The Language of Transcendentalism: Mysticism, Gender, and the Body in Julia Ward Howe's *The Hermaphrodite*

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The figure of the hermaphrodite played a vital role in shaping the notion of monistic unity promoted by American transcendentalists. These writers and thinkers were enthralled by the capacity of this image to problematize dualistic conceptions of gender in an embodied manner. Writing under a binary discursive regime while simultaneously seeking to redeem gender divisions in a divine unity, American transcendentalists turned to intersexuality as an embodied nondualistic account of both self and body. Drawing on the visionary thought of the Swedish philosopher and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, Ralph Waldo Emerson posited that "the finest people marry the two sexes in their own person. Hermaphrodite is then the symbol of the finished soul."[1]

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[1] Ralph Waldo Emerson, journal entry, April 1843, in *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman et al., 16 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1960–82), VIII, 380.

Transcendentalist writers like Emerson and Julia Ward Howe found great inspiration in Swedenborg's work, especially in *Conjugial Love* (1768). As Suzanne Ashworth points out, they traced in Swedenborg's mystical theology a spiritual vocabulary capable of collapsing sexual difference through the imagery of "intersexed angels made one body through divine coupling."[2] Furthermore, as I will suggest in this essay, mystic texts provided the transcendentalists with practical *linguistic* techniques for addressing the ineffable worlds of both the self and the divine. Their mystical, noninstitutional modes of expression allowed the transcendentalists to move beyond the human-made confines of societal language, beyond the grounds of instrumental and discursive reason.

Emerson reflects extensively on the failure of dualistic language to grasp heterogeneous modes of being. In *Nature* (1836), he famously yearns for a return to an original connection between word and world, contending, "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind."[3] His allusion to the Swedenborgian doctrine of correspondence—in which the natural and physical worlds exist as a reflection of spiritual and divine domains—allows Emerson to transform nature itself "into a kind of personalized, sacred language."[4] Language, according to this view, is not merely an arbitrary system of signs and sounds, but a materialized expression of the spiritual interconnection of the human mind with the "poetic language manifest on the landscape."[5] Yet all the while, language is inextricably constrained by its embedment in sociohistoric conditioning, and this societal limitation has particular

[2] Suzanne Ashworth, "Spiritualized Bodies and Posthuman Possibilities: Technologies of Intimacy in *The Hermaphrodite*," in *Philosophies of Sex: Critical Essays on "The Hermaphrodite,"* ed. Renée Bergland and Gary Williams (Columbus: The Ohio State Univ. Press, 2012), p. 186.

[3] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*, in his *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), p. 20.

[4] Devin P. Zuber, *A Language of Things: Emanuel Swedenborg and the American Environmental Imagination* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2019), p. 10.

[5] Michelle Kohler, *Miles of Stare: Transcendentalism and the Problem of Literary Vision in Nineteenth-Century America* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2014), p. 4.

implications for the transcendentalist effort to unveil an all-encompassing gender balance.

The writings of Margaret Fuller and Julia Ward Howe centrally reflect an attempt to move beyond dualistic thought in language. Both writers took pains to develop a hermaphroditic language, one that would allow them to undo gender dimorphism by working upon its discursive construction. In her *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845), Fuller famously argues that "male and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But, in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman."[6] Fuller's focus on qualities such as motion, fluidity, and states of matter strives to undo opposing poles such as masculine and feminine, fluid and solid, man and woman. Because the concepts available to her perpetuate a dualistic organization of the real, Fuller stresses that her monistic metaphysics of gender requires a different approach to language: she drains the force from gendered nouns by turning them into adjectival forms. As Leon Chai notes, what Fuller seeks to achieve is a nonconceptual language that precedes the constructing features of discourse, a spiritual language that "does not attempt to define" one's nature "in advance by means of a given concept."[7] Whereas ordinary societal language makes sense of the real through concepts that deny one's singularity, Fuller's prose invokes spiritual modes of expression that allow her to work upon the concept in order to disarm discursive dualisms in language.

The connection between spirituality and a transcendentalist feminist politics of language stands at the center of my investigation. Specifically, I argue that transcendentalist women writers turn to two distinct forms of knowledge rooted in mysticism—mystic speech and mystic modes of embodied perception—as a means to undo the abstracting features of conceptual language and the way this language of categories

[6] Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Criticism*, ed. Larry J. Reynolds (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), p. 68.

[7] Leon Chai, *The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1987), p. 347.

aims to determine the truth of the body. The link between language and the body becomes crucial for writers like Howe and Fuller who seek to undo social divisions while writing in a discourse steeped in rigid polarities such as male and female, civilization and nature, flesh and spirit, and intellect and intuition. The mystic approach to both expression and embodiment, I suggest, allows Howe to problematize the dualistic discursive regime of her time. Her linguistic politics, which favors opacity or veiling over lucidity, as well as affective sensation over explication, frees the body from the constraints of social intelligibility through the design of a language that is constantly forced to confront its failure to adequately name.

My discussion focuses on the intersection between mysticism and intersexuality in Howe's unfinished "Laurence manuscript." Howe's text, written during the 1840s and first published under the title *The Hermaphrodite* in 2004—more than one hundred and fifty years after it was originally written—depicts the life of an intersex protagonist named Laurence. Although Laurence are raised as a man and at times present themselves as a man, the novel insists on Laurence's fluidity of both sex and gender, actively distancing Laurence from the pronouns "he" and "she." I will thus be discussing Laurence using the gender-neutral (and plural) pronouns: they/their/them. Although these pronouns are anachronistic and not historically proper, I believe that they better elucidate Howe's feminist politics of language—that is, her novel's stubborn insistence on locating the self outside of the binary, hierarchical poles of "he" and "she." The gender equivocation of Laurence, who are desired and hailed by different characters as either "he" or "she," and who assert in return, "I am no man, no woman, nothing," is thematized by Howe's linguistic desire for nothing.[8] Her unique language design, as can be seen in her idea of a "third" sex/gender category of "nothing," foregrounds opacity, veiling, and sensation over conceptual fixity and clarity. Writing in a language that desires "nothing," Howe

[8] Julia Ward Howe, *The Hermaphrodite*, ed. Gary Williams (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2004), p. 22. Subsequent references are given in parentheses in the text.

seeks to liberate gender and sex from discursive instrumentality through an apophatic quality, using a mystic language of negation that constantly highlights its inability to conceptualize. Striving to evade the limitations of fixed gender identity, Howe's "nothing" creates an open space in language for unknown and undetermined modes of being.

Howe adapted this apophatic approach to language from the seventeenth-century German mystic Jakob Böhme. She was well versed in the works of Böhme, whose mystic language of negation was designed to enable a process of spiritual transcendence. Böhme's suspicion of conventional expression made his writing notorious for its profound opacity. Conceived in the manner of a radical form of negative theology, Böhme's prose draws constant attention to the failure of language to name. As Cyril O'Regan argues, Böhme posits that one can speak only through an *absent* discourse. Böhme's language of absence ultimately generates a dialectical movement between oppositions such as "dark and light, nonseeing and seeing, silence and speech, death and life," transforming such semantic tension into a "threshold of resolution" by calling "a glorious expressive world into being out of the inchoate nothing."[9] For Howe, Böhme's negative theology, his apophatic language of erasure and self-loss, uncovers distinct modes of knowledge, desire, and feeling.[10]

Although a few scholars have pointed out the engagement with European mysticism in *The Hermaphrodite*, they have not taken notice of the place of mystical language either in transcendentalism or in Howe's writing. Important studies by

[9] Cyril O'Regan, *Gnostic Apocalypse: Jacob Boehme's Haunted Narrative* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 2002), pp. 75, 77.

[10] Howe's dialogue with Böhme's theology distinguishes her from Emerson. Although Emerson had a long-lasting fascination with Böhme's ideas, he was also critical of his apophatic language, positing that Böhme's opaque vocabulary "established a fixed formula of symbols" that was unfit for communicating the dynamic human experience (Elisabeth Hurth, "The Poet and the Mystic: Ralph Waldo Emerson and Jakob Böhme," *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 53 [2005], 335). While Emerson famously aspired to make all "mean egotism" vanish, he did not endorse Böhme's "apathetic detachment from concrete experience" and expression (Hurth, "The Poet and the Mystic," p. 341). Howe, conversely, detaches the spiritual from everyday life, making the incommunicability of the mystic experience into a negative visionary site harbored from social and discursive inscription.

Suzanne Ashworth and Monika Elbert have been limited to Howe's dialogue with the philosophy of Swedenborg, and have centered around topics such as spiritualist modes of intimacy and the hermaphrodite's symbolism in Swedenborg's thought.[11] What these discussions neglect is Howe's particular use of mystic speech as a means for transcending gender limitations. My analysis focalizes Howe's engagement with the writing modes of European medieval women mystics. I trace Howe's design of a mystic language that veils more than it discloses and that, in doing so, resists a sociolinguistic reality obsessed with pinning down whether one is unambiguously a he or a she. By problematizing language as a stable system of meaning making in her delineation of an ambiguously sexed protagonist, Howe turns to *experiential* language to escape instrumentality. Her writing opens up a mode of expression that may acknowledge both genders and bodies in their multiplicities.

Howe makes two direct references to mystic thinkers in *The Hermaphrodite*. First, she has Laurence delve into the writings of Swedenborg and Böhme. In her own diaries and letters, Howe elaborates on her personal intellectual investment in the thought of both mystics, who played a central role in shaping the thought of the American transcendentalists.[12] Howe was also well read in the literary engagements with Swedenborg by French authors like George Sand and Honoré de Balzac, whom she read voraciously.[13] Second, in the center of her novel Howe includes a fictionalized medieval German mystic text, which she composes in its entirety. Her diverse engagements with European mysticism, as well as the choice to locate

[11] See Ashworth, "Spiritualized Bodies and Posthuman Possibilities," pp. 186–214; and Monika Elbert, "(S)exchanges: Julia Ward Howe's *The Hermaphrodite* and the Gender Dialectics of Transcendentalism," in *Toward a Female Genealogy of Transcendentalism*, ed. Jana L. Argersinger and Phyllis Cole (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2014), pp. 229–48.

[12] See Julie Ellison, *Emerson's Romantic Style* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984); Christina Zwarg, "Representative Others: Uses of Fuller and Fourier in *Representative Men*," in her *Feminist Conversations: Fuller, Emerson, and the Play of Reading* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 221–37; and Sean Ross Meehan, "Ecology and Imagination: Emerson, Thoreau, and the Nature of Metonymy," *Criticism*, 55 (2013), 299–329.

[13] See Gary Williams, "Speaking with the Voices of Others: Julia Ward Howe's Laurence," in Howe, *The Hermaphrodite*, pp. ix-xliv.

the fictional events in Germany and Italy rather than in the antebellum United States, invite us to explore the crucial feminist political work that the mystic tradition performs in Howe's narrative.

It is thus worth considering how the "deep time" that, as Dana Luciano suggests, characterizes *The Hermaphrodite* contains not only Greek mythology and Italian Baroque sculpture (both of which have been insightfully studied by Luciano).[14] Howe's novel also consists of distinct forms of knowledge promoted by European medieval women mystics, in their attempts to break free from phallocentric discursive regimes. Howe mobilizes their apophatic approaches to language, as well as their modes of embodied experience, in order to unsettle discursive inscriptions of bodily phenomena in language. By designing a mode of speech that is capable of recognizing the body in its material and sensory fluidity, Howe transforms the failure of language to name into "a horizon of possibility."[15] Through her destabilization of language in its relation to the body, Howe opens up a potentiality to encounter antebellum American genders and bodies in their alterity. If the social policing of genders in *The Hermaphrodite* relies on pinning down one's correct sex in language, then, as we shall now see, it becomes clear why Howe turns to the place of both language and the hermaphrodite figure in the mystic tradition: she seeks to undo discursive inscription by nullifying language itself.

[14] Luciano adopts the term "deep time" from Wai Chee Dimock to show that *The Hermaphrodite*'s deep historical dimensions go back to "the untimely figure of the hermaphrodite" (Dana Luciano, "Unrealized: The Queer Time of *The Hermaphrodite*," in *Philosophies of Sex*, p. 220). Dimock adapts this concept from geology and astronomy in order to rethink American Literature as a transnational phenomenon, characterized by multiple temporalities and disparate geographies (see Wai Chee Dimock, "Introduction: Planet and America, Set and Subset," in *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature*, ed. Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007], p. 1).

[15] I borrow this term from David M. Halperin (see Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995], p. 62), as well as from Gayle Salamon, whose work I discuss in detail later in this essay (see Salamon, "Boys of the Lex: Transgenderism and Rhetorics of Materiality," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 12 [2006], 591–94).

Howe's unfinished manuscript, even in its edited, reconstructed form, is a work of enigma. It is not fully clear when Howe began writing it, and it is also unclear how she planned to connect its different fragments into one cohesive narrative, if at all.[16] Furthermore, beyond the obscurity regarding its conditions of creation, mystery and veiling both serve as primary devices in *The Hermaphrodite*. From the beginning of the manuscript, Howe advances her gender politics by foregrounding a language of mystery. Laurence, the novel's protagonist and narrator, constantly describe their intersex in terms of a secret, or mystery, that must not be disclosed or expressed. Laurence recount, for example, how as a child they were forced into masculinity and were raised as a man: their parents decided "to invest [Laurence] with the dignity and insignia of manhood," and Laurence recount: "I was baptized therefore by a masculine name, destined to a masculine profession, and sent to a boarding school for boys, that I might become robust and manly, and haply learn to seem that which I could never be" (*The Hermaphrodite*, p. 3). Howe shrewdly captures the gender disciplining performed by the social institutions of the Family, the Church, and the School. These witty opening lines stress that for Howe one is not born, but rather becomes, man, through the instrumental work of appearance, vocation, and education.[17]

What is more intriguing, however, is Laurence's use of a mystic mode of speech in addressing their intersex. By opaquely describing masculinity as "that which I could never be," Laurence turn to semantic veiling, in order to mark their gender and sex as dwelling beyond social expression, beyond

[16] Garry Williams, who edited the manuscript and brought it to print, explains: "The first page and key bridge passages are missing, and even when one can deduce how Howe intended various episodes to fit together, ambiguity about chronology remains" (Williams, "Speaking with the Voices of Others," p. x).

[17] I am alluding to and cross-gendering Simone de Beauvoir's seminal claim, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier [New York: Vintage Books, 2011], p. 283). I reference this phrase not only because it captures Howe's ideas about the production of gender but also because of de Beauvoir's own investment in mysticism, which I discuss later in this essay.

a societal discourse that assumes gender dimorphism.[18] The sociolinguistic regime of Howe's time has no concept for depicting the intersex's body without constructing it: the only linguistic unit available for Laurence to transcend instrumentality is the pronoun "I." In medieval mystic texts, language performs a "founding act" in which "the subject is born of an exile and a disappearance. The 'I' is 'formed'—by its act of willing *nothing* or by (forever) *being incapable of doing* what it wills—as a 'desire' bound only to the supposed desire of a Deity."[19] By drawing on an apophatic mode of speech in which the "I" can be expressed only through a language of loss and disappearance, Howe asks her readers to embrace a desire for nothing, which is linked to a desire for everything (a union with God). The desire for nothing reveals the failure of language to name both material and spiritual natures. Sharing Emerson's prominent ideal of becoming "a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all" (Emerson, *Nature*, p. 10), Howe's language generates a visionary training, inviting her readers to experience (rather than explicate) Nature in all its dimensions. However, a significant difference in Howe's text is her insistence that alterity remains unknowable. Laurence's speech, which goes beyond the limitations of the referential signs on the page, makes this apophatic quality the source of agency: only by abandoning oneself—by ridding oneself of societal language—can the language of the other emerge.

In the course of the novel, Laurence's sex, or mystery, is constantly scrutinized by various characters who seek to pin it down in language. Laurence describe these investigations in terms of a "trial," operated on their body already at youth (*The Hermaphrodite*, p. 3). Nonetheless, as a first-person narrating "I," Laurence insist on not fixing sex and gender in language, and, instead, they opaquely describe how these trials compelled

[18] Howe, like many other writers of her time, often conflates gender, sex, and sexuality. Nonetheless, she uses this conflation as a means for problematizing all three categories alike. As Dana Luciano suggests, Howe's turn to "the untimely figure of the hermaphrodite, a creature whose vexed history of desire and shame is marked in the *flesh*, calls a culture's sexual arrangements into question" ("Unrealized," p. 220; emphasis added).

[19] Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 92.

Laurence to internalize "all that I was, and was not" (p. 3). In order to recognize individuals in their particularities, Laurence's language draws attention to its inability to fully contain its object of representation. This apophatic rhetorical convention is typical of the medieval European mystics, who mastered it in their attempt to address God, the ultimate ineffable Other. Michel de Certeau contends that mystic texts operate as "beaches offered to the swelling sea; their goal is to disappear into what they disclose, like a Turner landscape dissolved in air and light" (*Heterologies*, p. 81). It is her creative adaptation of mystic speech that allows Howe to open up an interstice between discourse and matter—"all that I was, and was not." She makes manifest the failure of language to fully determine human and bodily natures, in order to unsettle the discursive regulation of human anatomies. This regulation, as Judith Butler has taught us, produces "a differential sense of who is human and who is not, which lives are livable, and which are not."[20] Howe's prose, moreover, not only refuses to fix individuals within the binary constraints of social legibility, but also makes the denial of intelligibility into the condition for recognizing the other as another.

Since Howe probably began writing her manuscript in late 1846, it is possible that she had in mind the case of Levi Suydam, an intersex person gendered as a man, whose right to vote in the 1843 election in Salisbury, Connecticut, raised stirring debates. In her discussion of the case, Anne Fausto-Sterling observes:

> The selectmen brought in a physician, one Dr. William Barry, to examine Suydam and settle the matter. Presumably, upon encountering a phallus and testicles, the good doctor declared the prospective voter male. With Suydam safely in their column, the Whigs won the election by a majority of one.
>
> A few days later, however, Barry discovered that Suydam menstruated regularly and had a vaginal opening. Suydam had the narrow shoulders and broad hips characteristic of a female build, but occasionally "he" felt physical attractions to the "opposite" sex (by which "he" meant women). Furthermore, "his

[20] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 4.

> feminine propensities, such as fondness for gay colors, for pieces of calico, . . . an aversion for bodily labor, and an inability to perform the same, were remarked by many."[21]

Whereas William Barry's medical diagnosis conflates gender, sex, and sexuality in order to designate Suydam's sexual pathology, Howe mobilizes such composites in *The Hermaphrodite* to undo the assumption of gender dimorphism. This conflation can be seen in various "trial" scenes in the novel, including a medical examination by a doctor who seems to echo Barry's vocabulary (a scene that I discuss later in detail). Furthermore, in her effort to undo dualistic thought, Howe has conflicting social institutions and individual characters reveal themselves in one another. Not only are the trials operated by state institutions mirrored in the dynamics between individuals, but individuals who refuse to accept Laurence's ambiguity of sex end up paralleling Laurence. By playfully having characters who deny the heterogeneity of sex correspond to Laurence, Howe argues for the feminist political potentiality of the transcendentalist belief in an intimate unity between diverse modes of being.

During their college years, for example, Laurence are wooed by a rich young widow named Emma, who considers Laurence to be a male. Laurence reject Emma's wooing, maintaining, "There lies between us a deep, mysterious gulf, seek not to fathom it—with me, your human destiny would be hopelessly imperfect" (*The Hermaphrodite*, p. 18). Laurence describe their intersex as a mystery that one should not attempt to fathom: this effort can be made only within a binary logic that constructs Laurence as an "imperfect" male/man. Refusing to accept Laurence's sexual detachment, Emma appears in their room at night. She surveys Laurence "from head to foot, the disordered habiliments revealing to her every outline of the equivocal form before her" (p. 19). Snared in her fantasy of Laurence's fixed masculinity, Emma is horrified by Laurence's divulged body: "She saw the bearded lip and earnest brow, but she saw also the falling shoulders, slender neck, and rounded bosom—then with a look like that of the Medusa, and a hoarse

[21] Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p. 30.

utterance, she murmured: 'monster!'" (p. 19). Emma, who interprets Laurence's body as that of a nonhuman monster, is herself described as Medusa, the mythical monster who transforms humans into objects; in narratives of Greek mythology, those who gaze into her eyes turn to stone. By having Emma mirror Laurence in her depictions of Emma as a monster who constructs sexual otherness as monstrosity, Howe creatively reworks transcendentalist monism, making it into a powerful political vehicle for the undoing of gender dimorphism.

The feminist potentiality of this mirroring effect is also achieved through the theme of discourse and animation. Emma tells Laurence: "You are like this marble against which I lean my head, whose pulses throb so that there seems to be a pulse in the cold stone itself—thus, a heart that is near you may think to feel the presence of one in you, but it is all marble, only marble" (*The Hermaphrodite*, p. 12). While Emma blames Laurence for being sexually detached and cold as marble, her words stress her own inability to recognize Laurence as another. Her language animates Laurence's body, projecting on it her fantasies regarding the coherence of sex, gender, and desire.

The animation of one's body through linguistic inscription is similarly revealed in the work of the legal system in *The Hermaphrodite*. "You were born imperfect," Laurence's patriarch father tells Laurence; "It was difficult to determine your sex with precision, it was in fact impossible" (*The Hermaphrodite*, p. 29). The father, whom Howe sarcastically dubs "Paternus," frames Laurence's intersex as deficiency rather than multiplicity. In fact, it is only because of his declining health and the lack of an alternative male heir at the time that Paternus did not disinherit Laurence at birth: "Under the circumstances we deemed it most expedient to bestow on you the name and rights of a man" (p. 29). Although Paternus concedes the contingency of sex and gender as bestowed rather than essentially given, he operates within a dualistic symbolic order that shapes Laurence's body as that of an imperfect male/man. Thus, with the birth of Laurence's younger brother, Philip, Paternus disinherits Laurence.

By exploring a biological body that escapes dualistic precision, and by foregrounding the discrepancy between matter and discourse, Howe envisions a symbolic order that does not assume a hierarchy of two opposing sexes. She stresses, moreover, that one's capacity to move beyond a dualistic symbolics requires a distinctly mystic phenomenology. In an attempt to free the body from its social constitution, Laurence turn to radical asceticism in a secluded hermitage in the woods. In it, Laurence find a statue of a veiled female mystic saint, and are surprised to find that in sculpting this figure, "a strange caprice of art concealed the features" of the face (*The Hermaphrodite*, p. 38). This metafictional gesture marks visual and linguistic veiling as a means for breaking free from social gaze.

Like the "marble veil" that "covered the face" from seeing and being seen, Laurence's mystic experience foregrounds veiling over social intelligibility (*The Hermaphrodite*, p. 38). The mystic experience lies beyond human comprehension and social expression. This can be seen in Laurence's reflection on the imponderable duration of the experience: "It is marked in my remembrance by states, rather than by days; and its light and darkness were other than that of the evening and of the morning. A few words suffice for its history, because it is one for which we possess few words" (p. 44). Whereas ordinary language attempts to perceive the world through stable binary categories such as day and night, Laurence's mystical experience is governed by the amorphous units of states. Having transcended human reason during the ascetic adventure, Laurence ultimately must choose between three options—"Death, madness, or a return to the common life of humanity"—and they end up choosing the last (p. 65). Yet equipped with a new spiritual phenomenology, Laurence become capable of going beyond the societal organization of the real. "The mystic visions of my introverted life still presented themselves, unbidden, before me," Laurence recount, "and seemed in their eternal truth to mock at men as phantoms, and to deride their aims and desires as dreams worthy only of children" (p. 65).

Just as Howe reveals the failure of dualistic logic to grasp the multiplicity of sex, so does she explore desire in its fluidity by having Laurence be desired by both women and men, and as

both a man and a woman. When a youth named Ronald discovers Laurence in the hermitage, with "long hair" and "deathlike countenance" (*The Hermaphrodite*, p. 51), he believes that Laurence are a female/woman. Ronald's persistent desire for Laurence as a woman makes it clear that he fails to move beyond gender dimorphism. Like Emma, Ronald animates Laurence's body, projecting on it his fantasy of Laurence's cohesive femininity. Ronald's failure to recognize alterity is epitomized by the thesis he writes for a composition class at college. Laurence recount Ronald's story—an adaptation of Ovid's Pygmalion:

> It was that of a pilgrim who had long worshipped the marble image of a saint, so long, that it was become to him the truest of realities. At length, in the madness of his passionate longing, he impiously prayed God that it might become human for his sake. The prayer was heard, the miracle was granted. The beautiful saint breathed, smiled, spake, and descended from her marble pedestal—the lover opened his arms to clasp her to his heart, but lo! at the first touch, it had ceased to beat—the cold embrace was death. (p. 75)

Ronald's tale delineates a longing for an unreachable beloved other, which characterizes the mystic's desire for a union with God. Yet the story presents the pilgrim's consummation of his desire as an act of blindness. The pilgrim fails to accept that the statue is not a real saint, as it seems to him "the truest of realities." His prayer for the animation of the statue is described as impious, as he wishes for the statue to be transformed so that it may match the illusion that his fantasy had projected on it. Having failed to establish a relationship based on recognition, the pilgrim watches the animated marbled saint die at his first touch. Ironically, Ronald seems to miss the point of his own story. His animating vision resembles that of the pilgrim, since Ronald insists to Laurence: "You shall be a man to all the world, if you will, but a woman, a sweet, warm, living woman to me" (p. 86).

Howe's recurring intersection of sculpting and the body makes the statue figure emblematic of the sexing of bodies in *The Hermaphrodite*. Ronald desires a fantasy of Laurence-as-female,

asserting that he possesses "a wondrous fire, a strange alchemy, that can turn marble itself to molten flame" (*The Hermaphrodite*, p. 87). Similar to the instrumental animation of bodies by Emma, Paternus, and the pilgrim, Ronald reduces Laurence's ambiguity of sex by using alchemy to turn material substance into a fetishized idol. Conversely, the desire for nothing generated by Howe's language of veiling strives to free both the self and the body from discursive constraints. Howe's prose refuses to impose on either the self or the body any notion of a final form or stable concept. This linguistic politics is accompanied by an embodied mystic perception, which I explore in detail in the second part of this essay. For Howe, embodied modes of experience that cannot be pinned down in language allow one to go beyond the distorting conceptualization of the material and spiritual worlds. These mystic ways of knowing permit individuals to momentarily contact the wholeness of Nature through bodily generated qualities such as affect and sensation.

Howe seeks to break away from the social grammars of gender and sexual intelligibility not only through mystic language but also through the feminist potentiality of embodied experiences. Veiling plays a similar role in her distinct mode of perception, which stands at the heart of the mystic tradition and which aims to free both the body and embodied sensations from the way instrumental logic insists on explaining them. The term "mysticism" encapsulates this spiritual ambition to see and be seen differently. It comes from the ancient Greek word μύω, which means to conceal or to close one's eyes. The term was initially adopted by early Christians to address the hidden depths of scripture, but gradually became a spiritual practice. What was veiled in this new approach to contacting the divine was not the thing one sought to know. Rather, veiling came to characterize a particular experiential mode of knowledge required for achieving unity with God: "the process by which one comes to know hidden things is

designated as mystical rather than the things themselves."[22] Furthermore, mysticism became a gendered practice from the outset. Women were central to medieval Christian mystical traditions, and mysticism became "associated with femininity or with women and so denigrated"; even when distinctions were made between its "good" (theological) and "bad" (ecstatic, affective) forms, they were articulated in gendered terms associated with masculinity and femininity, respectively (Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, pp. 7, 8).

In the writing of medieval women mystics, ecstatic experiences are linked with an affective potentiality through the generation of embodied modes of perception capable of revealing the hidden truths of the soul. In her visions, the thirteenth-century mystic and poet Hadewijch of Antwerp, for example, describes how once, on a Sunday afternoon, "our Lord was brought secretly to [her] bedside." She continues:

> When I had received our Lord, . . . he withdrew my senses from every remembrance of alien things to enable me to have joy in him in inward togetherness with him. Then I was led as if into a meadow, an expanse that was called the space of perfect virtue. In it stood trees, and I was guided close to them. And I was shown their names and the significance of their names.[23]

Similar to Laurence's depiction of the hermitage experience, Hadewijch's words reject both institutional ways of knowing and conceptual language. In order to access the divine, she suggests, one needs to withdraw from the familiar senses, which are alien to the world of the spirit. Additionally, Hadewijch's use of passive voice and her problematization of naming mark an inversion of agency, and thus stress the failure of human-made language to articulate the experience of the divine. This apophatic quality, which seeks to veil rather than disclose, and to deny in order to stress illimitable presence, marks negation as a prerequisite for accessing the divine. By adopting a desire for nothing, Hadewijch shifts her agency to the spiritual

[22] Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 146–47.

[23] Hadewijch, "Vision 1: The Garden of Perfect Virtues," in *Hadewijch: The Complete Works*, trans. Columba Hart (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 263.

language that speaks through her. Yet for her, like for Howe, the body is the site of the spiritual drama, and she materializes this embodied experience in her language of sensation.

The affective potentiality of bodily experiences can also be seen in Mechthild of Magdeburg's *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit* (*c.* 1260). Mechthild, who in the thirteenth century was the first mystic to write in German, breaks the binary division between spirit and flesh by considering the body a fluid entity consisting of states that are given to spiritual change. Mechthild's ecstatic experience of the divine allows her to transcend the societal, everyday state of her body. Thus, she posits, "No one is able or is permitted to receive [God's] greeting unless one has gone beyond oneself and has become nothing. . . . This the blind saints cannot ruin for me. They are the ones who love and do not know."[24] Mechthild's reversal of the link between instruction and insight—she dubs the saints of the Church "blind"—as well as her desire to become nothing reenacts a tension between institutional and experiential knowledge. She flaunts the expressive limitation of her language in order to resituate herself with regards to God in mystic terms. In Howe's novel, Laurence's enduring insistence, "I am no man, no woman, nothing," invokes a similar desire for nothing in order to reveal the insufficiency of socially shaped epistemic categories to grasp both bodies and selves in their dynamic fluidity.

But in order for us to consider more fully the meanings of Howe's embodied mysticism, I want to turn briefly to another historical instance in which mysticism serves to subvert phallocentrism: twentieth-century French feminist theory. Amy Hollywood argues that it is no wonder that twentieth-century feminist theorists became fascinated with "emotional, bodily, and excessive forms of mysticism" (*Sensible Ecstasy*, p. 5), a fascination that she traces in the works of Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clément, Luce Irigaray, and various other thinkers. According to Hollywood, in order to enter the male-dominated public sphere of writing, medieval women mystics had to invest themselves in a new mode of ecstatic

[24] Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Frank Tobin (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), p. 42.

bodily experience, which afforded a new mode of expression and reason. This disruptive virtue is adopted by Luce Irigaray in her feminist politics. Irigaray posits that by unsettling both language and the body as decisive and stable entities, mysticism insists "both on recognizing the other as another and on overcoming boundaries between the self and that other" (Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, p. 5).

In *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977), Irigaray argues: "Female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters."[25] That is to say, the female body is always already constructed within the male-dominated symbolic order, whose language posits this body as inferior and lacking. The only way out, Irigaray maintains, is to turn to the female body, as a means of envisioning a new, nonhierarchical symbolic order. Similar to Howe's investment in the intersex body, a body that categorically undoes a dualistic conception of sex, Irigaray turns to bodily materiality in order to shatter a symbolic order that is phallocentric, and thus essentialist, from the outset.

Whether the body can be discussed in a way that precedes its discursive construction has become a contested question in the past two decades, with the growing development of trans and intersex studies. While scholars like Judith Butler and Anne Fausto-Sterling have challenged a dualistic distinction between sex and gender by showing that sex, just like gender, is discursively constituted, trans theory has often suggested that such a position might dismiss "any understanding of the materiality of the body that was not produced or fully shaped by discourse."[26] In an attempt to reconcile this tension, Gayle Salamon contends: "If we are to understand the real body as opposed to linguistic inscription, it is in some important sense resistant to description, since description always inscribes that which it seeks to identify through naming" ("Boys of the Lex," p. 591). Salamon stresses the importance of epistemological

[25] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, [1977] 1985), p. 23.

[26] Christopher Breu, "Introduction to Focus: Rethinking Intersex," *American Book Review*, 37, no. 4 (2016), 3.

uncertainty for permitting one a nonmediated experience of and in one's body.

For Salamon, "What the 'real' body tells us—or, rather, what it silently displays, without benefit of language—is nothing. Considered only as a blunt materiality, severed from any psychic investments, it has no meaning at all" ("Boys of the Lex," p. 591). Salamon's consideration of the body outside language to be "nothing" carries forward the feminist and queer possibilities generated by becoming nothing in the mystic tradition. The way in which medieval women mystics embraced epistemological uncertainty is mobilized by various feminist and queer thinkers in their endeavor to escape the discourse-body impasse. This is why Irigaray is so fascinated by the capacity of mystic women to subvert a phallocentric symbolic order in two major ways: through their use of a veiling mode of language that denies instrumental abstraction, and through their investment in ecstatic bodily experiences that stress the singularity of the mystic's body. Ann-Marie Priest explains:

> For [Irigaray], woman, too [like God], is alien to discourse. Like God, "woman" is diminished, constrained, limited when she is represented by language and thus brought into the symbolic order. . . . language, and the discourse it founds, are dominated by something entirely alien to "her": masculinity, the sex and gender of the male. The "femininity" that is represented within such discourses is, like God when represented by human language, a lie.[27]

What Irigaray takes from the mystic tradition is the capacity to envision a symbolic order based on bodily manifestations that mean "nothing" within a phallocentric discursive regime.

The place of the body in problematizing the linguistic production of gender dualism plays a similar role in Howe's feminist politics. Howe, like Irigaray and Salamon, considers the body to be "a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments

[27] Ann-Marie Priest, "Woman as God, God as Woman: Mysticism, Negative Theology, and Luce Irigaray," *Journal of Religion*, 83.1 (2003), 5.

of a culture are inscribed."[28] Howe's narrative explores an intersex body as well as ecstatic bodily experiences that relate the self to a higher spiritual unity through sensation, in order to reimagine the symbolic order of Howe's time in a way that would not favor one sex/gender over another. Yet Howe is well aware of the societal censorship that her mystic embodied politics must face, insofar as patriarchy has generally linked the experiences of mystic women with madness and hysteria. Mystic practices were traditionally deemed feminine and thus abnormal, and mystic women were "aligned not with religion but with hysteria" and disease (Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, p. 4).

In a diary note from 1843, presumably associated with the Laurence manuscript, Howe writes:

> Most men are afraid of madness—few will defy its dark power, or even attempt a struggle with its advanced guard—at the first look, we behold something mightier than we, and turning like frightened children scramble back to our strong hold crying to god to fight the demon for us.
>
> Earnestly do I speak of the revelation of God to the solitary soul. . . . Having learned the extent of that which can be accomplished by a solitary mind, it remains for [one] to learn how much more can be effected by the conjunction of two that form one, and to see reflected in that other half of himself the other half of that truth which once his imperfection could but imperfectly receive.[29]

Howe makes clear that the mystic experience is denigrated because of its relation to madness, demons, and dark power. The ecstatic union with what is beyond the self, an all-encompassing spiritual whole, is understood by society to be madness because it transcends human reason by engaging with "something mightier than we." This union can thus be experienced only by a solitary soul and not through social institutions. In adopting a mystic phenomenology, one learns "to see

[28] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1993), p. 165.

[29] Julia Ward Howe, 1843 notebook, "Life is strange and full of change," in *The Hermaphrodite*, Appendix 1, p. 199. On the notebook's relation to the "Laurence manuscript," see Gary Williams, editorial note to Appendix 1, in *The Hermaphrodite*, p. 199.

reflected in that other half of himself the other half of that truth which once his imperfection could but imperfectly receive." Recognizing the always already veiled, never fully knowable other as one's "other half of himself" dissolves the boundaries between self and other into intersecting, intersubjective fluid halves. What is considered by her society to be pathological madness is for Howe a productive means for exposing the "imperfection" at the heart of the dualistic production of gendered and sexed persons. It is thus not surprising that *The Hermaphrodite* foregrounds the themes of hysteria and madness as agential strategies for undoing gender dimorphism. Although mystic women were historically denigrated as hysterics, Howe reclaims their embodied practices to reveal the imperfection at the core of a phallocentric social organization.

By turning to hysteria and madness as productive antitheses of social intelligibility, Howe opens up a dynamic relation between gender, the body, and time. Her understanding of the self to be in constant embodied relation with a spiritual ecology disrupts the linear teleology of patriarchy, embracing instead the nonlinear temporal presentness of sensation and becoming. After Laurence's only brother, Philip, dies, Paternus annuls the renunciation of Laurence, as he wants Laurence to become the family's male heir. When Laurence refuse to abide by the patriarchal continuity of bloodlines, Paternus attempts to have Laurence declared mad and hospitalized in an asylum. Laurence manage to escape this threat with the help of their Italian nobleman friend and mentor, Berto. This marks the next stage in Laurence's spiritual Bildung, as Laurence now have to learn to become a woman.

Now in Rome, Berto instructs Laurence on how to masquerade as a British woman named Cecilia. Having escaped the patriarchal temporal order of filial inheritance, Laurence/Cecilia now encounter a different mode of time, which disrupts linearity and teleology. Howe advances this alternative temporality through her design of the character Nina, who is one of Berto's three sisters. Nina's abnormal mental condition, described by Berto as "a strange mingling of sorrow, love, and madness" (*The Hermaphrodite*, p. 137), is the result of the long period of waiting she has endured for her absent lover,

Gaetano. Gradually, Nina falls into delirium, passivity, solitude, and muteness:

> Still, she continued strangely inanimate, she never spoke, and shewed no perception of external things. She would sit, day by day, in her armchair, with eyes cast down or closed, mechanically taking the food that was brought to her, and suffering herself to be dressed or undressed, laid upon her couch or led to her chair as passively as an image of clay. (pp. 138–39)

Howe's depiction of Nina as an automaton highlights Nina's rejection of linear temporality for the sake of an infinite ecstatic present. Furthermore, Nina's static behavior radically undermines patriarchy's claim to a complete understanding of the female body. Her body remains incomprehensible, beyond the reach of ordinary language and reason. Just like Laurence's, Nina's body undergoes constant scrutiny by several institutions, including medicine, religion, and psychology. The priest, for example, determines that "Nina was possessed of an evil spirit" (p. 143). Yet although he performs "every form of exorcism" on her, the priest's efforts all end in failure (p. 143). Nina suddenly wakes up, insisting that her abnormal behavior is not a deviation from Christianity but the other way around. In an allusion to Christ's words in John 20:17, Nina orders the priest: "Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended unto my father and your father, unto your God and my God" (p. 143).

For medieval mystic women, intense bodily experiences compensated for the problematics of discourse by producing sensation over conceptual understanding. Their spiritual modes of knowledge favored somatic-mental behaviors such as ecstasy, erotic pleasure, and psychic detachment for their capacity to instill in the mystic a unique nontemporality. Mechthild of Magdeburg, for example, states, "In this greeting [from God] I want to die living," making an elated state of mental stagnation a prerequisite for becoming one with God (*The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, p. 42). Engaging in intensive affects and sensations allowed medieval mystics to generate "a phenomenology of emotion," through their "spiritual

transformation of the passions."[30] The mystics' desire for nothing, their attempt to rid themselves of sensory certainty, sought to liberate both the self and the body from their submission to institutional explication.

The turn to mystic modes of embodied perception also characterizes other transcendentalist thinkers. Vesna Kuiken's outstanding study of Margaret Fuller's embodied phenomenology reveals "mysticism to be essential to understanding her work, as a procedure of turning away from any notion of personality."[31] As Kuiken shows, Fuller developed a "practice of erasing personal identity through ecstasy in order to achieve an impersonal perspective that would remove her subjective participation in her headaches" ("On the Matter of Thinking," p. 102). The mystical practice of becoming nothing translates into Fuller's concept of "Ecstatica," a trance state that serves as an alternative to one's habitual sense of and in one's body.[32] In a journal note from 1840, Fuller writes: "I grow more and more what they will call a mystic."[33] Among the various embodied perception strategies that Fuller overviews in her writing is a distinct mode of ecstatic recollection, which she describes in an 1838 letter: "One day lives always in my memory; one chestiest, heavenliest day of communion with the soul of things."[34]

In *The Hermaphrodite*, Howe is particularly interested in this practice in her design of Nina's character. Nina's somatic-mental condition, just like the mystical ecstatic experience embraced by Fuller, remains beyond comprehension in language, beyond logical and discursive grasp and control, beyond the stable confines of a finished self. Laurence contend:

[30] Niklaus Largier, "Medieval Mysticism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion*, ed. John Corrigan (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), p. 365.

[31] Vesna Kuiken, "On the Matter of Thinking: Margaret Fuller's Beautiful Work," in *American Impersonal: Essays with Sharon Cameron*, ed. Branka Arsić (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 102.

[32] See Margaret Fuller, "The Great Lawsuit: Man *versus* Men. Woman *versus* Women," *The Dial*, 4 (1843), 37.

[33] Margaret Fuller, journal fragment, 1840, in *The Essential Margaret Fuller*, ed. Jeffrey Steele (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1992), p. 12.

[34] Margaret Fuller, letter to Jane F. Tuckerman, 21 October 1838, in *The Letters of Margaret Fuller*, ed. Robert N. Hudspeth, 6 vols. (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983-1995), I, 347.

> Whether [Nina] was cataleptic and insane, whether she was clairvoyante, and if so, whether the facts open to her knowledge had their place in the material or spiritual world, were all subjects of doubt and dissension among the more intelligent of Nina's friends. (*The Hermaphrodite*, p. 158)

Nina's idiosyncratic condition cannot be captured by a dualistic logic. It cannot be classified under either the "cataleptic" or the "insane," the "material" or the "spiritual." Howe's language foregrounds these binaries only to stress that Nina's condition reveals these constrictive poles to be "all subjects of doubt and dissension."

Indeterminacy regarding Nina's condition also characterizes Howe's own attitude to Nina's behavior. On the one hand, Nina's phantasmagorical, ecstatic clinging to the absent body of her lover is not very different from Emma's blindness to Laurence's bodily conditions. On the other hand, Howe clearly links Nina's condition to a mystic feminist potentiality. Nina's siblings, Berto and Briseida, believe that a German mystical text written by their uncle and titled "Ashes of an Angel's Heart"—a text that Howe composes and includes in her narrative in its entirety—holds the key to Nina's mysterious "sublime madness" (*The Hermaphrodite*, p. 164).[35] The mystic text's self-declared capacity to transcend bodily and discursive limitations, its "idea of eternal and indivisible union of loving spirits," the two siblings maintain, was for Nina "first a desire, then, a conviction, then a madness" (*The Hermaphrodite*, p. 164).

Furthermore, Nina's mystic perception allows her to become the first character to recognize Laurence's ambiguity of sex. To Berto's question of whether Laurence/Cecilia are a woman, Nina replies in a veiling language, "Not altogether" (*The Hermaphrodite*, p. 189). In answer to Berto's subsequent question of whether Laurence/Cecilia are a man, Nina replies, "almost," maintaining that "no man can feel as she feels, no woman can reason as she reasons" (p. 189). Howe encapsulates the problematic intersection of discourse with the body in the minutest linguistic unit of the pronoun. The instrumentality of language is so powerful that even the pronoun "she" inscribes

[35] See Williams, editorial note, in *The Hermaphrodite*, p. 163.

the intersex's body in a manner that denies Laurence's multiplicity of sex and that goes against Nina's own equivocal phrase "not altogether." Yet although Nina uses the pronoun "she," and although she differentiates between genders and sexes in essentialist terms of masculine reason versus feminine emotion, her answer nonetheless posits Laurence's body as a prediscursive site of multiplicity in which essentialist dichotomies are collapsed and transcended.

By the same token, Howe contrasts the medical diagnosis of Laurence's intersex with the language of binaries that serves as its vehicle. After Laurence fall into a sudden deadly illness, a medical doctor arrives, but instead of examining Laurence's illness, he examines Laurence's sex. The physician ends the debate between the four siblings by determining that he "cannot pronounce Laurent either man or woman," since "he is rather both [man and woman] than neither" (*The Hermaphrodite*, p. 195). Once again, linguistic inscription is almost inescapable: the doctor determines that Laurence establish a complete balance between "man" and "woman," but his attribution of the pronoun "he" to Laurence diminishes the monistic metaphysics that his diagnosis seeks to establish. In order to escape this discursive impasse, Howe has two mystic, noninstitutional ways of knowing immediately follow the physician's ruling. First, Nina's sister, Briseida, reads to the group "something of Swedenborg" (p. 195), a text that permits Briseida to conclude that Laurence are "a heavenly superhuman mystery, one undivided, integral soul, needing not to seek on earth *its* other moiety" (pp. 195–96; emphasis added). The mystic tradition allows Howe to envision an alternative story of creation to the prevalent biblical one (of two) in the Book of Genesis, a story in which God did not create Woman from Man and for Man. The mystic notion of an undivided, equally sexed initial creation allows Howe to radically reimagine the symbolic order of her time by having it correlate with the hidden transcendentalist unity at the heart of the material world.

Additionally, in Laurence's final "lovely vision" before their death (*The Hermaphrodite*, p. 196)—a death that does not prevent Laurence from continuing their narration, and that, in doing so, affords Howe another strategy for transcending the

reduction of persons to their discursively produced bodies—Laurence see two figures fighting over Laurence's body. "He is mine, he is mine, I have died for him!" says a woman whose figure resembles Emma (p. 196). She clings to Laurence's body, but Laurence then encounter a Ronald-like figure: "one in the form of a young man came and tore me from her arms and from her breast, crying aloud, 'give her up to me, she is mine alone'" (p. 196). Howe seems to gesture to Emerson's claim in "Illusions" (1860) that "The notions '*I am*,' and '*This is mine*,' which influence mankind, are but delusions of the mother of the world."[36] More important, Howe translates the Emersonian impersonal into a more radical critique of the attempt to locate the self within the finished confines of either "he" or "she."

As can be seen in this ultimate struggle for recognition, both of the gender pronouns available to Howe deny Laurence's place within what Judith Butler has called "the continuum of human morphology" (*Undoing Gender*, p. 4). Furthermore, these pronouns are imposed on Laurence by two characters whose desire is based on a wish to possess the other. Howe elucidates the sociolinguistic problem, but she also finds a way out, by foregrounding the mystic potentiality of first-person narration in relation to otherness, wherein the "I" offers itself to higher spiritual unity that underlies all being. Facing Emma's and Ronald's desire to possess Laurence's gendered body and to pin it down in language, Laurence say: "Then I lifted my hands to God, and cried: 'take me, for I am thine!'" (*The Hermaphrodite*, p. 196). The mystic experience, which produces a different mode of perception and embodiment, also generates a particular approach to language, one that rejects institutional clarity, fixity, and finality and favors instead fluidity and becoming in relation to otherness.

Howe's mystic language emerges as a result of a wish to precede the concept. By producing a veiling, experiential way of knowing the fluidity of gender and sex, Howe makes dualistic conceptions of gender lose their body of evidence—that is,

[36] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Illusions," in *The Conduct of Life* (1860), in his *Essays and Lectures*, p. 1123.

the conceptual description of the body *as* evidence. The place of European mysticism, in its unique dynamic between language and the body in the development of transcendentalist gender politics, is a topic worth further exploration. Fuller, for example, shares Howe's interest in the feminist possibilities of mysticism. As Dorri Beam shows, Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* contains numerous moments of ecstatic vision. These instances allow Fuller to construct "an ecology of self that pleasurably extends and expands when social obstacles are removed in dream or vision, and the self pours out of its bounds, especially the body."[37] Fuller's spiritual boundlessness of self has to do not only with the body, however, but also with the ways in which the body is discoursed in language. The use of mystic modes of speech in Fuller's intricate linguistic design is a topic that deserves future research. To be sure, Fuller's prose problematizes the dualistic inscription of gender and sex in a different way than Howe's. Fuller goes against the prevalent male-dominated position, "I am the head, and she the heart," stressing the hierarchical presupposition of such bodily figuration of the symbolic order (*Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 16). By making "masculine" and "feminine" into fluid spiritual qualities that coexist in a dialectical relationship within every individual, Fuller's language productively appropriates these concepts. Howe, by contrast, turns to a different strategy. She renounces the linguistic categories "masculine" and "feminine" altogether, embracing instead a mystic desire for nothing. By promoting a mystic language of veiling and sensation to escape the concept, Howe places both gender and sex in a spiritual, nonbinary realm. Her rich stylistic dialogue with the mystic tradition allows Howe to radically disarm the discursive regime of her time, to refigure antebellum conceptions of gender and the body, and to develop a way to speak outside power.

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[37] Dorri Beam, "Transcendental Erotics, Same-Sex Desire, and *Ethel's Love-Life*," *ESQ* 57 (2011), 58.

ABSTRACT

Danny Luzon, "The Language of Transcendentalism: Mysticism, Gender, and the Body in Julia Ward Howe's *The Hermaphrodite*" (pp. 263–290)

This essay studies the idea of a "third" sex adapted by Julia Ward Howe and other American transcendentalists from the language and theology of European mysticism. It explores Howe's design of a nonbinary gender category through her dialogue with the figure of the hermaphrodite in the mystic tradition. Specifically, I look at Howe's unfinished "Laurence manuscript" (written throughout the 1840s and first published in 2004 under the title *The Hermaphrodite*), tracing how it gives shape to unique intersex modes of knowledge and expression. The novel's intersex protagonist, who repeatedly claims "I am no man, no woman, nothing," allows Howe to productively utilize a language of negation and multiplicity, making the apophatic quality of mystic speech, as well as her protagonist's denial of intelligibility, into a means of spiritual transcendence. In doing so, Howe marks gender categories as dwelling beyond social expression, away from phallocentric discursive constraints and their production of fixed dualistic concepts. Her mystic phenomenology elucidates the indeterminacy of gender, revealing it as something that cannot be adequately conceptualized in language. Howe's prose thus produces complex dynamics between the spirit and the flesh, in order to free both the self and the body from the sociolinguistic restrictions of social intelligibility.

Keywords: Julia Ward Howe; *The Hermaphrodite*; American transcendentalism; queer theory; mysticism