

BOOK REVIEW:
MARIETTE IN ECSTASY
by Ron Hansen

by Francis Baumli, Ph.D.

Ron Hansen, Mariette in Ecstasy (New York: Edward Burlingame Books, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), x & 179, \$20.00

I heartily confess that my attitude toward this very Catholic book is scarcely reverent. Although I did experience many a small religious ecstasy while reading this novel, I also felt episodes of true fury toward the author—so many episodes that, by the book's end, this fury was chronic. Thirty pages into this book, I was looking to see what else the author had written, thinking I should promptly order another of his books. Thirty pages before the end I wanted to throw it against the wall. By then I was resolved to never, ever read another thing by this author.

As a work of art the book is just too flawed. (Some of these flaws, I am sure, were caused by parasitic editors.) The book's subject and emotional tone were highly patrician, and the language generally supported this plenum, but over and over a stupid contraction would get shoved in: "she'll" or "she's

got" or "they'd" and the like. My avid reading would be brought up short by these jolting inanities, as well as by the many other grammatical oddities, too many of which seemed to have been shoved in by jejune editors trying to put their thumb-print (hoof-print?) on this author's prose.

But this author's prose was not, aside from what the editors did or undid, otherwise pristine. It clearly was flawed by what he himself did. For example, the book used too many words I had to look up in the dictionary. (Yes; these are my words: I had to look up too many words in the dictionary.) People who know me are aware that I do not have to look up many words. Also people know that I rarely mind looking up words since I always welcome the opportunity for learning about a new one. So why did I mind this time? Because it was an exercise artificially imposed. Those words I had to look up were attempts, on the author's part, to dabble in artificial technique. He was trying to seem more intelligent than he is. How do I know this? It's very simple, really. The words I looked up usually were big enough I had to use the OED (Oxford English Dictionary). That is twenty volumes worth of dictionary

arrayed in a very long row across the entire width of my very big desk. But ... and here is the clincher. While I had to look up as many as 200 words in the course of reading this little novel (which wasn't even quite 180 pages long), I had to pull out only four volumes of the OED. For well over half the book, it was all g's, h's, and a few f's I had to look up. Then, rather abruptly, about two-thirds of the way through, it became s's and t's and v's. I could tell what was going on. This writer had made a list of "big" words, intending to use them so he could impress the reader, but he did not even bother using the span of whatever heavy-duty dictionary he was consulting. He did not even see fit to mix up the alphabetical order of the words he was using as he inserted them. Am I surprised at encountering this? No. I have been acquainted with many writers who have told me they do this. As they prepare to write a book, they go through a dictionary, pick out some words they think the reader will not know, then they stick these in at random as they write. "The trick," one female poet told me, "is to make sure you remember the definitions yourself, so when people

ask you the meaning, it won't seem like you were faking it."

But she was faking it. After all, she did not initially know the meaning of the words, had to be sure and remember them so it would not later appear that she had been using artifice, and what she wrote did not actually involve creating; instead, she was busy trying to figure out how to craftily insert all that wordy fruit she had so clandestinely plucked.

I am sorry to say that I witnessed this technique (which actually is not a technique; it is a subterfuge) in no less a writer than Mary McCarthy herself. I had long acknowledged that, when I read her, I have to look up many words. Over the years many of her friends joked to her that they needed to carry with them a complete set of the OED if they were going to carry a novel of hers they were reading. She, in interviews, always expressed (feigned) surprise about this. Well, I am not so easily taken in. When reading one of her novels, I noticed a pattern: I would be in one volume of the OED for two or three words, then another volume for two or three words, etc. Aware, however, that this could be my deficiency (Who's to say that, for minutes at a time,

my brain doesn't "block out" the meaning of words beginning with a certain letter?) I asked a woman (whom I could, with no degree of harsh judgment, assume to have less of a vocabulary than mine) to keep a list of words she did not know the meaning of as she was reading a Mary McCarthy novel. This time the evidence was incontrovertible. There it was—Mary McCarthy used a word list as she wrote. She was more clever than Hansen about mixing the words up, but she too had her small clusters—a few s's, then some f's, next v's, and so on. If novelists do this occasionally, poets are especially prone to doing it. I have known poets who would come across a word they had not previously known, but now found quite intriguing, and they would be in an agony until they could finally get an opportunity for using that word in a poem.

As is usually the case when writers use words this way, they also misuse words. Thus Ron Hansen, more than once, trying to ever so cleverly use a "big" word ended up not quite using it correctly. Over and over I would mutter to myself, "This word doesn't exactly mean that, does it?" and so I would look it up, and no, it would not mean exactly that, and if it sort of meant that, it

did only vaguely—usually so vaguely as to be incorrect. Over and over he used, not those big “five-dollar words,” but archaic words, esoteric words, and in many cases words that were entirely wrong and could not even be redeemed by suggesting that they were nonce words in search of becoming neologisms. For example, on page 143, there is the sentence, “And then she’s fiercely pressed down to the palliasse and miseried by hands.” Some of the other nuns, we are to suppose, are attacking her. Or maybe it is demons. One isn’t sure, partly because one is distracted by that, “she’s,” but mainly because one is mystified by that “miseried.” The word “misery” is not a verb even in the OED, and it does not work as a verb here—the intransitive feeling-state of the properly used noun is not at all conveyed by this attempt at making a noun denoting sentience over into an intransitive verb that might have worked better as a transitive verb had Hansen but attempted to use (i.e., newly create) it this way. Another example, this one from page 146: “Mariette shrugs and says in the higher song of French that she just doesn’t know.” Well; sorry Ron, but referring to French as a “higher song” just doesn’t quite make sense. “Higher” how?

French higher than English? Well; maybe. But why call it a "song"? This usage, or misusage, does not correspond to any meaning in the OED, and his way of dallying with the word certainly does not merit its being inserted into the OED as a new way of using the word. A third example involves not using a word incorrectly, in terms of lexicography, but rather, using it entirely outside of its temporal context. Witness, on page 177, the choice of language: Mariette is in pain—a brief return of the stigmata which afflict her hands. She has been out of the convent now for a good while, and is tutoring a young lad in French. She is standing with her back to him as she winces in pain, and the boy says, "Are you okay?" Reader, do you note?! He says, "Are you okay?" The village looks upon this woman as either a saint or a witch. The boy is her student. This is the year 1912. And we are entrenched very solidly and stolidly in New England, upstate New York. Why didn't Ron Hansen just go ahead and have her answer in singsong, "No problem." This, along with the, "Are you okay?" would have given more than a few moments of high hilarity for those of us who pay attention to the idioms of spoken language (and the

idiocy of bad style). ("High hilarity" not to be confused, as someone like Ron Hansen might, with "a real thigh slapper.")

Aside from Ron's chronic habit of indulging garish syntactical lapses which one can clearly denote, the author's failings as a writer were most evident in his sheer inability to achieve a consistent praxis for putting down words, i.e., to find a writing voice which is as clearly his own as his speaking voice is his own. He kept experimenting—or rather, groping. He would begin writing a section in the painterly style of Monet. (Quick, intense, vague impressions.) Then he would switch to Manet. (More leisurely, protracted, determinate impressions.) There he usually remained, although every now and then he would take an excursion in the style of Mary Cassatt. (Impressions, still, but more forceful—so much so as to often seem tactile.) It was always an amateurish Monet, or Manet, or Cassatt, but Manet suited him best. Still, even in this mode, his prosaic ataxia jerked along and never did succeed in defining, much less commanding, a style. One wished, so often, that he would just quit toying and cloying, trying to show us how clever he could (try to) be, and

instead just move the story along, as he did so well (albeit too briefly), on pages 154-160.

And yet ... and yet ... I have to admit that this book did have power. The author brought forth enough sympathy for the character, Mariette, that I truly envied her this immersion into the holy. Such redolence! Such resplendence! And such glorious fusion with the Divine! And there was achieved a true sense of reality—a sort of “naturalism” (as it is called in literature)—when describing the mixed feelings the other nuns felt toward this young novice who was experiencing her stigmata. Their responses, ranging from admiring love to invidious envy, were believable, well wrought, and well writ. Also, Hansen over and over actually evoked such powerful religious feeling in me that it gave me chills. And there were many times when his book, evoking my nihilistic grief, brought me to tears. (Why don't I just admit it? I experienced more than tears—there were times I sobbed.) All this unquestionably means that Ron Hansen's abilities as a writer can be, and sometimes are, impressively powerful. (Oh; if only they could be consistently so powerful!)

And yet ... and yet (even again!) ... while these aforementioned powers of evocation are considerable, I must note I am not sure but that most of my grief and religious feeling came from a wellspring of something already under pressure within myself, rather than from what Hansen invoked or provoked. Moreover, I must say that Hansen's ability to move a character into what is her true inner emotional quality was too often too suspect, i.e., too often inadequate. Mariette was never quite prepared, by the author, for a holy receptivity which would warrant her incurring the stigmata. She was still a girl who could be shallow, hypocritical, vain. She was, as some of her fellow sisters accused, a flirt, and she liked mocking people. If she was prayerful, meditative, perhaps hallucinatory (though clearly enraptured by Jesus), she certainly never seemed very pure. Or if she really was so pure, the reader had to accept this on faith rather than in terms of what the author had created. If the character has her faith in God, fine; but we the readers should not have to have faith in this character's faith, which would mean that we also have to have faith in the author's credibility.

Of course, some readers might judge that an evocation of faith from within the reader toward the author is, in this book, opportunity for indulging some dabbling with the sort of spiritual ambiguities and testings of faith which inspire and edify. I suppose there is nothing wrong with such centrifugal religious inclinations, if all you want is light reading. But I would prefer more demanding reading—reading that involves, not dabbling in spiritual ambiguities, but wrestling with them. And as for such wrestling, I must here avow that I can not at all imagine this book having appeal to anyone but a Catholic, a former Catholic, or a Catholic atheist such as myself. Which means that this book's spiritual message has limitations—requiring someone to be already conversant in the language of the Catholic religion in order to appreciate the book's meaning and fervor. Certainly one can appreciate the spiritual messages put forth by Tolstoy, Graham Greene, even Saint Francis of Assisi, without being a Catholic. Their message, or at least the power of their message, achieves a religious universality without relying on the language, ritual, and theology of a specific creed. Ron Hansen, however,

lacks the ability to achieve such universalized religious awareness. As a writer he has not the genius for making his message resound so powerfully as to be heard through the walls of cloistered creed.

One final comment is here in order, and it actually is primarily an aside: The author himself—the person separate from the book—is a very odd specimen. I have seen pictures of him, and I swear, he looks like a woman. So much like a woman I would have to see more pictures, or meet the author in person, to be convinced that he is not a woman. Also, if I may speculate: I am quite sure Ron Hansen must be the author I was speaking of in the interview I gave in 2006 for Viaticum Press International. I am referring to that geriatric editor who edited a book of short stories by a young author and wailed, “But of course they were all wrong!” She did not state the author’s name, but the way she described that book of short stories makes me think it was probably Ron Hansen himself and his first book—a short story collection called Nebraska. Also, the way she described his physiology and physiognomy perhaps explains my difficulty with his sex. I recall her stating that because he is tall and angular, with an

"Abe Lincolnesque" look, they had to spend a great deal of time just getting the right photograph. (Two days, I think she said, although my memory is not clear on this detail.) So maybe what they came up with was: soften those angles by putting him in a woman's sweater and giving him a female-type hair-do to make him look like an unattractive dyke. I daresay they succeeded, although I also think they could have done better by just giving him a top hat and making him look even more Abe Lincolnesque. Regardless, that editor's verbal description of him evinced the spitting image one could conjure of a Ron Hansen during his pre-makeover life.

But let us not dwell too much on Ron Hansen the man. (Even though it is easy to do, since when it comes to Ron Hansen the artist, there isn't much to dwell on.) As for Ron Hansen the writer: If I am correct in assuming that it indeed was Ron Hansen whom that editor was talking about, then his editor obviously, back then, got by with changing his prose as much as she wanted to. This would suggest that if Hansen let an editor get by with such desecration once, then it is no wonder that he, in this book, again shamefully (or shamelessly?) submitted his prose to such a spanking.

This would explain his book's being contaminated with such a plethora of insipid (i.e., scarcely inspired or even innovative) prosaic sullyings inflicted by all that editorial meddling—displayed there, morbidly, alongside Hansen's own stylistic autism.

So thus you have it: a book which at times exalted me spiritually, but so infuriated me artistically that the spiritual exaltations were soon laid low.

Thank you, Ron Hansen, for sharing with me your spiritual fervor. It was, at times, a balm and an epiphanal ("epiphanic," to you) inspiration. And shame on you, Ron Hansen, for being such a pretentious, smug, piss-poor artist. You took a grand subject-matter and gestured toward, but failed to grasp, its sublime stature. In short, you had a grand idea, but you lacked the talent for making it real. You tried to write a better novel than you could. There is nothing wrong with such aspiring, of course, but do not expect me to ever again waste my brain cells, much less litter the interior of my soul, by submitting myself to another of your exercises in pseudo-literary frottage. I will never, ever again spend my hours recoiling from, much less deciphering (or commenting on): your many lapses

in lexicographical propriety, context, and verisimilitude; your simpering stylistic assays into sentences that cleave, style sans cleavage, and words that too often just don't quite cleave (in the other sense of this word); or your failure to find continuity in those many discontinuous assemblages of spiritual interstices you tried but failed to cohere or catalogue. In short, Ron Hansen, do not think that you can again lure me in the direction of your pseudo-prose with the bait of promised spiritual sustenance. You do not possess enough artistry to succeed in sharing either spiritual sustenance or theological substance. All you are able to do is vaguely titillate by pointing to the hypothetical presence, the shallowly presumed philosophical hypostases, and the infratentorial hypoxia of the elusive divine.

Satis, I here say, in a much truer sense of the Latin than was the sense of it you clumsily clawed for when you errantly shoved the word into your book.

*(Witten July 15, 2007, in one day.)
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