

Anatomies of a Saint: The Unstable Body of Teresa de Jesús

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Teresa reading Teresa

From as early as 1554, when Teresa de Jesús experienced her first raptures, both her body and her soul became the object of competing diagnoses that endeavored to determine whether her ecstasies were divine, demonic or, most egregious of all, human in origin. Not least among them were the diagnoses of the future saint herself whose *Vida (Life)* can be read as a response to growing suspicion throughout the sixteenth century of charismatic female spirituality and of mystical practices that sought unmediated communication with God. Ecstatic bodies, in particular those of mystic women, thought to be especially vulnerable to diabolic seductions, posed a vexing interpretive challenge: identical symptoms could have radically opposing etiologies, since God and the devil had access to the same alphabet of rapturous signs. How, then, to know with any degree of certainty that a rapture was a sign of sanctity and not grounds for exorcism?

For Teresa, symptomatized and pathologized by both Church and Inquisition as a potential heterodox, this process took on special urgency. In this essay, I explore Teresa's efforts to interpret the symptoms of her body and the movements of her soul and, specifically, the strategies she mobilized in order to claim diagnostic authority over the radically unstable text of her interior, substituting a demonic etiology with a divine one. I explore how Teresa reclaims experience – *experiencia* – as that which allows her to distinguish the provenance of her charismatic symptoms, providing a cogent rebuttal to those who would accuse her of heresy or fraud and, moreover, an experienced-based *corpus* of theological knowledge, founded, like the new sciences, on first-hand observation of interior secrets.

One might argue that there is nothing remarkable in Teresa's turn to experience as a means to authorize her discourse. Indeed, the Thomistic premise of *cognitio dei experimentalis* had been used by Gerson, Bonaventure, and

Bernard of Clairvaux to define mysticism. Francisco de Osuna, quite likely Teresa's principal source on affective spirituality, had affirmed the importance of experience (and of experienced guides) on the path to direct knowledge of God. But there are two important distinctions to be drawn. First, in the Spain of the mid sixteenth century, any claim of an immediate (that is, unmediated) knowledge of God through experience was deemed dangerously close to Lutheran heresy or demonic possession, particularly if such claims were put forth by a woman.¹ The challenge for Teresa, then, was to legitimize her right to mystic experiences without overtly challenging the hierarchical structure that would be judging her. Several critics have done remarkable work in this direction. Alison Weber has argued that the requirement to justify her spiritual favors while demonstrating obedience puts Teresa in a 'double bind'; she suggests that the rhetoric of humility which pervades the *Vida* provides a way out of the double bind, by inscribing inferiority in order to then wield it as an arm of resistance (1996: 45–8). James Fernández offers a different but equally suggestive reading; he argues that autobiographical discourse – especially Teresa's – is structured on a back-and-forth movement between two forms of address: apostrophe (the invocation of a higher authority – God, in Teresa's case) and apology (submission to a concrete human authority – for Teresa, her *letrado* or learned confessors) (1992: 29). Drawing on Weber's and Fernández's insights, we might say that Teresa relies on experience in order to negotiate a position of knowledge that is precariously balanced between subjectivity and subjection.²

The second distinction between Teresa's use of experience and that found in earlier mystic treatises such as Osuna's has to do with what was most crucially at stake for Teresa: it was not only knowledge about God through experience, but also a second-order knowledge *about* that knowledge and more specifically, about its provenance. Experience can be said to work on at least two levels in Teresa's discourse: it legitimates her access to the supernatural, and also guarantees the accuracy of her interpretation, underwriting a theory as well as a praxis of *discretio spiritum*. In both cases truth is the central concern. In the first instance, experience is the very union with God that provides access to a transcendent Truth; Teresa's challenge is to defend her claims to that Truth against those who either lack experience or who allege she has no right to it. In the second case, experience serves to elucidate the truth status *of* the revealed truth by discerning its origin as demonic

¹ On the ways in which experience operated within both Reformation and Counter Reformation theology, see Jay 2006. On the concept and history of *cognitio dei experimentalis*, see also Geybels 2008.

² Other recent studies of the *Vida* include Hollis 1990, Slade 1995, Ahlgren 1996: 67–84, Pérez-Romero 1996, and Carrera 2005.

or divine. Teresa relies on experience as a means of producing hermeneutic certainty, gaining diagnostic authority over her own symptoms.

*Espiriencia, mujercillas, mística teología**

The first nine-and-a-half chapters of Teresa's *Vida* mostly follow the conventions of nuns' autobiographies: they are a confession of her past life (beginning with a spiritual calling in childhood, heeded, then postponed, then taken up again), and an account of her fledgling efforts at interior prayer.³ It is in Chapter X that the *Vida* takes a decidedly different turn. From that point forward, she narrates the account of what happens to her in ecstasy and, beginning in Chapter XI, daringly offers an excursus on mystical theology which, she claims, is based not on book learning, but fully grounded in experience. Teresa does not ignore her transgressiveness; in the penultimate paragraph of the *Vida* she will confess that she has been very bold in writing about 'cosas tan subidas' (1990: 481) ('these sublime subjects', 1957: 314).⁴ It is precisely in the passage from Chapter X to Chapter XI, as Teresa is about to begin recounting and interpreting the spiritual gifts that have given rise to so much apprehension, that she requests that García de Toledo, intended reader of this particular version, either tear up or burn her manuscript if it does not conform to the truths of the Holy Catholic Faith (1990: 189), corroborating the extent to which such conformity weighed on her. She also makes a plea for anonymity, claiming that no good will come of the circulation of her name. It is one of several moments in the *Vida* that splits the text in pieces, creating an almost Augustinian before and after that will be repeated, not coincidentally, in the chapter that closes the theological excursus:

Yo digo lo que ha pasado por mí como me lo mandan; y si no fuere bien, romperálo a quién lo envió, que sabrá mejor entender lo que va mal que yo, a quien suplico por amor del Señor, lo que he dicho hasta aquí de mi ruin vida y pecados, lo publiquen (desde ahora doy licencia, y a todos mis confesores que así lo es a quien esto va) y, si quisieren, luego en mi vida; porque no engañe más al mundo que piensen hay en mí algún bien y cierto, cierto, con verdad digo, a lo que ahora entiendo de mí, que me dará gran consuelo. Para lo que de aquí adelante dijere, no se la doy

* Experience, poor little women, mystical theology

³ For background on early modern hispanic nuns as autobiographers, see Arenal and Schlau 1989a, Donahue 1989, and Surtz 1995.

⁴ All citations of the *Vida* refer to Dámaso Chicharro's edition (Teresa de Jesús 1990); English versions are taken from J. M. Cohen's translation (Teresa de Jesús 1957).

[licencia para publicar]; ni quiero, si a alguien lo mostraren, digan quién es por quien pasó, ni quién lo escribió, que por esto no me nombro, ni a nadie, sino escribirlo he todo lo mejor que pueda por no ser conocida, y ansí lo pido por amor de Dios. (Teresa 1990: 188)

(I merely relate what happened to me, as I have been commanded. If the recipient of this does not approve of it, he will tear it up, and he will know better than I what is wrong with it. But I implore him, for the Lord's sake, to let what I have so far said about my wretched life and my sins be published. I give permission for this, here and now, to him and to all my confessors, of whom he is one. They may publish this now in my lifetime, if they like, so that I may no longer deceive the world, which thinks there is some good in me. I am speaking in all sincerity when I say that, in so far as I understand myself at present, this will give me great comfort. This permission does not apply to what I am going to say from now on. If the rest is shown to anyone I do not wish him to be told whose experience it describes, or who wrote it. That is why I mention neither myself nor anyone else by name and have done my best to write in such a way as not to be recognized. I beg your Reverence, for the love of God, to preserve my secrecy.) (Teresa 1957: 74)

Teresa's rending of the text in two might be seen as a pre-emptive move to ward off the threat of violence over the body of her manuscript that her confessors hold. That she herself deposits that power in their hands (by insisting they destroy it if it is non-conforming) is a red herring; they in fact have had the power all along. But what is extraordinary is the way Teresa's invitation to her confessors to destroy the secret text if it is unorthodox covertly transfers that culpable non-conformity from her person on to her text. In fact, Teresa creates two texts from one: the first, a public autobiographical confession that by outing her as a sinner will bring her consolation; the second (contained within the first, another secret interior), a clandestine text that recounts and interprets her mystic experiences. She tellingly frames this secret text in a double passivity: a grammatical one that uses the passive voice to displace agency ('what happened to me') and a rhetorical one that reinscribes her obedience ('as I have been commanded') as she enters shaky ground.

It is no coincidence that at this juncture, as Teresa is erasing herself from her own story, she should reaffirm the extent to which the account that follows cannot exist without her. Three times in the chapter's final paragraph she makes reference to experience, framing it as the *sine qua non* that, more than simply supplementing book learning, seems at times to supplant it:

Por claro que yo quiera decir estas cosas de oración, será bien oscuro para quien no tuviere experiencia. Algunos impedimentos diré, que a mi entender lo son para ir adelante en este camino, y otras cosas en que hay

peligro, de lo que el Señor me ha enseñado por experiencia, y después tratádolo yo con grandes letrados y personas espirituales de muchos años, y ven que en solos veinte y siete años que tengo oración, me ha dado Su Majestad la experiencia, con andar en tantos tropiezos y tan mal este camino, que a otros en cuarenta y siete y en treinta y siete que con penitencia y siempre virtud han caminado por él. (1990: 189)

(However clearly I may wish to explain this matter of prayer, it will be very obscure to anyone who has not the experience. I shall describe certain impediments, which I believe prevent men from advancing on this path, also certain other sources of danger about which the Lord has taught me by experience. More recently, I have also discussed the subject with men of great learning and persons who have led spiritual lives for many years; and they have seen that in the twenty-seven years during which I have practised prayer, ill though I have trodden the road and often though I have stumbled, His Majesty has granted me experiences for which others need thirty-seven, or even forty-seven, although they may have progressed in penitence and constant virtue.) (1957: 75)

Teresa makes clear that no matter how eloquently she recounts this matter of prayer, her meaning will remain elusive to those who lack the experience that at once forces and authorizes her to speak. It is one of many instances throughout the *Vida* in which Teresa draws a distinction between the initiated and uninitiated in affective spiritual practices; this distinction will find an echo in her categorization of confessors as *espirituales* (spiritual) and *letrados* (educated) (among these she will draw a further distinction between fully fledged *letrados* and *medios letrados* (half-educated) confessors). In suggesting that the uninitiated – those who lack first-hand experience of the rapture she describes – will be unable to understand her, she subtly wrests from them the authority to judge her.

What comes next seems, at first blush, to respond to an apostolic or pedagogic impulse; Teresa offers to map the pitfalls on the path of interior prayer for the benefit of those who wish to advance on the path. But that impulse, which is potentially dangerous for a woman in her circumstance, is doubly (if only implicitly) sanctioned: first, by the assertion that it is God who has taught her, and secondly, by the vetting of the ‘grandes letrados y personas espirituales’ (men of great learning and persons who have led spiritual lives) with whom she has consulted. Teresa achieves a delicate balance here, moving between a dyadic and a triangular geometry. This is a recurrent movement in the *Vida*. On one hand, she affirms the intimacy of her one-on-one relation with God, who imparts His teachings to her without the need of a mediator, by experience, and, on the other, she wards off potential criticism by submitting those teachings to third-party adjudicators whose complicity she actively seeks. Rather than relinquishing authority in the hands of those

mediators, however, Teresa enlists them as witnesses in her defense who *see* that her experience is God-given. It is important to note that Teresa does not try to gloss over the disparity they also see (her receiving divine gifts despite being unworthy), but incorporates the fullness of their gaze into her narrative, thereby increasing its truth value. What immediately follows is the turn to God that so often resolves *aporias* in Teresa's discourse: 'Blessed be He for all things, and may He, for His name's sake, make use of me. My Lord knows that all I desire is that He may be praised and magnified' (1957: 75). Here that turn works to dispel doubts about the paradox she has just raised and which informed the murmurings of those who argued that she was either a demoniac or a fake: why God would have chosen Teresa's body, 'un muladar tan sucio y de mal olor' ('a foul and stinking dunghill'), as the site on which to plant his spiritual gifts, 'huerto de tan suaves flores' (1990: 189) ('a garden of such sweet flowers', 1957: 75). Far from ignoring or writing off the contradiction, Teresa takes full ownership of it, emptying it of any suspect content: the paradox itself becomes proof of divinity, the stuff of miracles.

It is a paradox Teresa returns to time and again throughout the *Vida*; this is not surprising, since it was at the heart of the argument of those who claimed she was either possessed or a charlatan. At times she humbly confesses her insufficiency before God, at other times she lays claims on that insufficiency as a means to neutralize its charge. One of the most dramatic instances of this occurs in a passage that Weber has insightfully read in the context of the changing tides of the word *mujercilla* (poor little woman) in the wake of the trials of the *alumbrados* (Illuminists), and as a defense veiled as a concession (1996: 31–7).⁵ Admonishing those who question the provenance of her raptures (skeptical that God would confer divine favors on Teresa in a mere matter of days, and yet withhold them from men who have worked long years to obtain them), she writes:

Para mujercitas como yo, flacas y con poca fortaleza, me parece a mí conviene (como ahora lo hace Dios) llevarme con regalos, porque pueda sufrir algunos trabajos que ha querido Su Majestad tenga. Mas para siervos de Dios, hombres de tomo, de letras y entendimiento, que veo hacer caso de que Dios no los da devoción, que me hace disgusto oírlo, no digo yo que no la tomen, si Dios la da [...] mas que cuando no la tuvieren, que no

⁵ The *alumbrados* or Illuminists were groups of men and women, both lay and religious, many from *converso* families, who met in private homes, outside of the Church hierarchy, in order to discuss and interpret the Scriptures. Weber writes: 'Although the groups did not share a unified doctrine, they held the common belief that the individual was capable of understanding the Scripture when inspired or "illuminated" by the Holy Spirit' (1996: 22). Many of these groups, who believed salvation came by grace alone, were led by women.

se fatiguen; y que entiendan que no es menester, pues Su Majestad no la da, y anden señores de sí mismos. (1990: 197–8)

(As for a poor woman like myself, a weak and irresolute creature, it seems right that the Lord should lead me on with favours, as He now does, in order that I may bear certain afflictions with which He has been pleased to burden me. But when I hear servants of God, men of weight, learning, and understanding, worrying so much because He is not giving them devotion, it makes me sick to listen to them. I do not say that they should not accept it if God grants it to them [...] but they should not be distressed when they do not receive it. They should realize that since the Lord does not give it to them they do not need it. They should exercise control over themselves and go right ahead.) (1957: 81)

The question of mystical experience here becomes gendered: it is not that Teresa receives spiritual gifts *in spite of* being a woman but rather *because* she is a woman. The incongruity inherent in her receiving favors provides the best proof of their orthodoxy. It is a brilliant strategy that patronizes her accusers, who are advised to exercise control over themselves, and categorically disarms them, turning the tables on their skepticism through a process analogous to what Josefina Ludmer has defined as ‘tricks of the weak’ (1984: 53).⁶ Paraphrasing Ludmer, we might say that from her assigned place of *mujercita flaca* (a weak little woman) Teresa changes the meaning both of that place (a foul dunghill) and of what is (or can be) installed there (a garden of such sweet flowers). One might be tempted to see Teresa’s move here within a longer tradition that associates affective female spirituality with experience, but leaves theological exegesis to men of letters and understanding (see Perry 1990: 91–2). There is no question that Teresa writes, wittingly or not, in the protective shade of charismatic foremothers – as well as in the ominous shadow of the *alumbradas* (Illuminists) – who similarly accessed the transcendent through experience. But if this would seem to inscribe Teresa’s use of experience on one side of a set of seemingly intractable alignments (man/woman, mind/body, rational/affective, theoretical/experiential), it is worth remembering that this passage occurs in the midst of a chapter on *mística teología* (to use Teresa’s words) that is authored by a woman and in which the experiential *determines* the theoretical. Despite the qualifier that she may have read or heard it somewhere (1990: 193), the fourfold metaphor of the waters that begins in Chapter XI is an attempt to transform the experience of interior prayer into the discourse of a mystic science. Far from reinscribing the rift between mystic experience and mystic theology along gendered lines, Teresa dissolves it.

⁶ See also James Fernández’s remarks on the applicability of Ludmer’s term to Teresa’s practice (1990).

Discretio spiritum

I turn now to the second level at which experience operates in the *Vida*. If the first level of experience is based on a direct and unmediated knowledge of the transcendent that authorizes Teresa to speak among *letrados*, the second level is explicitly associated with the theological science (or grace) of discernment and with a kind of knowledge *about* knowledge that legitimates Teresa's ability to interpret her raptures and confirm their divine provenance, thus guaranteeing their truth. At the heart of both the principle and practice of discernment is a confrontation between doubt and certainty.⁷ As Michel Foucault writes: 'For Christians, the possibility that Satan can get inside your soul and give you thoughts you cannot recognize as Satanic but that you might interpret as coming from God leads to an uncertainty about what is going on inside your soul. You are unable to know what the real root of your desire is, at least without hermeneutic work' (2003: 203).

The hermeneutic work of discernment – understood by the Church as the product of both a God-given grace and a learned method – stages the encounter between faith and science, heavily mediated by doubt: it provides a way to know, a system for moving from interpretive instability to interpretive stability. Moshé Sluhovsky writes, 'Theologically, discernment of spirits (*discretio spiritum*) is a divine grace (*gratia gratis data*); philosophically, it is an interpretive challenge' (2007: 170). For Teresa, the way to confront that challenge, the movement from hermeneutic instability to stability, customarily takes one of three forms (although I discuss these separately, they often overlap): *a posteriori* external confirmation (objectivity), isolation of doubt – and of those who would doubt her – as demonic (the devil's due), and a turn to the effect as the legible, perceptual trace of invisible or indeterminable phenomena (traces).

Objectivity

The first of Teresa's strategies for dispelling doubts about the orthodoxy of her mystic raptures is, in many ways, the most straightforward. It consists of a second experience of God that confirms (or, on occasion, strategically denies) divine authorship of a first experience. In the *Cuentas de conciencia* (Examinations of Conscience) as in the *Vida*, God often reappears to dispel Teresa's doubts concerning the provenance of a rapture or, as frequently, of a message she has received during rapture. Although this strategy is efficient in foreclosing the possibility of misdiagnosis (that is, of misconstruing the

⁷ The history of discernment within the Catholic Church finds its roots in 1 John 4.1: 'Believe not every spirit, but try the spirit if they be of God'. Sluhovsky 2007 traces the history of this elaborate system from the time of John to the sixteenth century.

demonic as divine or the divine as demonic), insofar as God Himself returns to set the record straight, it could be said to create an infinite hermeneutic circle: how can Teresa know, after all, that the second vision or mystic experience is not itself a demonic illusion that falsely confirms untruth as truth?

Part of the answer to this question can be found in the continuous nature of Teresa's exchanges with God, who returns, time and again, to offer a second (or third or fourth) opinion when the first opinion (typically offered by a *letrado* or *medio letrado* who lacks mystical experience and prompts Teresa's self-doubt) is erroneous. James Fernández has noted that this constant communication with God is one of Teresa's most frequent and astute tactics, whereby she ends up skirting the question of her orthodoxy or heterodoxy, burying it in the text itself (1990: 299). Along these lines, we might see these *a posteriori* confirmations by God in relation to the tenuous balance the text negotiates between a specular geometry (based on an unmediated relation with God) and a triangular one (in which the confessor occupies the third position). Here, God occupies not only the second position, the *Tú* (Thou) that grounds the *Vida* (and dissolves with the writing *yo* in mystic union), but also a fourth position that displaces the third (making the confessor's skepticism all but irrelevant) and gives Him – and Teresa through Him – the last word, dispelling any doubt about her orthodoxy.

Another part of the answer has to do with the way in which this second level of experience (the belated confirmation) is granted a different epistemic status in the text from the initial affective experience it guarantees. Although both are sited in the identical interior space (Teresa's soul), the second experience rarely consists of an ecstatic dissolution with the divine; rather, it most often takes the form of a message that is almost prosaic in nature and that is externalized through the medium of voice. If rapturous union is radically subjective, at once interpellating and annihilating the subject, the voice of God that confirms rapture is presented as entirely objective, almost as an eyewitness testimony. The interpretation the voice offers can go either way, at times confirming a divine etiology, at times warning of the opposite. But the provenance of the voice itself and the certainty it provides are never in question.

Cuando es demonio, no sólo no deja buenos efectos, más déjalos malos. Esto me ha acaecido no más de dos o tres veces, y he sido luego avisada del Señor cómo era demonio. [...] El gusto y deleite que él da, a mi parecer, es diferente en gran manera. Podría él engañar a quien no hubiere tenido otros de Dios. (1990: 313)

(Locutions that come from the devil not only lead to no good, but leave bad effects behind them. These I have experienced, though only on two or three occasions, and each time I have had an immediate warning from the Lord that they came from the devil [...] The pleasures and joys which the

devil bestows are, I believe, more various; and with his pleasures he might well deceive anyone who has not experienced, or is not experiencing, pleasures from God.) (1957: 177–8)

If God here informs Teresa that an earlier experience was demonically authored, it is worth noting that He is not telling her something she did not already know. The passage points to the multilayered nature of Teresa's diagnostic method, which generally makes use of more than one criterion to reach interpretive certainty. Here, for example, Teresa relies on a difference in the quality of pleasures – and on the effects those pleasures produce – in order to render a diagnosis which is later substantiated by God. The status of certainty that the text bestows on God's voice copiously overflows on to Teresa's act of discernment, reinforcing its affiliation with truth. But that certainty was in a sense already predetermined by experience, which makes her immune to the devil's capacity to deceive the inexperienced. If the devil can possess Teresa, he cannot, however, fool her into thinking he is God.

The devil's due: Teresa's dance with doubt

Given the suspicion of demonic intervention that Teresa's visions and ecstasies aroused, the overwhelming presence of the devil in her autobiography seems almost scandalous. Far from banishing him from her text in an effort to keep suspicions at bay, Teresa gives him pride of place in the *Vida*; according to Weber, he is named more than 200 times throughout her works (1992: 171). As we have just seen, Teresa even confesses to having been rapturously possessed by the devil, albeit only on two or three occasions and never confusing his ephemeral pleasures with God's lasting ones. The inclusion of the diabolical is entirely logical. The devil occupied an important position in the spiritual landscape of early modern Europe, which was populated by creatures both demonic and divine (see Dulumeau 1978 and Camporesi 1991). A text that purports to be a confession of ecstatic spiritual experiences would have been suspiciously lopsided without him. Nevertheless, Teresa pulls off a brilliant slippage in her text between the devil and doubt; she aligns those who question the divine provenance of her raptures with the devil himself, making doubt, not seduction, the devil's finest tool. This slippage, that isolates doubt and reduces it to a known quantity, constitutes a second strategy for dispelling uncertainty, both about the sources of her ecstasies and about her ability to properly identify and name them. Teresa turns the tables on those who seek the devil in her raptures, boldly suggesting that the devil is to be found not in the object of their scrutiny, but in the gaze that looks for him.

Teresa's tactic is a daring one, but it is not entirely original. Osuna had laid the groundwork for it in his *Tercer abecedario espiritual* (1527) (Third Spiritual Alphabet), where he responds to those who denounce quietist

practices on the grounds that its followers love God not for Himself, but for the sensual pleasure He provides (1972: 212). In a move Teresa will emulate, Osuna transforms the accusations of his critics into the devil's work. Throughout the *Tercer abecedario*, the devil operates much as he will in the *Vida*, as a counterfeiter who falsifies and devalues good intentions. But where Teresa will go farther than Osuna, and take greater risks, is in conflating doubt itself (both the doubts of her detractors – those who harbor suspicions about the divine etiology of her ecstasies – and the self-doubts they arouse in her) with the devil.⁸

As a rhetorical strategy, it is nothing short of brilliant. Doubt, not rapture, is revealed as the symptom whose etiology is demonic. Any reading (not excepting her own) that misrecognizes the divine, construing it as diabolical, is reduced to a mere deceit of the devil. Confessors who suspect she is merely possessed are thus aligned with the demonic: the devil is duping them, not her. This is not to say that Teresa denies that the devil operates directly upon her; on the contrary, at different moments throughout the *Vida*, and notably in Chapters xxx–xxxii, she describes the battles and temptations she endures at the devil's hands. But even outright temptations by the devil are very often reduced to a question of doubt. Referring to the disobedience to her superiors that her founding in secret represents, Teresa writes:

Acabado todo, sería como desde a tres u cuatro horas, me revolvió el demonio una batalla espiritual como ahora diré. Púsome delante si había sido mal hecho lo que había hecho, si iba contra obediencia en haberlo procurado sin que me lo mandase el provincial. (1990: 424)

(When it was all finished – it must have been some three or four hours later – the devil plunged me into a spiritual battle once more, as I shall now relate. He suggested to me that what I had done might have been wrong and that I might have been violating my obedience by bringing it all about without a mandate from the Provincial.) (1957: 267)

The expected resolution doesn't come until several paragraphs later, when God provides 'a ray of light which showed me that this was the devil's work. Then I recognized the truth and knew that it was all an attempt to scare me with lies' (1957: 268). What God grants Teresa here is nothing other than the grace of discernment, allowing her to see her doubt for what it was: a demonic snare intended to keep her from doing God's work of reform. The temptation and its disclosure (that exposes doubt as demonic) authorize her disobedience. God Himself quiets her uncertainty.

One of the places where the conflation of devil and doubt appears most clearly in the *Vida* is in its treatment of humility. Weber has written exten-

⁸ On Teresa and doubt, see Subirats 1983, Fernández 1990, and Van Ginhoven 2010.

sively on how a rhetoric of humility structures Teresa's spiritual autobiography, noting a split of humility into 'a true and a counterfeit virtue' (1996: 74). We might find in Teresa's conceptions of true and false humility responses to the two principal charges leveled against her: that she was a fake, authoring her own raptures, or that her raptures were demonic in origin. True humility consists of simply accepting God's favors without questioning His reasons for making her their object, or presuming she has done anything to deserve them:

Y como este edificio todo va fundado en humildad, mientras más llegados a Dios, más adelante ha de ir esta virtud, y si no, va todo perdido. Y parece algún género de soberbia querer nosotros subir a más, pues Dios hace demasiado, según somos, en allegarnos cerca de sí. (1990: 202)

(Moreover as the whole edifice is founded on humility, the nearer we draw to God the more this virtue must be developed, and if it is not, all is lost. It seems a sort of pride in us too that makes us wish to rise higher when God is already doing more for us than we deserve by drawing us, in our condition, nearer to him.) (1957: 85)

Aquí es muy mayor la humildad y más profunda, que al alma queda, que en lo pasado; porque ve más claro que poco ni mucho hizo, sino consentir que la hiciese el Señor mercedes y abrazarlas la voluntad. (1990: 241–2)

(The soul's humility is now greater and more profound than it was before. It clearly sees that it has done absolutely nothing except consent to the Lord's granting it graces, and embraces them with its will.) (1957: 118)

Musings on true humility almost invariably lead to the same point: how little Teresa has to do with the favors she receives: 'no había fuerzas en mi alma para salvarse, si Su Majestad con tantas mercedes no se las pusiere' (1990: 249) ('my soul would have no power to achieve salvation if His Majesty did not bestow it on me with His great mercies', 1957: 124). In distancing Teresa from any culpable agency in producing or controlling her ecstatic experiences, this positively-charged humility goes a long way towards responding to what was perhaps the most dangerous of the diagnoses her symptomatic body and soul elicited: that her raptures were neither divinely nor diabolically authored, but products of her own hand.

Counterfeit humility, in contrast, is that which leads Teresa to abandon God's path, not thinking herself worthy of His favors. There is example after example in the *Vida* of the dangers of false humility, which is repeatedly exposed as an invention of the devil (1990: 168):

Éste fue el más terrible engaño que el demonio me podía hacer debajo de parecer humildad, que comencé a temer de tener oración. (1990: 157)

(Now the devil began to practise a most terrible deception on me, under the guise of humility. Seeing myself to be so utterly lost, I began to be afraid to pray.) (1957: 50)

Y no le tiene el demonio [al que tiene oración mental] por la manera que a mí a dejarla por humildad. (1990: 171)

(Let him [who has begun mental prayer] not be persuaded by the devil, as I was, to give it up out of humility.) (1957: 62)

no cure de unas humildades que hay [...] que les parece humildad no entender que el Señor les va dando dones [...] Creamos que quien nos da los bienes, nos dará gracia par que, en comenzando el demonio a tentarle en este caso, lo entienda, y fortaleza para resistirle. (1990: 185–6)

(Let him take no notice of certain kinds of humility [...] Some think it humble not to recognize that the Lord is bestowing gifts on them [...] Let us believe that He who gives us the blessings will also give us grace to detect the devil when he begins to tempt us in this way, and makes us strong enough to resist him.) (1957: 72)

In each case, false humility is associated with demonically inspired doubt. This can manifest itself as either the doubt imposed externally by examiners who accuse her of vainglory, or its internalization as self-doubt. In exposing these accusations (and the ‘humility’ they prescribe) as the devil’s ruses, Teresa disarms those critics who question her claims of divine rapture by suggesting she has been seduced by the devil but is too vain to realize that God would not bother with her. She will go so far as to say that she fears those who see the devil everywhere (especially the confessors who counsel ‘humility’) more than she fears the devil himself (1990: 319). The devil, while ultimately rendered powerless, cannot be dispensed with. Doubt needs a place at the table; truth cannot be produced in its absence. Indeed, doubt must be conjured in order to be defeated. In the *Vida*, the devil fulfills this function. Through him doubt is localized and disciplined: ‘una higa para todos los demonios, que ellos me temerán a mí’ (1990: 319) (‘I snap my fingers at all the devils; they shall be afraid of me’, 1957: 183).

Traces

More than the other two, the third strategy for discerning spirits and dispelling doubts is a science of reading traces. It seeks to translate supernatural phenomena that are most often externally imperceptible and of indeterminate provenance into visible, or tactile, or otherwise perceptual proof, to make evidence out of things unseen. It is, moreover, the method Teresa recurs to most frequently throughout the *Vida* and the one she recommends as a method: the experienced soul, she suggests, will be able to correctly

judge the source of a rapture based upon careful examination of the effects it produces, of the traces it leaves behind. A number of chapters of the autobiography, and the later *Camino de Perfección* (*The Way of Perfection*), can be read both as a theory of discernment that takes up weighty theological questions and as a manual on discernment that provides a virtual how-to for interpreting ecstatic effects. The symptoms of demonic and divine rapture may be identical to the untrained eye or inexperienced soul, but what remains, the traces each one leaves, are not.

Si es del demonio, alma ejercitada paréceme lo entenderá; porque deja inquietud y poca humildad y poco aparejo para los efectos que hace el de Dios. No deja luz en el entendimiento ni firmeza en la verdad. (1990: 229)

(If it comes from the devil, I think an experienced soul will realize it. For it leaves disquiet behind it, and very little humility, and does not do much to prepare the soul for the effects which are produced when it comes from God. It brings neither light to the understanding nor strength to the will.) (1957: 108)

Even if the rapture *is* demonic in origin, something that can be easily ascertained by the experienced soul based on the markedly different after-effects of one and the other, the malady matters less than the diagnosis: possession by the devil is reduced to a manageable threat if he is correctly identified as such.

The importance that experience acquires in this third method gives rise to a significant tension in the *Vida*. The subjective agency that Teresa had so urgently denied in relation to rapture (as it could be taken as proof of either demonic vainglory or forgery) surreptitiously resurfaces here. If the first kind of discernment relies on apprehending (grasping the meaning of) God, who reappears to objectively confirm that a vision or rapture was divine, and if the second relies on apprehending (capturing by exposing) the devil, who provokes the doubts that define rapture as demonic, this third class of discernment relies primarily on the experienced, discerning human subject, Teresa herself, who is best armed to determine the truth about her own raptures, based on the effects they leave.

The problem was already implicit in Osuna's *Tercer abecedario* particularly those passages that recognize the degree to which the subject participates in discerning the movements of his or her own soul (and Osuna believed women to be fully capable of discerning, under the guidance of an experienced confessor) (1972: 118). But the landscape had changed considerably in the almost three decades separating the 1527 publication of the first volume of the *Abecedario* and Teresa's first drafts of her spiritual autobiography in the mid 1550s. The challenge for Teresa, once again, was to find a middle ground that allowed her to lay claim to interpretive authority

over her own body and soul, and at the same time to distance herself from the appearance of excessive agency; in other words, to walk the fine line between subjectivity and subjection. One way out of the dilemma is to emphasize the sense of absolute certainty that accompanies divine rapture and makes examination of the sort advocated by Osuna almost gratuitous: ‘When God’s spirit is at work there is no need to cast around for ways of inducing humility and shame’ (1957: 110). If God is the author of the ecstatic experience, the effects of true humility and almost overwhelming shame are so clear that there is no need for any kind of research, or *a posteriori* hermeneutic work.

But Teresa’s more customary approach is to turn to God in the face of a potential impasse. In the following passage, she does just that, elegantly negotiating a compromise:

Bien creo no estará en este engaño quien tuviere talento de conocer espíritu y le hubiere el Señor dado humildad verdadera; que éste juzga por los efectos y determinaciones y amor, y dale el Señor luz para que lo conozca. Y en esto mira el adelantamiento y aprovechamiento de las almas, que no en los años; que en medio puede uno haber alcanzado más que otro en veinte. Porque, como digo, dalo el Señor a quien quiere y aun a quien mejor se dispone. (1990: 462–3)

(I am quite sure that no one who has a gift for spiritual discernment, and to whom the Lord has given true humility, will remain under this delusion for long. He will judge things by their fruits, and by the good resolutions and love to which they give rise; and the Lord will give him the light by which to recognize these. God considers a soul’s advancement and progress, but takes no account of time. One soul may have achieved more in six months than another in twenty years, since, as I have said, the Lord gives at His own pleasure, and to him who is readiest to receive.) (1957: 298)

Sluhovsky reads this passage as affirming a kind of equal opportunity principle. ‘Teresa’s definition of the successful discerning personality,’ he writes, ‘is not bound by gender, position in the church or degree of learning’ (2007: 214). This democracy – or better, meritocracy – of discernment is an important part of the self-defense Teresa articulates in these lines, but it is not the whole story. In fact, that defense is considerably more complex than it appears. Discernment in this formulation depends on both human and divine agency: the hermeneutic activity whereby the mystic subject distinguishes demonic from divine ecstasies according to the effect each leaves (a talent that Teresa directly links to experience at numerous times throughout the *Vida*) and the God-given humility and light that confirm the judgment. In one respect, this is nothing but a re-elaboration of discernment as both a science and a grace. But even the language of ‘God-given’ Teresa invokes

does not so much elide as camouflage the subject's agency. God bestows his divine gifts (including that of discernment) according to His own desire and, what is more, according to how well the subject has prepared herself to receive it.

We might see in Teresa's compromise between talent and light something resembling Cisneros's marriage of acquired and infused knowledge, *scientia experimentalis* and *sacra doctrina*.⁹ But this is doubly problematic for Teresa. As a woman, she cannot claim to possess acquired knowledge, book-learning, as the basis for discernment. However, if she relies solely on infused knowledge to determine the provenance of spirits, she runs the risk of re-entering the hermeneutic circle described above. If what is at stake is precisely the divine nature of her visions and experiences, how can one of those selfsame visions provide the needed proof of its orthodoxy? As a kind of materialization of immaterial phenomena, and as the memory of that materialization, effects and experience furnish Teresa with a subtle way out of the predicament. To begin with, the experience of past raptures – the Rosetta Stone by which effects can be deciphered – provides the means through which infused learning takes on the status of (and arguably supplants) acquired learning. This type of substitution takes place throughout the *Vida*, both in dramatic climaxes, as when Teresa's confessors take away her books and God announces that He will be her new book, but also, more prosaically, through the operations whereby experience – even (especially) experience that cannot be adequately articulated by the intellect or translated into language – is somehow fixed in memory. Secondly, as the perceptible traces of ineffable experiences, effects quite literally substantiate, give substance to, an invisible presence, whether divine or demonic. Like the voice of God who confirms a prior rapture, effects confer the luster of objectivity on acts of interpretation. In so doing, they provide a way out of the hermeneutic circle and affirm Teresa's right to self-diagnose her ecstatic symptoms.

Contingency and certainty

Throughout the *Vida*, effects serve as a means to reach interpretive certainty, to prove either the divine nature of Teresa's ecstasies or her immunity to demonic deceit. But there is an instance that seems to put everything into question, raising the possibility that diagnosis can be erroneous, that effects can be misconstrued. After declaring that an experienced soul will immediately recognize demonic seduction based on the effects it leaves, Teresa writes:

⁹ See Howe 2002: 289. On Cisneros, see also Gómez de Castro 1984 and Rummel 1999.

Puede hacer aquí poco daño o ninguno [el demonio], si el alma endereza su deleite y suavidad, que allí siente, a Dios, y poner en Él sus pensamientos y deseos, como queda avisado. No puede ganar nada el demonio, antes permitirá Dios que con el mismo deleite que causa en el alma, pierda mucho; porque éste ayudará a que el alma, como piensa que es Dios, venga muchas veces a la oración con codicia de él. (1990: 229–30)

(Here the devil can do little or no harm, if the soul directs to God the delight and calm that it then feels, and fixes its thoughts and desires on Him, as it has already been advised to. Indeed, the devil can gain nothing. On the contrary, by God's grace, the joy that he arouses in the soul will cost him dear. For this joy will help the soul, who will think it to be of God, and so will often come to its prayer with a desire for Him.)

(1957: 108)

The shift from the idea that the experienced soul will be able to recognize the etiology of its own ecstatic movements to the possibility that it can be mistaken is not insignificant. It may be that Teresa is simply keeping with accepted early modern theological wisdom, which accords God greater power than the devil; in the end God wins, as the soul is drawn to prayer. But in suggesting that it is the pleasures the devil affords the body and soul of the possessed that end up doing God's work, Teresa seems to diverge radically from accepted dogma. It is a rare moment in the *Vida* when the misdiagnosis of spirits is presented as possible, as well as quite beside the point. Ultimately, the subject can redirect if not the causality then at least the net effect of demonic possession, emptying it of its fatal, heterodox charge. If the soul turns the fullness of the ecstatic experience – pleasure and tenderness, thoughts and desires – towards God, neither the provenance of the symptoms nor their misrecognition will matter. It seems a risky position for Teresa to advance, despite the final outcome of divine victory: 'no tornará muchas veces el demonio, viendo su pérdida' (1990: 229) ('he will realize that he has lost the game and very often will not try again', 1957: 109). In a text that is trying to rule out the possibility of mistaking the devil for God, why raise it?

One answer might be that the self-defense Teresa's *Vida* provides is successful precisely because it accounts for all possible contingencies. Both etiologies prove her innocence in the end, and, what is more extraordinary, all interpretive eventualities are considered, from the most orthodox to the most heterodox:

- If it is God who authors Teresa's ecstasies, there is no room for doubt: 'de ninguna manera podía dudar que estaba [Dios] dentro de mí u yo toda engolfada en Él' (1990: 184) ('as made it impossible for me to doubt that He was within me, or that I was totally engulfed in Him', 1957: 71). The paradox inherent in a frail, unlearned woman's receiving spiritual gifts

against all conventional wisdom is the best proof that her raptures are divine.

- If Teresa doubts or is doubted, God returns to dispel uncertainty. Doubt itself, and the false humility prescribed by those who traffic in doubt, are revealed to be effects of the devil. Those doubts are more to be feared than the devil himself.
- If perchance it is *not* God, and the devil seduces Teresa, she will know. The devil may possess her but cannot deceive her.
- If in the moment of rapture, she does *not* discern the devil's hand, because he can produce symptoms and pleasures identical to those of God, the traces rapture leaves behind will clarify matters. She will be able to accurately interpret ecstasy's effects.
- And then, what might be seen as the most radical turn of all, if the diagnosis errs and the traces deceive: even in this case, the effects – the desire for further prayer – subvert and render harmless (and even profitable) the devil's original seduction, as well as the misdiagnosis itself.

The threat of interpretive instability this last possibility holds out is not so much dispensed with as incorporated and de-clawed. In the end, the *Vida* leaves no tenable position of uncertainty concerning Teresa's orthodoxy, even if the ecstatic body remains radically unstable.

Teresa's beatification in 1614 and her complete incorporation into the Church as a canonized saint in 1622 might be seen as the culmination of a long process of diagnostic scrutiny that could have gone either way. It may be that the Church decided she was more useful, or less menacing, as saint than as heretic. Indeed, Teresa's growing, almost cult-like, popularity throughout the teens and well into the twenties may have made any other decision inexpedient. As a mystic, a woman, and a reformer, Teresa stood triply on the fringes of Church orthodoxy. Her absorption into official *doxa* as a saint was, among other things, an economic and efficient way of rendering her corpse (or her memory, or her autobiographical text) stable at last, of transforming the pathology of the mystic's non-normative body and soul into the very example of sanctity. This reading, perhaps too cynical about the Vatican's motives, is not meant to exclude other possibilities. Throughout her life, Teresa was precariously balanced between the condemnably exemplarity of demonic impostor and the commendable exemplarity of living saint. But if the former position was clearly the more risky of the two, the latter was not entirely unproblematic. Rather it remits to a paradox located at the very core of Christian theology concerning sacramentality and the principle of *imitatio Christi*: how is Christ's example at once both singular – a supreme sacrifice which initiates a new Law and with it a new temporality – and repeatable, a sacrifice reenacted via the Eucharistic sacrament performed at every mass? What is more, if not repeating Christ's

example can lead to a kind of heresy, repeating too closely can lead to a kind of idolatry. In the case of Teresa, the canonization that rehabilitates her within Church orthodoxy and transforms her, finally, into an example of saintliness holds – or hides – a similar paradox, one inscribed in the *Vida*, particularly when it is read, as it was by her nuns, as an instructive text.

The Vatican's institutional discernment apparatus, which diagnoses her as a saint, can redeem Teresa for *doxa*, but it cannot altogether erase the traces – the effects – of her former illegibility recorded in the autobiography. Teresa's canonization suggests that in the end the *mujercita flaca* who claimed to experience God directly was successful in making her case, in proving as truth the divine etiology of her ecstasies and her right to bear witness to the experiences of her own body and soul. The *Vida* itself has much to do with this: it effectively functions as a transforming machine, a site in which doubt is turned into certainty, paradox into divine reason, womanly frailty into strength, prosecutors into defendants. These transformations, I have argued, are not so different from those staged on early modern theaters of scientific or quasi-scientific truth production, and in dissection theaters, that similarly achieve certainty by exposing an interior and untangling the layers hidden therein.

Further reading

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