this essay, is notable within the history of Christian devotion because its vivid descriptions of Gertrude's visions show a considerable elaboration on the long-standing but ill-defined veneration of Christ's heart. This veneration was present somewhat in early Christianity, in the belief that Christ's heart poured forth a redemptive fountain through the wound in His side; that image was sustained by Anselm in the eleventh century and became more pronounced and widespread in the twelfth, culminating in its most famous articulation by St Bernard in his commentary on the Song of Songs.[2] But it is the women of Helfta—Gertrude foremost, who surely knew Bernard's commentary, and to a somewhat lesser extent the two Mechthilds—who make this devotion central to their mystical visions. Caroline Walker Bynum calls theirs "an explicitly eucharistic devotion,"[3] in which the heart, which is, obviously, of Christ's body and blood, both physical humanity and dispenser of the Spirit, becomes the meeting place between human and divine. Gertrude prays for such complete communion through Christ's heart in the seventh chapter of the Exercitia (Gertrude's only other surviving work, a series of prayers and exercises in pursuing the Christian life): "O heart that runs over with loving-kindness! . . . O heart full of compassion! . . . O dearest heart, I pray from my heart, absorb my heart totally in you."[4] She often visualizes Christ's heart as pouring forth a stream of pure crystal water (cf. Apoc. 22.1) which unites her to Him: "you will never be far from me, as is shown you in this stream" (Legatus 2.9).

Yet to experience mystical union with and through the heart of Christ is something entirely different than to express it in words. I have already noted Gertrude's hesitation in making the radical translation. Students of women's mysticism in the Middle Ages will appreciate the two most obvious obstacles to a literary endeavor of this sort. For one thing, the ever-present Pseudo-Dionysian problem endures, the sheer unthinkability of rendering divine things in our impossibly makeshift human languages.[5] For another, Gertrude (many would sympathetically lament) had the misfortune of being born a woman in a period when women were rarely taken seriously as scholars or theologians, when women's authority as writers was automatically considered suspect. After all, many women writing at the time found it necessary to include self-effacing apologies for their sex: Helfta's Mechthild of Magdeburg finds her authority lacking in comparison to a "learned religious man," asking God "How can one believe that you built a golden house in a filthy slough?"[6] and even the eminently learned Hildegard von Bingen calls herself a "paupercula" and "indocta mulier."7 However, any assertion that Gertrude's own reluctance stemmed in part from her sex must remain

conjectural; at no juncture does Gertrude herself retreat rhetorically into being "only a little woman." While her humility and sense of unworthiness are indeed manifest, they are not explicitly gender-linked.8

What is more central to Gertrude's anxiety is the first problem, the fundamental human problem of communicating the divine: "I began to consider within myself how difficult, not to say impossible, it would be for me to find the right expressions and words for all the things that were said to me, so as to make them intelligible on a human level, without danger of scandal" (Legatus 2.10). As Emilie Zum Brunn and Georgette Epiney-Burgard argue in the introduction to their anthology Women Mystics in Medieval Europe, although negative theology tends today to be thought of as a purely intellectual and not an affective pursuit (having "deteriorated into scholastic metaphysics"), affective mysticism such as that of Marguerite Porete, Meister Eckhart, and Hadewijch of Brabant does demonstrate considerable concern with problems of language and representation.9 One has only to glance at Marguerite for ample evidence, a writer whose Soul asserts that "everything one can say or write about God, or think about Him, God who is greater than what is ever said, is thus more like lying than speaking the truth."10 Likewise, Hadewijch strongly links even her erotic and apparently bodily piety to unspeakability: "my mind was beset so fearfully and so painfully by desirous love that all my separate limbs threatened to break, and all my separate veins were in travail. The longing in which I then was cannot be expressed by any language or any person I know."11 Gertrude herself confesses of her spiritual experiences:

[E]ven if my tongue were to stammer out something from [the paradise of union], I who have been admitted, favored by divine goodness, if only by way of my own vices and negligences, as though all covered with a thick crust, I should never really be able to grasp any of it. Although the knowledge of angels and human beings were to be worthily combined, even that would not suffice to form one single word that might accurately express even a shadow of such sovereign excellence. (Legatus 2.8)

It is important, therefore, to remember that, in the context of fundamental divine unspeakability, the popular feminist problem of "writing the body" becomes first and foremost the much thornier issue of writing God's body, via experiences of Christ, and only secondarily the problem of writing the mystic's own body; the writer's body, through imitatio Christi, becomes yet another text in which to try to read Christ.12 Gertrude's essential challenge, in first hesitating and then attempting to claim her authority by writing, is not so much to validate her own personal bodily experience as to validate the capacity of her bodily language to transmit ineffable truths about the nature and power of God. Furthermore, her choices of imagery render that capacity manifestly in need of validation. Gertrude, and her readers likewise, cannot but be aware that, by forefronting Christ's heart in her devotions, she has made a most audacious synecdoche: the representation of the Divine by a body part.

That the heart is, in one sense, a merely physical organ is recognized by Gertrude when she tells God that "you have led me to know and consider the interior of my heart which until then I had heeded as little, if I may put it thus, as the interior of my feet" (Legatus 2.2). The conscious absurdity of her comparison suggests both that for the heedless human the heart is a common body part like any other, and that, when illumined by God, it can potentially be more than this. But the heart, disturbingly juxtaposed here with the lowly feet, becomes specifically troubling, potentially "unseemly," when used as a figure for divinity. If God cannot be grasped in words, how can the very concrete heart, of all things, be defended as a metaphor? And how does Gertrude, who cannot escape from the concreteness of the human world, the human body, human language, dare to write at all?

The answers, I believe, lie in Christ's heart itself, as represented by Gertrude. Perhaps paradoxically, the figure of the sacred heart validates its own self as both source and result of truthful words. One must bear in mind, still, that the Heart is, according to Gertrude and others, where the divine and human join; this is where Christ's physical humanity is also the fountain of divine spirit; this is where the human heart and soul go to commune with both divine body and spirit. Hence it seems that, provided translation between the divine and human realms were possible, the eucharistic Heart/heart would be the appropriate site for its occurrence. Gertrude's writings show that the heart can house the unspeakable and speak the inarticulable. She at one point describes God as "all truth, clearer than all light, yet hidden deeper in our heart than any secret" (Legatus 2.1), and she praises the heart's eloquence over that of the tongue:

Since my tongue is ineffective to express how, in this showing, you granted me still more abundantly the abiding gift of your grace, may the affection of my heart do so, and . . . may I learn to direct my gratitude effectively through the affective movement of my heart toward your love. (Legatus 2.12)

Yet the heart is not only the communicator of wordless emotion, but also seems to be the place, at times, where emotions are turned into words. The sentences of introduction to Gertrude's first-person confessions state that "she wrote the things which she had experienced in her heart in intimate converse with the Beloved, in her own hand and in

his praise, in the following words" (Legatus 2.1). Book 2 of the Legatus is thus initially introduced to us as a verbalization of a heart-felt experience. Gertrude describes this process in more detail later, after she has recounted her resistances to God's insistence that she record her visions. God's answer to her objections about the impossibility of adequate representation is the following: "I am going to hold you close to my divine heart, so that by repeated inspiration my influence may act gradually upon you, pleasantly and sweetly, just as much as you can bear" (Legatus 2.10).13 Gertrude's written visions as we have them, including the visions of the sacred heart, are here represented as absorbed from the influence of that very divine heart, "just as much as [she] could bear," that is, translated into terms manageable to the human mind, not by Gertrude's own agency, but by God's—that is, by that of his physical manifestation, the Heart. Thus the sacred heart as it is written by Gertrude is already its translation of itself; but at least we may trust the translation as having been produced by the original author, so to speak, and the writing is made more "seemly" by virtue of its divine authority.

The Heart's responsibility for Gertrude's writing is further consolidated by the suggestion that Christ's heart has written and is written directly on her own heart and soul. This imprinting is accomplished in two ways. First of all, Gertrude uses the conventional scriptural figure of the wax seal to express the reformation of her soul by contact with God: "I saw my soul, like wax melting in the heat of the fire (Ps. 21:14), being placed close to the Lord's most sacred breast, as though to take the imprint of a seal (Song 8:6; Wisd. 9:10). . . . Thus it was sealed with the imprint of the resplendent and ever tranquil Trinity" (Legatus 2.7). Secondly, Gertrude sees her own heart as having been spiritually inscribed with Christ's five wounds (the most significant of which, of course, is the wound in the side—the heart). She finds a prayer in an unidentified book which reads, in part:
"Inscribe with your precious blood, most merciful Lord, your wounds on my heart, that I may read in them both your sufferings and your love. May the memory of your wounds ever remain in the hidden places of my heart, to stir up within me your compassionate sorrow, so that the flame of your love may be enkindled in me. Grant also that all creatures may become vile to me, and that you may become the only sweetness of my heart." (Legatus 2.4)

And swiftly her prayer is answered: "I knew in my spirit that I had received the stigmata of your adorable and venerable wounds interiorly in my heart, just as though they had been made on the natural places of the body" (Legatus 2.4). Hence Gertrude has been marked (twice) by signs of God; she has the truest writing in her, which, "read," conveys Christ's sufferings and love.14 Paradoxically, the physical symbol and the writing, both ordinarily human rather than divine constructions, lead in this unusual case to her renunciation of creatures, to the transcendence of the physical, and are worthy of being her "only sweetness." Clearly the writing by and on the heart contains a different potential for spiritual validity than other writing.
Not only is the sacred heart responsible for generating true "writing" internally, but it also becomes the vehicle through which God communicates his authorization of the use of tangible signs generally. This is best illustrated in Gertrude's long narration of the Lord's response to her complaint that she had received no tangible confirmation, such as a handshake, of the "pact" made between herself and God:

> As well as giving me all these gifts, Lord, in your inestimable love you graciously deigned to confirm them all by a pact. One day, as I was turning all these things over in my mind, rejoicing to see that your love so much outstripped my wickedness (cf. Rom. 5:20), I was led to the presumption of reproaching you with not having sealed this pact in the customary way, by clasping hands. With your infinitely compliant sweetness, you promised to satisfy me, saying: "Cease these reproaches and come and receive the confirmation of my pact." And immediately (in my nothingness) I saw you opening with both hands the wound of your deified heart, the Tabernacle of divine faithfulness and infallible truth, and commanding me (perverse, like the Jews asking for a sign [Matt. 12:38]) to stretch forth my right hand. Then, contracting the aperture of the wound in which my hand was enclosed, you said: "See, I promise to keep intact the gifts which I have given you. . . ." After these words of sweetest love, when I withdrew my hand, there appeared on it seven circles of gold, like seven rings . . . in faithful testimony of the seven privileges for the confirmation of which I had asked. (Legatus 2.20)

God is patient and loving with Gertrude despite what she sees as her inappropriate request for a physical confirmation of a spiritual contract. Though perhaps ideally Gertrude could be satisfied without tangible signs, she is by no means punished for her presumption; indeed, she is rewarded with sweet words and seven golden rings, far richer and

tenderer—and more concrete—signs than she had asked for. The source of these signs is Christ's heart, a treasure-house it seems, not of gold, but of beautiful symbols. Furthermore, since Gertrude states that the Heart is "the Tabernacle of . . . infallible truth," these symbols are to be trusted as truly as the terms of a contract; God would not offer a sign from His heart that was not reliable as a token of the real pact between human and divine, nor does He begrudge our requiring tokens, provided they increase our devotion. The heart pours forth signs for us and is itself a sign, given by God to Gertrude to make her understand His affection for her:

> In addition to all these favors, you have granted me the priceless gift of your familiar friendship, giving me in various ways, to my indescribable delight, the noblest treasure of the divinity, your divine heart, now bestowing it freely, now as a sign of our mutual familiarity, exchanging it with mine. (Legatus 2.23)

And surely Gertrude is also to understand by all this that God condones the use of signs and similitudes, that he has given her His heart for this very purpose, that she may know the virtue of a true sign, and, with the Heart written directly onto her own, may not be afraid to record these similitudes again in her own writing. If God uses the Heart as a sign, giving it to Gertrude through visions, who is she to reject it as scandalously incommensurate with the divine? And how could any reader question it? Indeed, if God's heart is written onto Gertrude's, Gertrude seeks to reproduce the same process in her communication with her readers, preserving the purity of unmediated spiritual union by appealing directly to their hearts, as if the writing on the page were merely incidental.15 The difficulties of representation inherent in writing about the divine are solved by the possibility of this heart-to-heart communication:

> You, my God, know all my secret thoughts; you know that I am compelled by a force which is external to me, and indeed is against my will, to commit these things to writing. I consider that I have profited but little from your gifts, and so I cannot believe that they were meant for me alone, because in your eternal wisdom you cannot be misled. That is why, Giver of gifts, you who have so freely loaded me with gifts unmerited, I ask you to grant that at least one loving heart reading these pages may be moved to compassion, seeing that through zeal for souls you have permitted such a royal gem to be embedded in the slime of my heart. (Legatus 2.5)

The "gem" in her heart, an organ which is ennobled therefore, despite its lowly participation in the "slime" of human sinfulness, must be put there for the purpose of moving others' hearts to similar—or even more loving—response. Likewise, she closes her book with a prayer that God will

> grant to all who read this writing with humility, joy in your gracious condescension; pity for my unworthiness; and sincere desire for their own perfection; so that from the golden thuribles of their loving hearts such sweet-smelling incense may ascend to you (Rev. 8:4) that through it reparation may be copiously made for all my defects of ingratitude and negligence. (Legatus 2.24)

God, of course, is still the one who must grant that Gertrude's writing will elicit the proper response in her readers' hearts, that signs will work in the way in which they are intended. But through the grace manifested by His inscription of His heart on hers, her figurative writing can prove true, can move the human heart and make it a sweet dwelling place for God. Her final commendation of her work to God expresses the hope that such figures, far from misleading the ignorant, will whet the appetite of the aspiring spiritual person and turn her through symbolic language towards divine truth:

Just as students attain to logic by way of the alphabet, so, by means of these painted pictures, as it were, they may be led to taste within themselves that hidden manna (Rev. 2:17), which it is not possible to adulterate by any admixture of material images and of which one must have eaten to hunger for it for ever. (Legatus 2.24)

By comparing the intellectual apprehension of logical truths by way of letters to the apprehension of divine truth through "pictures," Gertrude reduces further the gap between mystical and linguistic modes of understanding. The sacred heart as a sign imbued with all the mystical possibilities of divine-human union, a special sign which in its turn goes on to become a dispenser of new signs and a defender of the employment of signs generally, becomes the site where these two modes actually meet and mix. Christ's heart is therefore necessary to Gertrude, not only as intermediary between her soul and God the father, as we would expect, but also as intermediary between the ineffable and the representable, the place where the Logos may be translated into our language.

Notes

1. *St. Gertrude of Helfta, Legatus* 2.10. All references to the *Legatus* are taken from the English translation by Margaret Winkworth, *The Herald of Divine Love* (New York, 1993); scriptural citations are also provided by Winkworth. Future references to the *Legatus* will be cited internally.
2. Other notable early devotees of Christ's heart include William of St. Thierry, Richard of St. Victor, and St. Francis of Assisi. For succinct histories of the devotion up until Gertrude, see Alexandra Barratt, "Introduction" to the *Herald of God's Loving-Kindness* (Kalamazoo, 1991), pp. 19-20; Mary Jeremy Finnegan, *The Women of Helfta: Scholars and Mystics* (Athens, GA, 1991), pp. 131-32; Marion Morgan, "The Sacred Heart of Jesus in Roman Catholic Tradition," *One in Christ* 24 (1988), 223-36.
3. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1982), p. 193.
4. St. Gertrude of Helfta, *Exercitia spiritualia*, ch. 7, lines 380-84, trans. Gertrud Jaron Lewis and Jack Lewis (Kalamazoo, 1989), p. 135.
5. For Pseudo-Dionysius, of course, all language about God necessarily takes on the status of metaphor; he goes so far as to say "we must not then dare to speak, or indeed to form any conception, of the hidden super-essential Godhead, except those things that are revealed to us from the Holy Scriptures." See Dionysius the Areopagite, *On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*, trans. C. E. Rolt (London, 1920). A helpful study of medieval negative theology and apophatic language is Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago, 1994). Jacques Derrida's "How to Avoid Speaking"(1989) is also rather spectacular if by definition not entirely enlightening. A succinct discussion of the problem in relation to medieval women's mysticism can be found in the introductory chapter of Elizabeth Petroff's *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York, 1994), esp. p. 4. For a variety of approaches, see also the essays in *Mysticism and Language*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York, 1992).
6. Cited by Ulrike Wiethaus, *Ecstatic Transformation: Transpersonal Psychology in the Work of Mechthild of Magdeburg* (Syracuse, 1996), p. 127.
7. Cited in the introduction to Hildegard's works in Emilie Zum Brunn and Georgette Epiney-Burgard, *Women Mystics in Medieval Europe*, trans. Sheila Hughes (New York, 1989), p. 7.
8. The reasons for this must also be conjectural. I might put forth the suggestion that Gertrude's unusual degree of learnedness in Latin may have afforded her a surer foothold and authority in a male-dominated intellectual discourse; but that is only part of an explanation.
9. Zum Brunn and Epiney-Burgard, *Women Mystics*, pp. xxxi-xxxii.
10. Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls, trans. Ellen L. Babinsky* (New York, 1993), pp. 194-95.
11. Hadewijch of Brabant, *Vision 7*, trans. Mother Columba Hart in *Hadewijch: The Complete Works* (New York, 1980), p. 280.
12. This idea is fascinatingly and complexly laid out in fuller detail by Karma Lochrie in *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia, 1991), esp. ch. 1, "The Body as Text and the Semiotics of Suffering."
13. Editor Margaret Winkworth suggests that the words translated here as "repeated inspiration"—alternatis vicibus, "by alternating times"—refer to Christ's heartbeats.
14. Elizabeth Petroff ascribes "the idea that the visionary is not a vessel but a text, a body in whom or on whom a text is inscribed" to Marguerite d'Oingt (d. 1310), calling this idea a "new perspective" which she in fact specifically contrasts with Gertrude's. See Petroff, *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature* (New York, 1986), p. 278. However, the heart-to-heart mode of transmission in Marguerite d'Oingt's writings appears to me more similar to Gertrude's than contrasting. Further comparison between the two mystics seems called for.
15. For a parallel to this idea, see Karma Lochrie's discussion of the Monk of Farne (*Margery Kempe*, pp. 56-57, 69). One should note, however, that the Monk eventually confesses imprinting on the reader's heart to be an impossibility, whereas Gertrude seems more optimistic about this point.