



Heaven's Stenographer: The 'Guided' Hand of Vassula Ryden

She claims to receive communications not only from her guardian angel, "Daniel," but also from Jesus and even Yahweh himself, who guide her hand to produce written messages. She has provoked both skepticism and credulity from Catholic laity and clergy, and her texts—an amalgam of Bible verses and Orthodox and Catholic teachings—have helped her attract an increasing following. Some claim to have witnessed supernatural experiences at her talks, although I did not when I witnessed her first appearance in Western New York in 2004. I have since sought to learn just who Vassula Ryden is and more about the phenomenon behind that name (Ryden 1995; "Vassula" 2010; Tokasz 2004).

Vassula

Born to Greek Orthodox parents in Heliopolis, Egypt, on January 18, 1942, Vassula Ryden emigrated to Europe when she was fifteen. She says as a teenager she saw herself surrounded by souls of the dead, although she claims to have been indifferent to religion for a time. Following marriage, the birth of two sons, divorce, and remarriage, she claims to have begun receiving messages from her own invisible "guardian angel," Daniel. "I almost freaked out," she said (Ryden 2004). That occurred in late 1985 while she was living in Bangladesh. Five years later, she "regu-

larized" her marriage in the rites of the Greek Orthodox Church, to which she still belongs ("Vassula" 2010). Nevertheless, Ryden says that God revealed to her the Sacred Heart (a Catholic symbol of Christ's love for the human family) to show her the equality of all faiths (Ryden 2004).

In the mid-1990s, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued two notices of concern about Ryden. The first came in 1995, pointing out "several negative elements and errors." It requested that bishops refuse to give her the opportunity to spread her questionable ideas within their dioceses and asked them not to treat her writings or speeches as "supernatural." The following year, another notification encouraged priests to "exercise serious spiritual discernment" regarding Ryden's messages, declaring that they must be considered merely "private meditations" and not divine revelations. However, some of her Catholic supporters observe that the church does not completely discount her teachings, and the publications of her organization, the American Association for True Life in God, have obvious Catholic trappings ("Vassula" 2010; Tokasz 2004).

The Catholic Church is skittish about such freelancers—urging caution toward supposedly supernatural phenomena (such as stigmata or weeping

effigies) and any reputed visions or messages. The Church is all too aware of delusional persons and pious frauds. However, such matters are usually left to the local bishop, and investigations are typically less about science than about how a claim comports with Catholic teachings.

I determined to take an objective look at three aspects of Ryden's purported messages (within my own areas of expertise): first, the distinctive handwriting (I am author of textbooks on writing and forgery, including *Pen, Ink, and Evidence* [Nickell 1990]); second, the text (I have a PhD in English, experience in examining unusual texts, and membership in the International Association of Forensic Linguists) [Nickell 2008]; and third, whether Ryden might have a fantasy-prone personality (I have studied this trait for years, especially under the direction of the late psychologist Robert A. Baker [Nickell 1997]).

Handwriting

Ryden insists that the messages she receives and writes down are not the result of spiritualistic phenomena such as channeling or automatic writing ("Vassula" 2010). However, neither phenomenon is defined as being limited to spirits of the dead; either may involve interaction with any type of alleged nonphysical beings, such as angels,

Yes Jesus. The day of glory, what does
it mean?

I will tell you: it will be the day when
all the revelations will come to light;
it will be when all that has been written
by Me and My Father will come to light,
the Truth will not be concealed, come,
now* you are learning;

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I am here, daughter; I am Wisdom, be
ready to deliver My message to all mankind;
* I understood that the time has not yet come
for my mission. I was still learning.

Figure 1. Handwriting produced by artist Vassula Ryden—supposedly “supernaturally guided”—is drawn rather than freely written. [The same mannered script is used for messages from “Yahweh,” “Jesus,” “Mary,” and her guardian angel, “Daniel.”] It contrasts with her own handwriting.

deities, extraterrestrials, or the like (Guiley 2000, 25–26, 70–71). So, Ryden is by definition a channeler and an automatic writer.

Reportedly, the messages began in late November 1985 when Ryden was about to make a shopping list. Her hand suddenly began to move, seemingly without her control, to form words and drawings, initiating a phenomenon that continues to the present day. The self-styled visionary reportedly receives about four to six hours of guided-hand

“dictation” each day (Carroll 1995, ix; “Vassula” 2010). From a scientific perspective, (assuming it is not deliberately contrived) such a phenomenon is attributed to the ideomotor effect, in which a participant unconsciously produces a movement. The same psychological phenomenon is responsible for the motion of dowsing rods and pendulums, Ouija-board planchette movement, table tipping, and the like (Randi 1995, 169–70).

Ryden’s messages supposedly “come through dictation by an audible voice

within, then are written in a stately handwriting—distinct from her own—as she allows her hand to be guided supernaturally” (“About” 1995). Interestingly enough, the same “distinct” script that is used for messages from the angel “Daniel” is employed by “Jesus,” “Mary,” and “Yahweh” (see figure 1), rather than each entity having his or her own individual handwriting.

Keeping in mind that Ryden is an artist (“About” 1995), it seems noteworthy that the “guided” handwriting has the characteristics of a script that is artistically drawn rather than naturally and freely written. It is a “mannered” or affected hand, rendered in a self-consciously non-slanted style—rather like the so-called “vertical writing” that was taught in American and Canadian schools from 1890 to 1900 but was deemed too time consuming to produce practically and subsequently abandoned (Nickell 1990, 124, 126; Osborn 1978, 140). Most mainstream scripts, intended for right-handed persons to render with some speed, slope in the forward direction, as does Ryden’s ordinary handwriting. Interestingly, an alteration in slant is one of the most common ploys used for disguising handwriting (Hilton 1982, 169; Osborn 1978, 147, 149, 211). Use of this simple change can thus instantly impart a new look to an entire page. The “stately” hand also differs from Ryden’s in size (being larger than hers), another common disguise ploy (Nickell 1996, 49).

Apart from the “stately” affectation, the supposedly supernatural handwriting is essentially a formal, copybook version of Ryden’s own naturally jotted script that alternates with the “stately” hand in her notebooks. The “stately” hand avoids some of her script’s idiosyncrasies, yet it still has mostly printed capitals just like her own handwriting. On occasion, one of the copybook forms sneaks back into her natural script (replacing, for instance, her individualistic *f*, which has a backwardly made loop, with the standard copybook *f*) (see Ryden 1995, 171, 223).

Consistent with its neat, drawn appearance is the fact that the “guided”

handwriting is done on lined paper, with the lines showing in some of the reproduced pages (Ryden 1995, e.g., 232–33). This is consistent with the use of eye-hand coordination. One suspects that if Ryden were prevented from seeing what was being written, the entities supposedly guiding her hand would be unable to so faithfully follow the lines! I invite Ryden to accept my invitation to perform a scientific test to refute or confirm this suspicion.

Text

On January 25, 1987, Ryden wrote:

Courage daughter, I, Jesus Christ have instructed you that the cross you bear is My Cross of Peace and Love, but to bear My precious Cross, daughter, you will have to do much self-sacrifice; be strong and bear my Cross with love; with Me you will share it and you will share My sufferings; I was pleased to hear your prayer of surrender; in surrendering to Me I will lift you to the heights and show you how I work; I will mould you, if you let Me, into a better person; you have given Me your consent to become My bride, so what [*sic*] more natural for a bride to follow her Spouse? I am glad you realize your worthlessness, do not fear, I love you anyway. . . . (Ryden 1995, 233–34)

Is this really a message from Jesus guiding Ryden's hand? Not only is the handwriting the identical, mannered script that is also used for her "Daniel," "Yahweh," and "Mary," but the perpetual use of semicolons is another similarity from alleged speaker to alleged speaker. All—except, appropriately, Daniel—call her "daughter" (Ryden 1995, 153, 188, 225), and they refer to themselves with the same construction: "I, Jesus," "I, God," "I 'i Panayia" (Greek for "Our Lady, most Holy") (Ryden 1995, 155, 231, 293).

Ryden's purported messages can be compared with other alleged communications from Jesus. One set of writings was "received from Jesus" by Lilian Bernas (1999), a purported stigmatic. (*Stigmata* are the supposedly supernaturally received wounds resembling those of Christ. However, Bernas's wounds—which I have seen up close—

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appear to be consistent with self-infliction [Nickell 2007, 59–66].) In one communication with Bernas, Jesus supposedly said (Bernas 1999, 23):

My Suffering Soul—

This is your Beloved. I have come as promised to embrace you with the spirit of peace. Take this time, and have respite from the wicked assaults of the evil one. My child, you have bent, but you have not broken. This pleases your Beloved. . . .

My child—humble yourself now, and ascend the hill of your Beloved with your Beloved. . . .

Nancy Fowler, a homemaker in Conyers, Georgia, claimed for several years to be receiving messages from both Jesus and, more often, the Virgin Mary. (The latter appeared punctually on the thirteenth of each month, and I was able to attend a session [Nickell 1993, 196–97]). One message from "Jesus" instructed the faithful (Fowler 1993):

Come through My Mother on your journey back to Me. From this very cross I give the world My perfect love. I give the world, I give everyone in the world, My dear, Holy Mother. Please, if you accept My Love, then how can you reject, ignore, not honor,

not love My Mother. I come through My Mother and I want you, dear children, to come through My Mother on your journey back to Me.

I choose the word "Come" intentionally, not past tense. I still come through My Mother. Graces are poured forth through My Mother, the Graces come from Me.

I am especially familiar with these two groups of writings, although they are supposedly received by clairaudience (trance hearing) rather than by automatic writing. (Therefore, errors of grammar and the like could be attributed to mistaken transcription by the percipient.)

Now, whereas Vassula Ryden's "Jesus" frequently identifies himself as "I, Jesus," Lilian Bernas's Jesus persona never does, nor does the one channeled by Nancy Fowler. There are many other differences among the three sets of texts; for example, the dominant theme of each: Fowler's is the near-deification of the Virgin Mary (an emphasis sometimes disparagingly referred to as "Mariolatry"), Bernas's is the importance of suffering, and Ryden's is the need for divine love and guidance.

Style also differs from channeler to

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channeler. Ryden's "God" and "Jesus" (as well as "Daniel") speak similarly, often using convoluted diction (for example, "do not leave yourself be drifted away" [144], instead of "do not let yourself drift away"); wrong prepositions (e.g., "irrespective to their deeds" [146], rather than "irrespective of"); missing prepositions (such as in "I, Yahweh will remind them in this call many events" [150], wherein "of" is missing after "call"); subject/verb agreement error (e.g., "the reasons that makes" [44]); faulty auxiliary verbs (such as "I have restored you since the time you have accepted Me" [158], the second "have" being unnecessary); incorrect verb forms (e.g., "I will progress you" [163], "I fragranced you" [34], and "Jesus flourished you" [42]); and so on.

Ryden's messages also have occasional misspellings: for example, "God" says, "work with Me writting [*sic*] down My messages" (231), and he also uses the misspellings "joyfull" (138) and "analising" (101, 105). If God deigns to use the English language, should we not expect it to be rendered accurately?

Before we become invested in imagining what a deity might or might not do, we should note that Ryden's own written text has similar faults—for example, using "sprung" when "sprang"

would be correct, the misspelling "pan-ick," faulty subject/verb agreement (e.g., "Joy and Peace is"), and many others. At times the respective errors are eerily similar, as when "God" uses "do" for "make" (e.g., "do not get discouraged when you do errors") just as Ryden does (e.g., "I do so many mistakes") (see Ryden 1995, 22, 89, 93, 235).

Fantasy-Proneness

From the evidence, it looks like Ryden's channeled automatic writings are merely emanations from a single source: her imagination. Indeed, she exhibits many traits of what is known as a "fantasy-prone" personality: sane and normal but with a propensity to fantasize, as described in a pioneering study by Sheryl C. Wilson and Theodore X. Barber (1983). Since childhood, Ryden has had various "mystical" experiences. She has encountered apparitions (such as the souls of "dead people"), had vivid or "waking" dreams (with paranormal imagery), experienced religious visions, interacted with invisible companions, received messages from higher entities, and had other experiences common to many fantasizers (Carroll 1995; Ryden 1995, xx–xxl).

Taken together, the contrived handwriting, the linguistic lapses, and the in-

dications of fantasizing all suggest that Vassula Ryden is not in touch with supernatural entities but is simply engaging in self-deception that in turn deceives the credulous. Her automatic writings therefore are not works of revelation but simply of pious imagination. ■

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