

Wounding and Healing: Reciprocity in Divine and Human Narratives:

the Cases of Christina Mirabilis, Hadewijch, and Mechthild

Diana Neal

Elaine Scarry's text *The Body in Pain*¹ offers an analysis of the human experiences of suffering and pain as effects of divine and human making and remaking. Assuming a Feuerbachian analysis of the human projection of the divine, she maintains that God is the primal human Artefact who, once made, remakes the human subject in his own image through wounding and healing. That which distinguishes the human from the divine is embodiment. Embodied as they are, human beings can be wounded.² God, being bodiless, cannot be wounded.

Scarry's thesis relies overwhelmingly on a Western notion of human work that she believes has been passed into our culture through two dominant sets of religious and politico-economic discourses, for her those of Judeo-Christianity and of Marxism. These discourses have been so influential in the formation of western subjectivity that they reveal much, she holds, about the way Western subjects are constructed by discourses of pain and illness. It is this aspect of Scarry's monumental work that interests me, and which I will initially use to read the text of the 13th century Flemish mystic Christina Mirabilis,³ before moving on to a consideration of her medieval contemporaries Hadewijch of Antwerp and Mechthild of Magdeburg. In reading Christina's text, the problem I will pose is how her performance of wounding and healing assist in constructing/reconstructing herself as a mystical subject. Secondly I will ask the question, what theological and literary purpose does the language of wounding and healing serve in the medieval texts of the Beguines Hadewijch and Mechthild? In other words, what does the text produce?

Scarry's analysis of pain and illness is delivered within the context of her discussion of the modern political use of torture and warfare that appears applicable to understanding more generalised human experiences of pain and illness in the contemporary West. It is through our sensual, embodied projection into the world that we are reciprocally constructed as human subjects. Indeed, it is our sensuousity, sight and hearing, touch and voice, that allow us to project ourselves beyond the simple boundaries of our bodies themselves. For Scarry, pain and illness effectively inhibit the body's social extension, and thus hold implications for human subjectivity.

With the onset of physical pain, Scarry suggests that sensual extension is progressively short-circuited. Thus, the person in pain loses the ability to

articulate her experiences of embodiment. The subject withdraws within the boundaries of the body; her world, effectively, becomes coterminous with the physical boundaries of her body⁴ Because pain ‘has no voice’, she who is in pain has traditionally found the vocabulary of pain to be frustratingly meagre. She not only finds pain and its character difficult to express, but the one she attempts to convey her pain to finds it difficult to take in the pain to which the other is subjected. Because pain often remains subterraneously hidden within the body, the *truth* of pain remains, as Scarry notes, always subject to doubt by the other. Pain is notoriously “unshareable” in its invisibility and because of the difficulty in expressing it. Both Scarry⁵ and Arthur Frank⁶ have suggested that once pain acquires a voice, the sufferer moves from a situation governed by chaos, to one in which the subject begins to gain control, indeed begins to make sense of pain.

The re-gaining of a voice entails the extension of consciousness itself. Where pain is overwhelming and out of control, consciousness itself recedes; thinking is absorbed into the body. The categorical and symbolic similarity between illness and death then become apparent: illness mimics death in absorbing the conscious self into the body. Pain, therefore, as Scarry notes, cuts the sufferer off from her world, that is from the sentient world as the home of consciousness. The world outside the body holds less and less attention as pain and illness progress. For Scarry it is this tendency of pain to reduce bodily extension in the world that works to reduce this world’s claim on the sufferer and which lies at the root of religious asceticism. Once this world retreats, another transcendent world gains admittance to consciousness. But, Scarry asserts, this cancellation of the world’s claims does not entail a denial of the body but a heightening of bodily claims. Religiously speaking, the bodily self is deconstructed, to be re-constructed by divine power.

And yet the experience of pain is not restricted to illness and torture. Scarry here turns her attention to the relation of pain to work or creation. Wherever work comes upon resistance of whatever kind to the emergence of its desired artefact, there pain persists until the work is completed. To create an object, however, is to alter the world, to re-construct a world. This brings us to the Jewish and Christian narratives of creation through wounding and healing.

In Scarry’s reading, the relationship between the human and the divine is mediated in the Hebrew Bible by the weapon that wounds. By implication, the disembodied Voice which is God is immune to the wound, while the embodied human is pre-eminently woundable.

Scarry ties explicit biblical occasions of wounding to the general problem of unbelief and doubt. Where there is a failure in belief by the one who is made by God, there arise endless divine opportunities for remaking through the power of inflicting the wound. Conversion is effected through the Word and substantiated upon the human body. Through the remaking of the body, a believing people is created and multiplied in Israel⁷. Yet the moral and vulnerable distance between Voice and Body becomes the measure of God’s

transcendancy. The God who wounds cannot himself be wounded.

Nevertheless, Scarry suggests that this distance between Voice and Body comes to be somewhat moderated in the discourses concerning graven images. There God's concern to distinguish himself from gods which are embodied as artefacts requires inadvertently that he describe himself in an act of self-clarification. In venting his fury against graven images, however, he emphasises their inertness, their lack of sentience over against himself. They are not living; he is.⁸ Thus, as Scarry notes, Isaiah 42 is clearly a case in which the Divine Voice claims sentience for himself. Here God is obviously in pain, subject to the same vulnerability as his embodied people. The sentient God then confesses his need for Israel who reciprocally needs him (Ezekiel 11, Zechariah 8).

For Scarry, the sentient God of the Exilic period shares many of the characteristics of the embodied Jesus. In the Christian narratives the divinity of Jesus becomes humanised, embodied, and therefore vulnerable to the reciprocity of the wound. If, in the New Testament narratives, the sign by which God marks human sentience is that of healing, nevertheless, the human icon of the wounded God returns to the fore in the body of the crucified God. Scarry thus notes that the exchange of the wound is established as the disembodied Voice is embodied, and further, as the wounded human body is so-to-speak disembodied, or released from a preoccupation with pain through the healing hand of Jesus, and ultimately through Resurrection. This God and his people are made and re-made through the divine/human work of creation and recreation.

How, then, can Scarry's reading of the embodiment of God through the human and divine narratives of the Old and New Testaments be brought to bear in the reading of medieval Christian mystical texts?

Johannes B. Metz has observed that it is the narrative nature of Christianity that allows the history of those who suffer individually to be brought together with the narrative of the suffering God.⁹ Human and divine narratives are not, of course, exclusively limited to the history of suffering, but find their reciprocal climax in just such narratives. For Metz the narratives are thus brought together in the reciprocity of crucifixion and resurrection. The hagiographic narrative of Christina's performance of self-inflicted suffering before us contains all of the elements which allow her to take up a mimetic stance in relation to the story of the vulnerable and wounded sensibility of the human and divine Jesus. But it is well to remember that this is a hagiographical text, strongly encoded with male representations of the nature of woman and the nature of her spirituality:

Then wailing bitterly she began to beat her breast and her body... "O miserable and wretched body! How long will you torment me...? Why do you delay me from seeing the face of Christ? When will you abandon me so that my soul can return freely to its Creator?"...Then, taking the part of the body, she would say..."O miserable soul! Why are you tormenting me in this way?"

What is keeping you in me and what is it that you love in me? Why do you not allow me to return to the earth from where I was taken and why do you not let me be at rest until I am restored to you on the Last Day of judgement?"... She would then rest a little in silence.. Then, taking her feet with both hands, she would kiss the soles of her feet with greatest affection and would say, "O most beloved body! Why have I beaten you? Why have I reviled you? Did you not obey me in every good deed I undertook to do with God's help? You have endured the torment and hardships most generously and most patiently which the spirit placed on you.. Now, O best and sweetest body,...is an end of your hardship, now you will rest in the dust and will sleep for a little and then, when the trumpet blows, you will rise again purified of all corruptibility and you will be joined in eternal happiness with the soul you have had as a companion in the present sadness."¹⁰

Christina mortifies her flesh (the terminology is used advisedly) since death itself definitively becomes the goal in which this- worldly forces are cancelled in order to allow the entry of the qualitatively new. She understands her flesh to be the bearer of concupiscence and corruption. It is the flesh of this body that detains the beatific vision. Yet the performance of suffering itself establishes the basis for the entry of the transcendent. She recognises the goodness of the body, rather than the sinful flesh, and looks forward to the ultimate destination of the embodied soul in eschatological glory.

Christina's body, then, remains the seed of the resurrected body to come, remade and converted through the wound. The flesh that must be wounded in order to hasten the coming of the Divine Other of her desire, is nevertheless the body restored to health through the resurrection of the wounded God.

Christina's self is reconstructed or mimetically performed in relation to the Other. The God she wounds in her sinfulness prefaces *her* self-wounding *with his own* so that the vulnerable God of Jesus might extend his healing hand towards her corruptible, if beloved body. Though she views the present as a time of sadness, the eternal happiness is disclosed in the merging of the wounded history of Christina with that of her Divine Other, whose otherness is no longer marked by a lack of sentience. Christina performs the wounding and healing of God's own history upon her body in a brief but repetitive inscription of the Christian narrative. Distancing herself from this world in self-inflicted suffering requires her to leave the afflicted flesh behind only momentarily until she reunites with it in proleptic expectation.

But performative narratives like those of Christina Mirabilis, were not, of course, confined to discourses of self-inflicted suffering. As many scholars, including Caroline Walker Bynum¹¹ and Rudolph Bell¹² have pointed out, female mystics in particular engaged in performative narratives which allowed acute and chronic pain and illness to be brought successfully within an interpretative framework of shared meaning.

Although of a radically different kind from the texts of Christina, it is true that violent images are still prominent in the Beguine texts of Hadewijch of

Antwerp and Mechthild of Magdeburg, making them theoretically subject to feminist critique. It is my thesis however that the themes of wounding and healing in Hadewijch and Mechthild serve neither to valorise *nor* to criticise the phenomenon of eroticised violence, and that it is only possible to imagine the case to be otherwise if one substantially ignores the product of the text—what the text produces.

Let us return to Scarry's schema of wounding and healing. There, as we saw, the invulnerable divinity of antiquity exchanges his immunity to the wound for the vulnerability of the crucified God. In coming to a literary understanding of the Beguine texts we need briefly to consider the textual exchange between the notions of courtly love, suffering and pain. As such this exchange need not necessarily be valorised. Both Emmanuel Levinas and Luce Irigaray have attempted to demystify Western romantic love where it operates in terms of a desire and impetus for union which postulates the subsumption of the Feminine Other to the Same.¹³ It seems obvious that it is pre-dominantly romantic love that operates in the Beguine texts where physical violence is clearly an aspect. If this love is violent, it is psychologically violent, though not necessarily intentionally so. The Beloved wounds by and through his absence. Mechthild writes, "Tell my dear Lord Jesus Christ, How sick with love for him I am."¹⁴ Likewise Hadewijch, who exclaims, "The madness of love makes the strong weak And the sick healthy."¹⁵ It is clear that the setting of courtly love within which the Beguines frame their mystical project affirms the repeated slippage in the fixed gulf between divine and human pain. For Hadewijch and for Mechthild, the wound of love represents the failure of the project for *fulfilled* mystical union, not a divine rationale for self-inflicted torture. The healing moment represents the fulfilled goal of mystical "fruition" or satisfaction. Where the Beguines employ the language of eroticised violence they do not overtly sanction violence *per se*, but instead employ it as a language *in extremis* to express a love experienced *in extremis*. Thus, for Mechthild, "He causes her, poor wretch, torment. When he draws her up, she flows. She cannot hold herself in check until he brings her within him."¹⁶

And, just as the narrative of the Jewish and Christian God is a narrative of one who travels from a place of invulnerability to one of embodied vulnerability, so the point of the Beguine's mystical project is that abjection, like vulnerability, is taken into the divine and experienced as the divine in mystical fruition. Thus the language of the divine/human narrative collapses the human and the divine as separate ontologies, eschatologically divinising the human. So the divine narrative begins by reversing the divine and human, the male and female order we might have expected The Divine Voice complains in Mechthild:

Well then, dearest Maiden, for a long time now you have been my chambermaid. Now tell me, where is all this leading? You have hunted me, trapped me, bound me, and wounded me so deeply that I shall never be

healthy again. You have meted out to me many a cudgel blow. Tell me, am I ever going to recover from you? If I were not going to be killed by your hand it would be better for me never to have known you.¹⁷

Likewise, in the texts of Hadewijch, it is frequently the male human beloved who is wounded by the feminine divine, Lady Love, in a quirkish exchange of wounding roles. Thus,

He who lives on love with no success
Endures, in the madness of love,
Suffering that can only be known
By him who sincerely forsakes all for Love,
And then remains unnourished by her.¹⁸

And elsewhere:

That is mighty Love's mode of action:
If she wholly lures someone to her hand,
Although she forces him with violence,
She contents him and sweetens his chains.¹⁹

And finally:

Love knows the repeated blows
That I suffer for her.²⁰

Mutuality in the exchange of narratives of suffering and wounding induced by unsatisfied desire has here become the common stuff of the divine/human romance. And if the permeability of the feminine flesh is one theme of this spirituality, it is, in Mechthild, held in perpetual exchange with the permeability of the masculine divine Lover. She writes:

Both his wounds and her breasts were open
The wounds poured forth
The breasts flowed.
The soul was invigorated and completely restored.
As he poured the sparkling red wine
Into her red mouth.²¹

Here the exchange of the human and divine bodily fluids provides a narrative of reconstruction where each becomes indistinguishable in the human/divine eschaton of fruition. Nevertheless, the wound remains within an ontological flow of the divine/human relation. So on the one hand Mechthild says: "Whoever becomes entangled in longing such as this must hang blessedly fettered in God."²² Otherwise she places the following words in the mouth of the divine lover:

I shall anoint man's wounds with the blood of my innocence and shall bind
all man's sores with a cloth of wretched disgrace until my end.²³

The Beguine text projects the future as a time of the deconstruction of the human/divine opposition when the vulnerability of the human is remade *through the open permeability of the human/divine flesh as the site of the wound*. Mechthild thus laments the “openness” of the human/divine separation that nevertheless provides the basis of the proleptic reconstruction of the human/divine ontology.

Tell him in confidence
The wounds that he has
inflicted upon me
I can no longer endure
Unsalved and unbandaged
He has wounded me to death
If he leaves me here untended,
I can never recover.²⁴

The healing/remaking of mystic subjectivity is anticipated in the narrative of Hadewijch not as the destructive annihilation of the human by the divine, but as a mutual subsuming of one’s narrative by the other in the context of ever shifting boundaries. She says,

I saw him completely come to nought
and so fade and all at once dissolve
that I could no longer recognize or
perceive him outside me, and I could
no longer distinguish him within me.
Then it was to me as if we were one without difference.²⁵

The divine Lover wounds, but he/she, unlike human violators of the flesh, wounds in and through the delay of satisfaction, through his/her absence itself. In the texts of Mechthild and Hadewijch the occasion of divine presence represents the site of healing in which divinity, wounded and vulnerable within the yet undecided remaking of the human/divine relation, presses his open wounds into the wounds of the yet undecided character of human subjectivity.

On the right hand of our Lord stands
Jesus, our Redeemer, with his open
wounds bloody and unbandaged, ready to prevail over
the Father’s justice
that severely threatens many a sinner.
As long as sinning continues on earth,
Christ’s wounds shall be open: bloody,
but not painful.²⁶

Where, then, does the narrative lead? While Scarry implies that the death of Jesus climactically brings the bloody history of the divine and human encounter to an end through the healing hand of the crucified, the Beguine texts show that the reciprocity of the divine/human remaking proceeds apace as an expression of the divine horizon of human subjectivity, metaphorically

92

fleshed out in these texts through sexual difference. The texts apophatically produce something akin to a feminine/masculine divine in the sense of Luce Irigaray's notion of the Sensible Transcendental. Hadewijch calls this, "being God with God".

In the hagiographical text of Christina Mirabilis, it is, on the other hand, the male hagiographer who forces Christina to self-abuse, allowing him to confirm his world view that women rightly suffer violent abuse at the hand of a male divine, while otherwise affirming the transforming nature of the divine future.

A recent article in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*²⁷ has posed the quandary of feminist scholars in promoting mystical texts that seem to advocate and/or affirm the sado/masochistic violence of their imagery. Julie Miller argues that feminists need to reconsider their motivation, working as they do within a society in which violence against women figures so prominently. I hope to have shown that the Beguine use of the images of wounding and healing is much more subtly nuanced than Miller suggests, and that a literary, rather than a sociological reading of the texts such as she provides, yields dramatically different effects.

- 1 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain. The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985)
- 2 *Ibid*, 193
- 3 M.H. King (trans.) *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, *Matrologia Latina*, 2, (Saskatoon: Peregrina) 236-7
- 4 Scarry, *Op Cit*, 34
- 5 *Ibid*, 172
- 6 A.W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller. Body, Illness, and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 115
- 7 Scarry, *Op Cit*, 34
- 9 Johannes B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society. Towards a Practical Fundamental Theology* (London: Burns and Oates, 1980) 165
- 10 King, *Op Cit*, 27-8
- 11 C.W. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast. The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987)
- 12 Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985)
- 13 B. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay in Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969) 276-77
- 14 Frank Tobin (trans) Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* (New York, Paulist Press, 1998) 327
- 15 Hart, C. Mother Mother (trans) Hadewijch: *The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980) 206
- 16 Tobin, *Op Cit*, 44
- 17 *Ibid*, 42
- 18 Hart, *Op Cit*, 164
- 20 *Ibid*, 160
- 21 Tobin, *Op Cit*, 51
- 22 *Ibid*, 110
- 23 *Ibid*, 116
- 24 *Ibid*, 327
- 25 Hart, *Op Cit*, 281
- 26 Tobin, *Op Cit*, 71
- 27 Julie B. Miller, "Eroticized Violence in Medieval Women's Mystical Literature: A Call for a Feminist Critique," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Fall 1999