

Mysticism as Political Action

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Abstract

Here I argue that far from being a corrupted resource, the texts of certain female mystics from the Catholic tradition can be read as powerful liberating texts. If we read the writings and actions of some certain mystics through the lens of Hannah Arendt's concept of *Action*, certain forms of mysticism become political action itself. Here I trace the development of the concept of *Praxis* from its Aristotelian origins and show how Arendt's reconception offers a valuable way of understanding the actions taken by mystics such as Teresa of Avila and Hildegard von Bingen. By using this conception of action and applying it to these historical texts, I hope to open up a new and fruitful way of reading the writings and actions (and writings as actions) of female mystics who have suffered from being appropriated by institutions with conservative, oppressive ideologies.

Keywords: Political Action; Arendt; Praxis; Poesis; Mysticism; Teresa of Avila; Hildegard von Bingen;

It is not surprising that mysticism has been neglected as an intellectual resource for contemporary political action. One could convincingly argue that this is because the role of the mystic is directly related to the role of the Church. In the modern world, perhaps even in this "post-secular" world¹, the role of The Church as an intellectual or philosophical interlocutor, and perhaps specifically the Roman Catholic Church, has been dismissed as insignificant for those serious scholars of culture and philosophy. Mysticism, it may be argued, belongs to a deeply outdated and even backward world view. Mysticism is linked to an ideology that those interested in rigorous intellectual pursuits should not even deign to engage with. Mysticism is for 'religious people' for the peasants; the uneducated; the illiterate. Those who need a transcendent being to offer hope and purpose. How could a tradition so foundational to one of the most oppressive structures of power, offer hope of release from that same structure?

Mysticism is indeed for the peasants, for the uneducated; the illiterate and those who need a transcendent being. And what the texts

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1 If such a thing even exists.

of certain female mystics offer us is not a model of the ideal femininity², or the ideal way in which to submit ourselves before authority³ but the opposite. If we read the writings and actions of mystics through the lens of Hannah Arendt's concept of *Action*, certain forms of mysticism become political action itself. And this is my intention with this paper.

I define political action as any action designed to challenge the power of hegemonic structures of political, religious, or cultural institutions. And I follow Hannah Arendt in defining action as an activity which discloses the agency and character of the individual who acts. In this way, a particular type of mystic emerges from the abundance of mystics within the Catholic tradition each clamoring for attention.

There are certain mystics whose mysticism is explicitly and unequivocally, politically active. I will be arguing here that their mysticism, in fact, is political action. A certain type of mystic whose character and agency is revealed through their taking action, can and does challenge oppression and hegemonic power⁴. I call this *The Liberating Mystic*. *The Liberating Mystic* offers a model of political action which empowers those most oppressed by hegemonic power structures (such as, but not limited to) The Roman Catholic Church.

I will focus on Arendt's conception of *Action*. I shall use italics to distinguish this concept from other agential concepts. I will show how the actions of a specific collection of mystics fulfill Arendt's conception. It is in *Action*, as conceived by Arendt, that we can see the liberative potential in mystical texts – because it is in these texts that we see described the actions taken by the mystics, and in some cases, it is the writing of the texts themselves which constitute *Action*. These texts are liberative because they describe a form of action which is itself liberative and because they are the product of a process – namely, writing – which is itself liberative.

After briefly outlining Arendt's notion of *Action*, I will trace the historical distinction between passive and active mysticism, and show

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2 Teresa of Avila, Terese of Liseux and Catherine of Sienna are all heralded as role models for women within Catholicism

3 As Catherine of Sienna's texts have been used by some Catholic conservative writers.

4 Although often, these are not always found together.

how a certain type of mystic performs Arendtian *Action*. Unlike the historical distinction between passive and active mysticism, Arendtian active mysticism does not concern the manner in which communication or dialogue with the divine is achieved, rather it is concerned with what happens after this; with what the mystic does with this dialogue, how they act. This form of Arendtian active mysticism has real liberative potential. This Arendtian action is liberative because it is a species of a more general notion of liberative action, *and* because mystical actions are often uniquely liberative in their nature. Mysticism is characterized by its existence outside of established rules of engagement with the divine such as those set up by organized religions.

The Vita Activa

Arendt defines the *Vita Activa* – literally Active Life - as divided into three 'fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action'⁵(Arendt 1958: 7). Arendt's *Labour* may be easily understood as those biological processes of the human body that maintain and allow physical life⁶; 'the human condition of labor is life itself' (Arendt 1958: 7). *Work* are those activities which are 'unnatural' to human existence but which provide the artificial world of things⁷; 'The human condition of work is worldliness' (Arendt 1958: 7). *Action*, according to Arendt is the 'only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter [as both labor and work do], corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not man live on the earth and inhabit the world.'(Arendt 1958: 7). An example of *Action* would be talking to one another; engaging in conversation.

Arendt's Action

Action, therefore, is the human activity that is fundamentally connected to our being with others, and the constitution of the self in relation to others. Arendt's conception of *Action* is based upon a re-

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5 The English translation uses American spelling, and so when quoting directly American spelling is used.

6 The boundary between *labour* and *work* are in some instances difficult to distinguish – it is not clear, for example, whether hunter-gathering would fall under labour or work for Arendt – perhaps one could argue more easily that eating itself was a form of Labour. Would hunting and eating an animal be Labour, whereas dining in a three Michelin starred restaurant be Work? Is the distinction between Labour and Work the point of necessity? So it is necessary to eat, but anything beyond satisfying that basic primal drive becomes work. Arendt is not clear.

7 Heidegger's famous hammer would be a product of *work* as would any human-made item.

conception of the ancient idea of *praxis*, and specifically the distinction between *praxis* (action) and *poesis* (fabrication).

Historically, and by this I mean before Arendt developed a new conception of the concept, the idea of *praxis* was broader, and encompassed a knowledge of what to do in a certain situation. *Praxis* was also to do with practice in general and not only social activity or activity between human beings. Arendt shifted the meaning of *praxis* when she explicitly separated it out from *poesis*. When we encounter this distinction in Aristotle, *poesis* is explained as knowledge of how to make an artefact; make something in the world. This form of action Arendt separates out from *praxis* and calls *Work*, leaving *praxis* – practical knowledge – to be reconceived as *Action*. The important move she makes is to make this *Action* political and not ethical in the loose sense that Aristotle was concerned with.⁸

The distinction between *poesis* and *praxis* is important to Arendt because she wants to focus our attention on *praxis*. She refines the notion of *praxis* to argue that it should be understood to be made up of two elements: plurality and natality. It is this construction of *praxis* that lends Arendtian *Action* its decidedly political character, and moves it beyond simply a loosely ethical conception as in the Aristotelian form.

Plurality is the idea that all action is taken in relationships with and to others, and natality is the idea that within each action lies the potential for freedom and change, to act in a completely new way. Arendt links both of these notions to the phenomena of speech and language⁹. Without speech we would find it very difficult to coordinate our actions with those of others. Without speech, the plurality of action – one of the central elements of action for Arendt – would not be

8 See Aristotle, W. D. Ross, and Lesley Brown, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). I am indebted to Constantine Sandis for helping me work through these distinctions with regard to Arendt, as well as Ansuman Biswas and Luke Brunning, conversations with whom helped clarify the distinction between *poesis* & *praxis* (if one can or ought to be made).

9 Aristotle divided *praxis* into two forms also, but, these are different to Arendt's. For Aristotle, *praxis* was either (εὐπραξία), "good *praxis*" or *dyspraxia* (δυσπραξία) "bad *praxis*, misfortune". Ibid. at VI, 5, 1140b7.

possible¹⁰. Speech is also the way in which an individual discloses their action; action without speech may well be meaningless. It is through speech that we ascertain the meaning of an individual's actions.

Plurality

Action, for Arendt, is something ontological. In other words, it is through action that Being itself is enacted, and revealed. This is because *Action* (as opposed to work or labour) is only something that we can do in relation to, and because of, others. For Arendt, Being is fundamentally a Being-with, or *Mitein*¹¹ 'Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live' (Arendt 1958: 8). Within action, then, plurality means that we have the ability to distinguish ourselves from others through our action at the same time as realising that it is only through engagement with others, that we 'are'.

According to Arendt, it is in the third fundamental human activity, *Action* (distinct from work and labour) that Being itself is revealed or created. One cannot 'be' other than in relation to others. Humans enact their otherness or distinction from each other, by taking *Action*, and for Arendt, it is through speech that human distinctiveness (which all living things possess) is transformed into otherness (which only humans possess).

For Arendt, 'human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings.' (Arendt 1958: 176) and this because it is only in plurality – in the fact that we are all only ever human beings - that our uniqueness can be expressed. 'Human plurality,' Arendt writes, is 'the basic condition of both action and speech' (Arendt 1958: 175). By this, she means that within speech and action lies plurality, or, speech and action (and speech as a form of action) have at their core, plurality.

10 It may seem therefore, that one cannot 'Act' on ones own – and to some extent this is correct. One may be able to take *Action* alone, but it can only be *Action* in the Arendtian sense, if it is with an awareness of plurality (and therefore others). In which case completely isolated *Action* is not *Action* and is instead simply an act.

11 Although first discussed by Martin Heidegger in Martin Heidegger, *Sein Und Zeit* (Halle a. d. S: M. Niemeyer, 1927) xi, 438 p. Simone de Beauvoir writes extensively (and more helpfully) on *Mitsein* in Simone De Beauvoir et al., *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage, 2011) xxv, 822 p.

Natality

The other essential element of action is natality. Natality denotes the idea that within every action, there is the potential for a radically new beginning:

‘the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting.’ (Arendt 1958: 9)

In this way, natality is the absolute freedom to always start again, to initiate a totally new way of being.

It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings ... The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world (Arendt 1958: 177-8)

Political revolution is *Action* writ large for Arendt: ‘revolutions are the only political events which confront us directly and inevitably with the problem of beginning,¹²’ (Arendt 1963: 21). In revolutions, people understand and clearly see the power of action and its ability to define and give identity to, human Being. They also confront us with a direct engagement with radical freedom: with revolutions, one is made aware of all possibilities, including those previously hidden by oppression:

It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins. [...] The fact that man is capable of action means that the

12 By the ‘problem of beginnings’, Arendt means that often without revolutions – the prime example of *Action* for Arendt – it is often impossible to know how to initiate a new way of being. The problem of beginning is in knowing how to find oneself at ‘the beginning’. For Arendt, *Action* is the solution to this problem. When we take *Action*, we are confronted with the ability to start something new, but this ability is like looking into abyss. This problem of beginnings is that of being confronted with the ‘abyss of nothingness that opens up before any deed that cannot be accounted for by a reliable chain of cause and effect and is inexplicable in Aristotelian categories of potentiality and actuality.’ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York ; London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) at 208.

unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. (Arendt 1958: 177-8)

Action, Revolution, and the Mystic

Hannah Arendt’s conception of *Action* is perhaps one of the most important and influential concepts for political philosophers, particularly those working to effect liberation from political oppression. Arendt’s category of *Action* is important because it offers a conception of political action that places political action at the heart of Being itself. Those who engage with Arendt’s work are left with a responsibility to effect political change, as well as the conceptual tools to do so. The responsibility exists because within every action is the potential to make something completely and totally new. Following Arendt, to act is to engage with the potential for change; to act in any way is to make a choice; with the power to effect change comes the responsibility to either effect change or support the status quo.

Moreover, this change and action are directly related to community – one cannot take action without it being intrinsically linked to other people because within *Action* is always plurality. Arendt is keen to ‘combat the reductionist character of the teleological model of action’ – the understanding that action is always towards a certain end – by ‘exposing the nihilistic consequences of denying meaning or value to the realm of action and appearances’ (Villa 1992: 276). *Action*, for Arendt, is valuable in and of itself.

‘Action, in so far as it engages in founding and preserving political bodies, creates the condition for remembrance, that is, for history.’ (Arendt 1958: 9) *Action* is so important because it has at its core, a potential (natality) to create something totally other to that which has come before. History is important for Arendt because it how we remember that which came before. When we take *Action*, we are changing the way in which we understand and remember that which came before – we are changing history.

It is through taking *Action* that radical political and ontological change occurs. Taking *Action* might be seen to be good in and of itself since it manifests an interdependent plurality of people, but it is

additionally good in then enabling via this same plurality, further change that helps the community. When this action is intentionally engaging with plurality and natality, change can occur.

I want to put this conception of action to work in applying it to the texts and actions of specific mystics to show how the work of certain mystics can count, fruitfully, as a form of Arendtian *Action*.

Re-reading Mystical Texts as Arendtian Action

Arendt's concept of *Action* offers a way of understanding the lives and actions of mystics that reclaims their liberating potential. We can find evidence within the texts of mystics, of action that contains both plurality and natality, but more than this, we can find in these texts previously used to support the status quo, actions that challenged and changed it.

Much historical and even contemporary scholarship on female mystics, perhaps specifically Christian female mystics, focuses on mystical texts as resources that support an oppressive form of femininity and/or Christian life. Instead of liberative texts, these writings are used to suppress true political action, to suppress change and challenge, and to maintain oppression. Female mystics have their stories sanitized, re-written, heavily edited and re-packaged by members of religious organisations who go on to use these re-packed texts and hagiographed autobiographies as examples of ideal Christian femininity. Often these texts emphasize passivity, submission, and only emphasise a certain lack of particular form of action.

It is this emphasis on speech and action and speech as action that makes Arendt's concept of *Action* so helpful in understanding and reading the work of female mystics. Here I use Arendt to argue against a passive form of contemplative mysticism, which has traditionally (and in some places, still) been presented as the more preferable, noble and 'authentic' form of mysticism. But I want to suggest first that this way of reading and the encouragement of this way of reading mystical texts is itself a political action – one aimed at maintaining the oppressive status quo. Second, I suggest that those historical mystics – at least those I will engage with here – were fundamentally engaged in Arendtian action.

As Arendt writes,

A life without speech and without action, on the other hand—and this is the only way of life that in earnest has renounced all appearance and all vanity in the biblical sense of the word—is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men. (Arendt 1958: 176)

There is no meaningful life without speech and action, supporting my claim that only a form of mysticism that is active and political can be meaningful. The role of plurality in action for Arendt 'makes possible the peculiar freedom of political action.' This freedom is 'the very opposite of 'inner freedom', the inward space into which men escape from external coercion and *feel free*.' (Arendt in Villa 1992: 277)

'Inner freedom' here is that which has been sold by The Church to the oppressed as a substitute for real freedom: a safe substitute that maintains the *inaction* of those disenfranchised by the political status quo. Much like certain forms of oppressive conservative Christianity encourage a focus on getting to heaven over achieving basic standards of living conditions, this way of reading the texts of mystics encourages inaction, it encourages 'inner freedom' as a substitute for real freedom.¹³

Mystics who take Action

Scholars of mysticism have distinguished between 'active' and 'contemplative' mysticism. Various mystical texts make this distinction, and scholars of mysticism have maintained this binary classification since the study of mysticism developed as an academic discipline. In his survey of mysticism, F.C. Happold points out the various stages of mystical union that Richard of Victor, one of the most important twelfth century mystics¹⁴, describes.

In the first degree, God enters into the soul and she turns inwards into herself. In the second she ascends above herself and is lifted up to God. In the third the soul, lifted up to God, passes over altogether into Him. In the fourth the soul goes forth on God's behalf and descends

13 Challenging such pernicious theologies was an aim of many liberation theologies, and much of my wider work locates itself within this tradition.

14 Richard of Saint Victor is considered to be the first person to attempt to create a systematic theology of mysticism. Previous to his work, mystical experience was not understood as being related to scripture or any theology.

below herself.(Richard of Saint Victor in Egan 1991: 193)

Happold makes the point that Richard's fourth degree on mystical union can be read as a call to action. When the soul 'descends below herself', Happold claims, Richard is talking about returning to engage with the everyday world. For Happold, this movement indicates a distinct type of mysticism: 'To the mysticism of understanding and knowledge and of union and love I would add the mysticism of action.'(Happold 1963: 101-2) It is here we see for the first time, the distinction between the 'mysticism of action' coined by Happold, and 'active mysticism'. I wish to add a further specification: that what we find in the texts of certain mystics is neither 'mysticism of action' nor 'active mysticism' but is Arendtian action.

Happold elaborates:

The true mystic is not like a cat basking in the sun, but like a mountaineer. At the end of his quest he finds not the enervating isle of the Lotus Eaters, but the sharp, pure air of the Mount of Transfiguration. The greatest contemplatives, transfigured on this holy mountain, have felt themselves called upon to 'descend below themselves', to take on the humility of Christ, who 'took upon Him the form of a servant', and, coming down to the plain, to become centers of creative energy and power in the world.(Happold 1963: 101)

Although Happold is not the only (or indeed first) scholar of mysticism to mark out different types of mysticism, he is the first to mark out a mysticism of action as a distinct form of mysticism. The most interesting and important distinction between forms of mysticism has been between 'active' and 'passive'. But this distinction is not the same distinction he makes, and the one I want to develop here, using Arendt.

This division between active and passive has been related to contemplation, a key element of mysticism, and what has been called mystical experience. Much discussion of mysticism has focused on contemplation as either the method of communication with the divine, or the medium through which the divine could communicate with the individual. This distinction- between the mystic who actively attempts to cultivate a spiritual environment suitable to communicate with God, and the mystic who is spontaneously gifted with communication from God

in contemplation, has traditionally been the foundation of the distinction between active and passive mysticism. But it is not my intention to focus on this how certain mystics receive their communication. The active and passive mysticism I discuss is concerned with what the individual mystics do *after* the dialogue or communication with the divine has been experienced or received.

'Modern writers on mystical theology commonly distinguish two kinds of contemplation, the one acquired, active, ordinary; the other infused, passive, extraordinary.' (Butler: 216). The difference between the active and passive in this distinction is the way or manner in which the mystical experience was reached. When 'active', the mystic attempts through conscious and intentional prayer, to reach union with God. The 'passive' mysticism in this model is one given or bestowed upon the mystic by God. In this way, 'active' mysticism is like Underhill's practical mysticism; something that one does (mystical practice) in order to achieve a mystical union. In Happold's model, he calls this mysticism of action 'The lesser mystic way'. He claims that 'the word 'lesser' implies no value-judgement' (Happold 1963: 102) but this does not seem correct, or indeed, true. Even his use of Richard of Saint Victor demonstrates a belief that to take action in the world requires a stepping down; the mystic deigns to return to the world and busy herself with human matters.

I am suggesting something totally other to this: that mystical *Action* or mysticism as *Action* can come about after the event of dialogue with the divine. Arendtian Active mysticism or a mysticism of *Action* – because either fit my conception - is a form of political action that is informed by and inspired directly by an experience of dialogue (or union if understood as such) with the divine. Arendtian Active mysticism does not concern how one receives the divine dialogue, it is concerned with what one does with this information conveyed in the dialogue, in the world.

There are two moves here; the first is from passive mysticism to active mysticism in the ordinary way that Happold understands it. The second is to say that there is another, different form of action which is concerned with what the mystic *does* after they have their experience of union with the divine. This is where Arendt's model of *Action* is helpful. It is not enough to simply argue that active mysticism is about taking some

form of action towards union or dialogue with God. Active mysticism, I argue, needs to imply an active, intentional act that moves beyond an isolated contemplative union or communion with the divine. For this reason, Arendt's conception of *Action* with its integral understanding of natality and plurality, is essential to any attempt to argue for this.

Arendtian Active mysticism, then, is political *Action* taken intentionally to disrupt the status quo, *Action* that contains within it the potential of absolute freedom (natality). It also has at its core not only an understanding of the mystic's being-in-the-world as related to beings in the world, (plurality), but an understanding of the action itself being something that *defines* this plural nature of the mystic's Being.

In other words, the Arendtian active mystic is one who engages in active mysticism. Active mysticism is constituted by activity that is directly informed by dialogue with the divine, as well as having impact that defines the Being of the mystic as always ever a being amongst beings. Additionally, this *Action* taken as a result of dialogue with the divine, holds within it the seed of change that is political.

Active mysticism then, is something radically other than a form of mysticism that is set up as other to quiet contemplation, and rather, falls nicely into the fourth degree of union with God that Richard Saint Victor describes in his Texts. It is 'In the fourth the soul goes forth on God's behalf and descends below herself.' (Egan 1991) This descending below herself is to return to the world of beings, to actively and practically engage in the world. This must be a specific form of active engagement with others.

Active Mysticism in the Texts

Now that I have clarified what I mean by active mysticism, I want to examine mystical texts to show how their actions conform tightly to this model of active mysticism. We will see in these texts how the activities of the mystics fit Arendt's conception of action – in particular how they demonstrate both plurality and natality. I intend to reclaim the texts of female mystics as offering examples of the struggle towards the liberation from oppression and this is one way in which this can be done. We may not be able to have a liberated Teresa, but we can have a liberating Teresa.

Hildegard of Bingen

Perhaps the best example of Arendt's *Action* in the testimonies of mystics comes from Hildegard of Bingen. Hildegard was constantly getting into trouble with those in authority, and her letters are entertaining and engaging as a consequence. What we see in the testimony of Hildegard is evidence of her taking action due to the instruction she believes she received from the divine, and getting rebuked because of this. But her action is *Action* because in it we see the Arendtian characteristics of plurality and natality.

Perhaps the best example of Hildegard's *Action* comes in the form of Letter 23 to the prelates at Mainz. As abbess of Mount St Rupert, she had been ordered to disinter the body of a man previously buried in the sacred ground of the monastery. She refuses after claiming to have been told by God that to do so would be wrong:

By a vision which was implanted in my soul by God the Great Artisan before I was born, I have been compelled to write these things because of the interdict¹⁵ by which our superiors have bound us, on account of a certain dead man buried at our monastery, a man buried without any objection, with his own priest officiating. Yet only a few days after his burial, these men ordered us to remove him from the cemetery. Seized by no small terror, as a result, I looked as usual to the True Light, and, with wakeful eyes, I saw in my spirit that if this man were disinterred in accordance with their commands, a terrible and lamentable danger would come upon us like a dark cloud before a threatening thunderstorm.

Therefore, we have not presumed to remove the body of the deceased inasmuch as he had confessed his sins, had received extreme unction and communion, and had been buried without objection. Furthermore, we have not yielded to those who advised or even commanded this course of action. (Hildegard et al. 1998: 76)

Here we can see how Hildegard takes action based directly on her dialogue with the divine. She writes how it was only after asking the True

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15 An interdict is an ecclesiastical censure that prevents certain individuals or groups from partaking in certain, specified rites of the church. In this case, Hildegard was prevented from singing the offices and from celebrating Mass.

Light 'with wakeful eyes' that she decided not to obey the command of those with authority over her. She is careful to point out that it was when she was awake, alert and actively looking to see the outcome if she were to disinter the man; this was no dream-like vague sense, it is real, solid, and clear.

Moreover, this non-action (refusing to do something) is actually significantly more of an *Action* than if she had simply acquiesced to their demands. Hildegard is fully aware of the repercussions of her actions; she had already been threatened with having her right to sing and even the right to partake in celebrating Mass. Indeed so clear is she in her refusal and knowing full well what her punishment would be, she tells the prelates to whom she writes not only that she did indeed disobey their orders, but that she has already 'ceased from singing the divine praises and from participation in Mass' 'in accordance with their injunction'. The tone of her letter is defiant and lacks genuine respect. She is almost challenging the prelates to defy her as she has them. I have already ceased from singing, she seems to be saying, 'in accordance with your injunction' as if this was indeed in accordance with their wishes. The fact of course was that the withdrawal of the right to music was not something Hildegard was offered in exchange for disobeying their order: it was a threat. A threat, by taking up herself without their order, she seems to be proving is no threat at all. Far from being an attempt to 'not be totally disobedient' her ceasing to sing and celebrate Mass is instead a challenge of the authority of the prelates of Mainz. You can take away my music if you want, she says, but I answer to a much higher authority than you.

She even explicitly says this:

As a result my sisters and I have been greatly distressed and saddened. Weighed down by this burden, therefore, I heard these words in a vision: It is improper for you to obey human words ordering you to abandon the sacraments of the Garment of the Word of God, 'Who, born virginally of the Virgin Mary, is your salvation. Still, it is incumbent upon you to seek permission to participate in the sacraments from those prelates who laid the obligation of obedience upon you.(Hildegard et al. 1998: 77)

The result of this letter and her disobedience was serious.

Hildegard was threatened with excommunication and actually punished with a lesser injunction which involved serious restrictions on her ability to engage with her community. Her *Action*, she knew, would impact her sense of self as part of a community and the community itself. It was fully *Action* in that it was an act that directly confronted not only the plurality inherent in the issue she was refusing to part take in (the exhumation of a member of the wider community), but also the plurality of her position as a member of her own religious community. Hildegard's *Action* has natality at its core also: her refusal to engage with the prelates in the way that was expected of her marked a totally revolutionary way of acting. Hildegard was confronted by the 'abyss of nothingness that opens up before any deed' (Arendt 1978: 208).

Although we do not have the entirety of all correspondences regarding this situation remaining, there are letters between the prelates and Hildegard as well as from Hildegard to the archbishop himself that add more detail to this story. A nobleman was interred in the consecrated ground of Hildegard's monastery and this caused great controversy as at one time in his life he had himself been excommunicated (Hildegard et al. 1998: 79-80).

Although Hildegard was informed and had first-hand eyewitness evidence that the excommunication had been lifted, this made no difference. Apparently, there were political reasons for the prelates in at Mainz to insist on his exhumation. Suspicion surrounds the motivation for their actions because of the swiftness with which they acted as well as their timing, waiting until the Archbishop (a friend and supporter of Hildegard) was out of the country to enforce their interdict. 'In any case, Hildegard was obdurate, refusing to give up the body' (Hildegard et al. 1998: 80). It was this act, and the apparent miracle surrounding it, that contributed to her canonization as the reports for her protocol claim 'that she made the sign of the cross over the grave with her *baculus*, causing the tomb to vanish without a trace' (Hildegard et al. 1998: 80).

Hildegard writes to the Archbishop of Mainz, begging for his intercession and help. She is explicit in appealing to the Archbishop's belief in her as someone with a privileged communication with God and encourages him to take her side by aligning herself with the will of God. 'We are confident that the fire of Love, which is God, will so inspire you that your paternal piety will deign to hear the cry of lament, which, in our

tribulation, we raise to you.’(Letter 24, Hildegard et al. 1998: 80-81) She tells the Archbishop what has occurred, from her perspective:

When our superiors at Mainz ordered us to cast him out of our cemetery or else refrain from singing the divine offices,¹⁶ I looked, as usual, to the True Light, through which God instructed me that I was never to accede to this: one whom He had received from the bosom of the Church into the glory of salvation was by no means to be disinterred. (Letter 24, Hildegard et al. 1998: 81)

Hildegard makes it very clear that she is not acting according to her own will but because she has no choice, she is being commanded by an authority greater than any other. ‘I would have humbly obeyed them, and would have willingly yielded up that dead man, excommunicated or not, to anyone whom they had sent in your name to enforce the inviolable law of the Church – if my fear of almighty God had not stood in my way’ (Letter 24, Hildegard et al. 1998: 81).

Hildegard puts the Archbishop of Mainz in a position that makes it almost impossible for him to not lift the punishment placed on her as if he believes her to be in contact and dialogue with the divine then he cannot insist that she disobey His (Christ’s) orders. Hildegard refers to a letter written by the Archbishop, and delivered to her by the prelates, ‘forbidding us, once again, to celebrate those offices’. Hildegard is insistent that ‘having confidence in your paternal piety, I am assured that you never would have sent the letter if you had known the truth of the matter.’.(Letter 24, Hildegard et al. 1998: 81)

Teresa of Avila

Another example of a mystic taking Arendtian *Action* can be found in the writings of Teresa of Avila. One of the most important actions that Teresa took over the course of her life; one that she is most famous for and that brought her the most trouble and work, was of establishing a monastery of discalced Carmelites. After a collection of visions of Christ, as well as events that she describes as torments from the devil, she woke one day with an overwhelming desire to please God. By this time she had been living in a Carmelite monastery in Avila for over twenty five years. She liked it there, as she describes herself ‘I was very

.....
16 This is in fact not accurate- they did not offer her a choice, it was a threat.

happy in the house where I was. The place was very pleasing to me, and so was my cell, which suited me excellently; and this held me back’ (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 237).

Teresa had no need or desire to leave. The monastery in Avila was comfortable, a large house well patronized by wealthy guests, where the nuns wanted for nothing. It is important to note that despite the hagiographical redescrptions of Teresa’s story- redescrptions that emphasize how she was deeply dissatisfied with the culture and nature of the culture in the monastery- it being too lax and not holy enough, for example – her own writings prove the opposite. She was happy, content, very pleased with how comfortable and pleasant life was there. It was because of the desire placed within in, as she describes it, by God, and only because of this desire placed in her by God, that she decided to pursue setting up here own monastery. As far as Teresa was concerned, the instruction from the divine was clear:

One day, after Communion, the Lord earnestly commanded me to pursue this aim with all my strength. He made me great promises; that the fail to be established, the great service would be done Him there, that is name should be St Joseph’s; that he would watch over us at one of its doors and Our Lady at the other; that Christ would be with us; that the convent would be a star, and that it would shed the most brilliant light. (237Teresa and Cohen 1987)

This action was not welcomed by everyone, not least of all by Teresa herself. But the real challenge she faced after her own unwillingness to leave the comfort of Avila, was from the Roman Curia. According to Teresa, Christ himself foresaw the troubles she would encounter and right from the beginning, instructed her accordingly. ‘He told me to convey His orders to my confessor, with the request that he should not oppose them or in any way hinder my carrying them out’ (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 237).

Despite having the support of her spiritual advisor, as well as another nun she describes as her ‘companion’, the idea was rejected and ridiculed by those in ecclesiastical authority. ‘Hardly had this news of this begun to spread around the place than there fell upon us a persecution so severe that it would not be possible to describe it in a few words. They talked, they laughed at us, and they declared that the idea

was absurd' (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 238).¹⁷

Teresa's *Action*, like Hildegard's, was taken with a full awareness of the community she was a part of, and that her action would effect. Despite there being 'hardly anyone among the prayerful, or indeed in the whole place, who was not against us, and did not consider our project absolutely absurd', she persisted only because of her dialogues with God. 'The Lord showed me no other way' (Teresa and Cohen 1987: 239).

Teresa could not tell them of her principle reason to set up the convent because she had by this time already made herself unpopular within the convent because of her visions and locutions. Teresa had been accused of receiving visions from the devil himself and not from God and the visions and locutions she experienced on a regular basis were gossiped about viciously. Teresa's visions and the type of people that they attracted – namely holy men - had already placed her in a difficult social setting. She was already on the fringe of convent social life due to the visions and ecstasies that she suffered (or enjoyed). Throughout the *Life* she writes about how she wishes more than anything that her spiritual advisors and confessors would be more discreet. She knows that talk of her divine dialogues was rife throughout the convent, and that many of the nuns resented her, thinking her of attempting to gain attention for herself through these supposed ecstasies. The plan to start her own convent encouraged this bad feeling, and the only truth she could offer as some sort of explanation, she was unable to supply, because it would only feed into their existing prejudice.

Action is not always popular. In fact very often *Action* is deeply unpopular. The very nature of Arendtian *Action* – that it has at its heart plurality and natality – means that more often than not it is disruptive and not 'populist'. The point of *Action* is not that it is an act conceded my most to be correct, rather, it is an act or collection of acts that has at its foundation an awareness of the interconnectedness of beings, and the potential for change. When Teresa is harassed for eighteen years by the divine, and finally submits to His demands,¹⁸ a tipping point is reached.

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17 I will return to this series of events, and the response Teresa receives from the authorities, in the next and final chapters as it is a good example of what I term abjection.

18 For Teresa, although not for all female mystics, the divine was male.

Her submission and consequential *Action* is a form of revolution.

Vassula Ryden

The final example of a mystic taking action based upon communication with the divine, is of Vassula Ryden. Ryden is most famous for taking a very particular position regarding ecumenism. Ryden understands that God wishes all of the Churches to be united, and claims that this wish was conveyed to her on multiple occasions, directly. She continues to engage with the Roman Curia for this reason, despite their continued attempts to ignore and silence her.

From the very beginning of her communication with God, Ryden was told that one of the main reasons for the communication was to encourage or help bring about, 'Church Unity'. She was encouraged by Christ, who she understands to be communicating with her, to give speeches, talks, and publish the communications he gives to her all on this topic. If there were one single issue that the writings and actions of Ryden focus on, it is Church Unity.

Under the title *True Life in God*, Ryden publishes her communications in physical form as books, as well as well as online, and her website is of the same name. The nature of Ryden's online presence and instant dissemination of her messages through the Internet and her website has meant that a large online forum and community has developed around True Life in God. She talks about TLIG as if it is a movement, and not only a religious or spiritual movement, but specifically a movement for Church Unity. 'True Life in God is a call to Unity – all in TLIG have the responsibility to circulate widely the TLIG book "Unity, Virtue of Love".' (Ryden)

There is little doubt that one of the reasons the Roman Curia, with whom Vassula Ryden has had much involvement and engagement - have historically anxious about her work is because of this, and remain so today. Not only does TLIG represent a new religious movement of sorts, it is a new religious movement that has at its core, a fundamentally un-doctrinal idea.

Like other mystics, it is possible to identify a collection of actions that confirm to my model of Arendtian 'active mysticism' and that can be considered demonstrations of a mysticism of *Action*. Here I will focus on

the *Action* Ryden continues to take in promoting Church Unity. This is because it is this action which has been the most controversial and has resulted in her being abjected.¹⁹

One of the most important speeches cited by Ryden herself as well as members of TLIG, was delivered on May 25th 2007, in Turkey. It is considered important for a collection of reasons; first, it had a large audience of over 500 people, second, in this audience were a Cardinal, two Archbishops, nine Bishops as well as a collection of lay people. Ryden's website claims that this audience was made up of people from 'eighteen Christian denominations and of other faiths' and that 'the speech received a standing ovation from all present for two minutes.' (Ryden)

The two most important elements of the speech are her claim that the responsibility for:

The Church is one and has always been one, but the people of the Church are those that with their quarrels, prejudices, their pride and mainly their lack of love for one another managed to divide themselves, and we all know it!

And second, that Christ himself was 'offended' (Ryden) by the continued quarrels, prejudices, and pride of those 'people of the Church.' By 'people of the Church', Ryden is referring to the leaders of the respective denominations who reject unity. The most important and powerful of these are the Roman Curia of the Holy Roman Catholic Church and the leaders of the Eastern Orthodox Church. It is unknown if either of these Churches had representatives present, although this is the implication of the text on Ryden's website. By making such strong claims Ryden took some risks; she was already unpopular with both sides of the largest division, and her words in this speech do not show restraint.

She quotes one of the messages from Christ as saying:

My Kingdom on earth is My Church and the Eucharist is the Life

¹⁹ I use abjection here as a development of the Kristevan term as found in Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs De L'horreur : Essai Sur L'abjection* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980) 247 p.

of My Church, this Church I Myself have given you. I had left you with one Church but hardly had I left, just barely had I turned back to go to the Father, than you reduced My House to a desolation! You leveled it to the ground! And My flock is straying left and right. For how long am I to drink the Cup of your division? Cup of affliction and devastation!(Ryden)

She continues, this time in her own words:

There are two choices here. The first choice belongs to God and comes from God and that is: to live in love, peace, humility, reconciliation and unity. The second choice belongs to Satan and comes from him and that is: hatred, war, pride, lack of forgiveness, ego and division. It's not so difficult to choose.

There is more than a passing resemblance between this speech and the letters of Hildegard of Bingen to the prelates at Mainz. Indeed, when we look at Ryden's other texts, particularly her letters to and from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, we see a striking similarity in tone and content. One of the other most important resources we have in examining the relationship between the communication Ryden claims to have with the divine and her actions, are these letters. In them members of the CDF engage in a dialogue with Ryden in an attempt to 'discern the spirit'. It is in these correspondences that we find evidence of Ryden's actions being motivated by her communications, as well as seeing how her *Action* – in this case the speeches and writings she publishes on Church Unity – confirm to the model of an Arendtian mysticism of action.

In her speech given on the 25th of May, and published widely online and in hard copy, she claims that regarding Church Unity:

There are two choices here. The first choice belongs to God and comes from God and that is: to live in love, peace, humility, reconciliation and unity. The second choice belongs to Satan and comes from him and that is: hatred, war, pride, lack of forgiveness, ego and division. It's not so difficult to choose. (Ryden)

This is a brave act, and one directly motivated by her communication from God. Later, in a letter to the CDF in response to their questioning of her motivation, she writes:

I do not believe I would have ever had the courage or the zeal to face the Orthodoxy to bring them to understand the reconciliation our Lord desires from them if I had not experienced our Lord's presence, neither would I have endured the oppositions, the criticisms and the persecutions being done on me by them. In the very beginning of God's intervention I was totally confused and feared I was being deluded; this uncertainty was truly the biggest cross, since I never heard in my life before that God can indeed express Himself to people in our own times and had no one to ask about it. Because of this, I tried to fight it away, but the experience would not leave and later on, slowly, with time, I became reassured and confident that all of this was only God's work, because I started to see God's hand in it. This is why I stopped fearing to face opposition and criticism and have total confidence in our Lord, knowing that where I lack He will always fill, in spite of my insufficiency, and His works will end up always glorious. Approaching the Orthodox priests, monks and bishops to acknowledge the Pope and to reconcile with sincerity with the Roman Church is not an easy task as our Lord says in one of the messages; it is like trying to swim in the opposite direction of a strong current, but after having seen how our Lord suffers in our division I could not refuse our Lord's request when asked to carry this cross; therefore, I have accepted this mission, yet not without having gone through (and still going through) many fires. You have asked: "Why do you take up this mission?" My answer is, because I was called by God, I believed and I answered Him; therefore, I want to do God's will. One of Christ's first words were: "Which house is more important, your house or My House?" I answered, "Your House, Lord." He said: "Revive My House, embellish My House and unite it." (Ryden 2002)

Here Ryden demonstrates how her actions can be considered a form of Arendtian *Action*; her action demonstrates both plurality and natality. There are few actions more explicitly concerned with plurality than promoting and fighting for the unity of the Church. Unity of the Church indicates a fundamental understanding that one is only ever a being amongst others – Vassula's concern with unity is due to the understanding that the Church as she understands it can only grow and develop together – as a being amongst beings. Finally, the brave (or naïve and/or simplistic) call for complete unity demonstrates her belief in the true potential for radical shift to occur, through *Action*. Her public

condemnation of Church leaders for their 'pride' and 'stubbornness' as a reason for the failure of Church Unity so far, may well be dismissed as foolish by those more aware of the complex nature of ecumenism, but it remains the case that it also demonstrates her understanding that radical shift and change can occur as a result of her action.

The Liberating Mystic

All of the mystics examined here demonstrate a profound ability to take *Action* as defined by Arendt's model. They all take *Action* that contains within it plurality and natality. All of the mystics engaged with here share a specific quality; that of being acutely aware of their locatedness within a nexus of others and of having the potential to radically change the political and / or social situation for both themselves and others. Instead of dismissing these texts of female mystics as corrupted by misreadings, mistranslations and appropriation by oppressive institutions, I argue that their reading through the lens of Arendtian *Action* can offer inspiration for political change today, as well as a richer and more accurate understanding of the nature of these texts and their authors.

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