



Tattva

JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

THE MYSTICAL STRATEGIES OF ST. TERESA OF AVILA

Peter Tyler, Ph.D

When a number of books in Spanish were taken away from us and we were not allowed to read them, I felt it very much because the reading of some of them had given me great recreation, and I could no longer do so since they were only available in Latin. Then the Lord said to me: "Don't be upset, for I will give you a living book". (Teresa of Avila V:26.6)¹

In this passage in her *Libro de la Vida* ('Book of the Life', hereafter V) Teresa hints at some of the external and internal circumstances that led to her own writing career. In the passage we come across some of the key events that were influencing

¹ Cuando se quitaron muchos libros de romance, que no se leyesen, yo sentí mucho, porque algunos me dava recreación leerlos, y yo no podía ya, por dejarlos en latín; me dijo el Señor: "No tengas pena, que yo te dare libro vivo". My translation from the Spanish of the Obras Completas de Santa Teresa de Jesús ed Efrén de la Madre de Dios and Otger Steggink, 9th ed. Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1997 and Santa Teresa Obras Completas, ed T Alvarez, 10th ed. Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 1998. The English translations of Teresa's works will be either my own or, unless stated, Kavanaugh and Rodriguez 1987. V = *El Libro de la Vida* (Book of Her Life), M = *Las Moradas* (The Interior Castle), CE = *Camino de Perfección* (Way of Perfection), Escorial Codex, CV = *Camino*, Valladolid Codex, CT = *Camino*, Toledo Codex, C = *Meditaciones del amor de Dios*, Exc = *Exclamaciones*. For a biographical sketch of Teresa see the author's *The Way of Ecstasy: Praying with St Teresa of Avila* (Tyler: 1997).

her: the prohibition of spiritual books in the vernacular following the Valdés decree of 1559, her own reliance on just such vernacular books of spirituality in her early life and finally the inspiration for her own writing found in the words she received: 'I will give you a living book'. Central to her own vision of her 'mission' is the next sentence:

I wasn't able to understand why this was said to me for as yet I had received no visions. Afterwards, after only a few days, I understood very clearly. For what I saw presented to me gave me much to think about and recollect (*recogerme*), and the Lord showed me so much love and taught me in so many ways that I had little or hardly any need for books afterwards (V:26.6).²

In this passage Teresa seems to be making a move from 'saying' to 'showing', or, in this case, a move from the intellectual book-learning of the *letrados* to the 'vision' of 'what the Lord presents' 'in His love'. The key word here being *recogerme* – 'to recollect myself', a crucial term that links Teresa with the main spiritual currents of her time and especially the writings of the 'vernacular master' she refers to in the previous sentence and had already mentioned in Chapter Four of the *Vida*:

When I was on my way, that uncle of mine I mentioned who lived along the road gave me a book. It is called *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*³ and endeavours to teach the prayer of recollection... And so I was very happy with this book and resolved to follow that path with all my strength... For during the twenty years after this period of which I am speaking, I did not find a master, I mean a confessor, who understood me, even though I looked for one (V: 4.7).⁴

Before we now look at Teresa's own use of the *theologia mystica* it is necessary to give a brief word on the crisis of *alumbradismo* of mid sixteenth century Spain (and the prevalent cause of the Valdés Index) and how Teresa's work was a reaction to it.

² Yo no podía entender por qué se me había dicho esto, porque aún no tenía visiones; después, desde a bien pocos días, lo entendí muy bien, porque he tenido tanto en qué pensar y recogerme en lo que vía presente y ha tenido tanto amor el Señor conmigo para enseñarme de muchas maneras, que muy poca u casi ninguna necesidad he tenido de libros. My translation

³ By Francisco de Osuna, hereafter TA

⁴ No sabía cómo proceder en oración ni cómo recogerme y así holgué mucho con él y determiné a seguir aquel camino con todas mis fuerzas (I did not know how to proceed in prayer nor how to recollect myself and therefore I was very delighted with it and determined to follow this way with all my strength).

Alumbradismo, 1559 and the Valdés Index

Writing on Teresa and *alumbradismo*, the North American Teresian scholar Gillian Ahlgren states: "Though Teresa never used the term *alumbrados*, the effects of the movement were probably the most important influence on her literary objectives. The suspicions of prophecy and of women's religious experience which the movement had inflamed affected Teresa's credibility" (Ahlgren 1996:29).

Contemporary scholarship differs as to the role, nature and scope of the *Alumbrados* (See especially Márquez: 1980), the term *alumbrado* (lit: 'enlightened', 'illuminated') seems to have originally been one of mockery and abuse used to denote 'excessive piety and to suggest hysteria and hypocrisy and fraudulence' (Hamilton 1992:28). At the beginning of the sixteenth century it began to be associated in Spain with a loose-knit group who were condemned at various times by the Church and State. The propositions for which they were condemned were first collected together in the Edict of Faith issued by the Inquisitor General, Alonso Manrique (Archbishop of Seville) on 23rd September 1525. The edict contained forty-eight propositions directed against '*alumbrados, dexados e perfectos*' (lit: 'the enlightened, abandoned and perfect' see Bataillon 1982:166) which consisted of a collection of questionable and heretical statements held by and attributed to the group. As well as certain apocalyptic statements they included propositions such as 'prayer must be mental and not vocal'; the denial of the necessity of any sacramental intermediary between God and humans – thus rejecting the efficacy of external works as well as the authority of the church to interpret scripture; contempt for the cult of the saints, the worship of images, bulls, indulgences, fasting and abstinence. Although the Edict condemned what appeared to be a homogenous and coherent group scholars such as Bataillon and Marquez have concluded that the 'group' was a fragmentary assemblage of various collections of people with differing motives, ideas and spiritualities. It was the emphasis on the importance of personal prayer within these groups that caused the most problems for Teresa as one of the thrusts of her own life and work was the restitution of personal prayer as central to the life of the average Christian.

A key phrase used in the condemnations of the *alumbrados* was *dejamiento* (lit: 'abandonment') which was used to describe the type of prayer advocated by the *alumbrados*. It is unclear what exactly was meant by the term however it seems to have arisen as a variant of the prayer of *recogimiento* (lit: 'gathering together') alluded to above. The teaching of *recogimiento*, as Andrés Martín (1975) points out, placed an emphasis on the importance of withdrawing from activity once or twice a day, usually to a dark room, for quiet contemplation with lowered or closed eyes. The teaching of *dejamiento*, often ascribed to Isabel de la Cruz, suggested

that such a withdrawal was unnecessary and the contemplation could continue in all states and places – even allowing evil thoughts and temptations to arise. After the Edict of 1525 an inquisitorial process was initiated against Pedro Ruiz de Alcaraz and Isabel de la Cruz of Toledo (See Márquez 1980:244-57) who were found guilty of the practices condemned. In 1529 Alcaraz was flogged, his property confiscated and both plaintiffs were condemned to ‘perpetual reclusion and habit’. From this time any groups of laypeople, women and those associated with the Franciscan *recogitorios* were suspect of the heresy.⁵

It is notable that a number of the *alumbrados* groups were connected with *converso*⁶ or ‘New Christian’ groups, a group to which Teresa herself belonged. It is clear, as Bataillon points out (1982:166) that in the minds of the Inquisition, *alumbradismo* had to have somewhere a connection with the wider religious reforms of Northern Europe, even if, as appears likely, little such connection existed in reality.

The condemnation of the *alumbrados* by the Edict of Seville in 1525 marked in many ways the beginning of the end of the wave of openness and ‘renaissance’ within the mystical tradition in Spain initiated by Cardinal Cisneros at the beginning of the sixteenth century (See Bataillon 1982: 699 – 737). Teresa of Avila, born in 1515, was able to have access to many mystical works from the medieval tradition of *theologia mystica*⁷. As well as Osuna’s *Tercer Abecedario Espiritual* already mentioned, she read Bernardino de Laredo and the classical ‘mystical’ writers such as Augustine, Gregory and Bernard.⁸ However, as her own spiritual life grew and developed the political climate in Spain begun to change again.⁹ Following years of tension between the ‘Erasmians’ and the Inquisition, events in Spain came to a head in 1559 when many works of the ‘Cisnerosian Spring’ of the early 16th century (including Erasmus and Luther) were condemned in the Valdés Index. Valid only for Spain, it contained many of the writings of the people who had already fallen foul of Valdés and the Inquisition: Carranza, Luis de Granada, Juan de Avila and the works of Erasmus in Castilian and Latin. It also incorporated many of the writers and works who had contributed to the Cisnerosian revolution at the beginning of

⁵ For a full list of the condemned propositions see Marquez 1980:250.

⁶ Literally ‘converts’ – recently converted Christians usually from Judaism but also Islam.

⁷ For more on the medieval genealogy of this term see my forthcoming *The Return to the Mystical: Ludwig Wittgenstein, Teresa of Avila and the Christian Mystical Tradition* (London: Continuum).

⁸ References to all four are found in her works.

⁹ There are many good analyses of the reasons for these changes. In English good analyses are found in Ahlgren and Hamilton and in Spanish, Andrés and Marquez, all referred to above.

the century: as well as Francisco de Osuna's *Tercer Abecedario* (but not the other *Abecedarios*), it included Herp's *Theologia mystica* and de Balma's *Via Spiritus* (de Bujanda 1984: 303- 592).

As Hamilton puts it: "By forbidding so many books published with the approval of Cisneros, the Index could also be regarded as the first official statement condemning his spirituality, the coronation of the trials which had started in the 1520s and of which the *alumbrados* had been the first victims" (Hamilton 1992:111). Some works remained uncensored such as those of Alonso de Madrid and Bernardino de Laredo. In total it listed some 253 titles including fourteen editions of the Bible. In addition to the mentioned titles it also created a wider sense of alarm and caution on a whole range of areas.¹⁰ In Ahlgren's words:

In summary, the Valdés Index of Prohibited Books was not merely a list of books prohibited to the public; it was an edict intended to limit the scope of religious speculation and to define religious faith and practice very narrowly as the province of an educated elite whose task was not speculation but transmission of dogma (Ahlgren 1996: 17).

For Andrés, the Valdés Index 'tried to banish affective spirituality in its various manifestations, encouraging the traditional spirituality of the practice of virtues and the destruction of vices over other ways of spirituality considered mystical' (Andrés 1976: 1:362). And as Ahlgren notes:

As the new mystical pathways opened in the first half of the century narrowed to a dogmatic and disciplined orthodoxy, so did the range of subjects appropriate for theological debate... If the works were to survive intact, certain topics had to be handled with extreme care, and authors used language to hide rather than reveal their intent (Ahlgren 1996: 19).

As most women did not read Latin, the Valdés prohibition of spiritual books in the vernacular posed a particular problem. However, as these ideological concerns impacted upon her, Teresa was able to respond, I argue here, largely because of the 'training' and 'education' she had received from 'her master' Fray Francisco de Osuna and his exposition of the *theologia mystica* in the *Tercer Abecedario*

¹⁰ Other entries included books by known heretics, partial or whole translations of the Bible, books in Arabic or Hebrew or that tell of Muslim or Jewish practices, books regarding witchcraft and superstition and manuscripts that mention biblical tradition or the sacraments of the church. See Ahlgren 1996: 17.

Espiritual. In this respect, her schooling in the mystical strategies of the *theologia mystica* were ideal preparation for the challenges of the environment within which her mature work would develop.

Teresa and the *Theologia Mystica*

One of the central arguments of my paper is that Teresa is heir to, and knowingly uses, the techniques of what I have called the tradition of *theologia mystica*. Although, as argued, she relies heavily on this tradition throughout her works she only makes three explicit references to the *theologia mystica* in her work, these occur in Chapters Ten to Twelve of her *Vida*. It is worth while spending some time on these references and their place in the text of the *Vida*.

The decision to write the text of the *Vida* coincided with Teresa's re-formation of the Carmelite houses in Spain. In 1561 the Inquisitor of Toledo, Francisco de Soto y Salazar suggested that Teresa present a description of her experiences and methods of prayer. The first draft was completed in 1562 and the final draft in 1565, which was then to be read by several learned *letrados*: Juan de Avila, her Dominican mentors and probably Balthasar Alvarez, one of her Jesuit mentors. In 1574 the work came under inquisitorial suspicion – due, amongst other things, to the vindictive malice of the Princess of Eboli, and the manuscript disappeared into the Inquisition's hands until after Teresa's death in 1582. It was later recovered by Ana de Jesús and edited by Luis de León.

The context of Chapters Ten to Twelve of the *Vida* is that they are preceded by Teresa's descriptions of how her life of prayer had gone astray once she had joined the Convent of the *Encarnación*. As she describes the sins into which her soul had fallen she makes a telling comment: "And helping this was that as my sins grew, I began to lose the pleasure and gift (*gusto y regalo*) in the things of virtue" (V: 7.1).¹¹

For Teresa, one of the most distressing things at this time in her life was the loss of the pleasure (*gusto*) of the life of prayer. Deprived of this *gusto*, this link to the affective, she became 'afraid to pray' instead resorting to 'vocal prayer'. She clearly practised the outward virtues 'So that the nuns had a good opinion of me' whilst retaining this 'inner dryness'. She contrasts at this time her outer shows of piety and holiness (including instructing others on prayer) with her own interior sense of

¹¹ *Y ayudóme a esto que, como crecieron los pecados, comenzóme a faltar el gusto y regalo en las cosas virtud.*

alienation from the source of her being – God. The experience of this time is one of *recollection*, dryness punctuated by another state of which she finds it difficult to speak (V: 4.8). This period ('of some twenty years' V: 8.2) she tells us was a time of neither 'pleasure in God' nor 'contentment with the world' (*yo gozaba de Dios ni traía contento en el mundo*) (V: 8.2) for she is adamant that prayer is the source of 'delights/pleasures' (*gustos* V: 8.9) from the Lord, it is the place where 'the Lord takes delight in a soul and gives the soul delight/ *entrar a regalarse con un alma y regalarla*' (V: 8.9).

In this place of deconstruction – without intellectual concurrence (V: 4.7, 9.4, 9.5, 9.9) Teresa enters into a place to which she gives the name *mística teología*:

It used to happen, when I represented Christ within me in order to place myself in His presence, or even while reading, that a feeling of the presence of God would come upon me unexpectedly so that I could in no way doubt He was within me or I totally immersed in Him... I believe they call this "mystical theology (V:10.1).¹²

Teresa equates this 'mystical theology' with an indubitable sense of the presence of God:

The will loves; the memory appears to me almost lost; the understanding does not discourse, so it appears to me – it is not lost, but, as I say, it does not work – however it is amazed at how much it can understand, because God wants it to understand how little it can understand of what God represents to it (V: 10.1).¹³

Using the classical scholastic/Augustinian typology of the memory-will-understanding Teresa presents here what I call a deconstructive-affective strategy in clear terms. The pull of the text is as though she wants to declare that the reason (*entendimiento*) ceases to work – the most extreme position of unsaying. Although her uncertainty allows her to interject the milder *no discurre* – 'does not discourse', only the affective/libidinal can function at this point as she makes clear in her short statement *ama la voluntad* ('the will loves'). The mystical strategies of the *theologia mystica* are

¹² *Acaecíame en esta representación que hacía de ponerme cabe Cristo, que he dicho, y aun algunas veces leyendo, venirme a deshora un sentimiento de la presencia de Dios que en ninguna manera podía dudar que estaba dentro de mí o yo toda engolfada en El... creo lo llaman mística teología.*

¹³ *Ama la voluntad, la memoria me parece está casi perdida, el entendimiento no discurre, a mi parecer, mas o se pierde; mas, como digo, no obra, sine está como espantado de lo mucho que entiende, porque quiere Dios entienda que de aquello que Su Majestad le representa ninguna cosa entiende.*

clearly being employed here (See V: 12.5 too). As she describes in 12.5 this 'stopping of the intellect' is not something that is done by voluntary action, but something received from God, 'for otherwise we would be left like cold simpletons'. The intellectual should 'delight in God' (13.11) rather than 'wear themselves out in composing syllogisms'.

Her next mention of the 'mystical theology' in V: 11.5 is to distinguish it from the beginning stages of prayer (or as she calls it 'mental prayer') which will form a small discourse from Chapter Eleven to Chapter Twenty Two – the famous analogy of the 'four waters' (See Kavanaugh and Rodriguez CW I: 470). In Chapter Twenty Three she returns to her 'mystical theology', this, she says, is distinguished by being the stage where we 'enjoy' God's presence: 'lo más es gozar/ the more to enjoy it' (V: 11.5). The beginning 'mansions', as she will later call them in the *Moradas*, are places lacking in *gustos y ternera*¹⁴ – these are the special attributes of the *teología mística* (see V: 8.5, 9.9, 10.2 and 25.11). At this earlier stage the 'understanding' continues to 'work' and for this she recommends books such as Alonso de Madrid's *Arte de servir de Dios* (V:12.2). The great delight in the Lord's presence in the soul (V: 14.2, 14.9) reflecting the opening of the *Moradas*:

This quietude and recollection is something that is clearly felt through the satisfaction and peace bestowed on the soul, along with great contentment and calm and a very gentle delight in the faculties (V:15.1).¹⁵

Strategies of Unknowing in Teresa

The climate, then, in which the mature Teresa was writing books of affective spirituality for her sisters was clearly one of *odium theologicum* towards an intelligent woman presuming to teach men, a daughter of *converso* stock and someone whose teachings came perilously close to that of *alumbradismo* (See Llamas Martínez 1972 and Rivers 1984). We remember the famous quote from the Inquisitor Fray Alonso de la Fuente, made in 1589, some seven years after her death:

The author of the said book passes it off and recommends it as a doctrine revealed by God and inspired by the Holy Spirit; but if in fact the author was that nun whose name is on the title page, it is a matter *praeter naturam* for her to have written

¹⁴ The terms literally mean 'taste/savour/pleasure' and 'gentleness'. For more discussion see Tyler 2011.

¹⁵ *Esta quietud y recogimiento del alma es cosa que se siente mucho en la satisfacción y paz que en ella se pone, con grandísimo contento y sosiego de las potencias y muy suave deleite.*

something taught by an angel, because it exceeds a woman's capacity. In any case it could not have been a good angel, but a bad one, the same one that deceived Mohammed and Luther and the other leaders of heretics. This being the case, the so-called miracle of the nun Teresa of Jesus, that her body is today intact and uncorrupted, is a fabulous business, either the work of Satan or the invention of heretics (Llamas-Martínez 1972: 396).

Within this climate it appears to us now that Teresa deliberately used her own 'vulgar style of substandard written Spanish' (Rivers 1984:120) to survive. Indeed, within the context of the *theologia mystica* her 'anti-rational' style makes complete sense. Her style, as Rivers points out, deliberately avoids the syntax and style of the newly developing Romance Spanish then popular with Renaissance Spanish humanists such as Luis de Granada and Juan de Valdés: "Teresa's written Spanish is in fact hard for us to read and understand in a wholly rational way; it is comparable, within an American context, to something composed by a writer of Black English, who deliberately tries to avoid the academic sound of white bourgeois correctness (Rivers 1984:121).

My argument in this paper is that taking her cue from Osuna and the tradition of *theologia mystica* she is engaging in her own form of 'unknowing' all the better to teach the truths of *theologia mystica* and in particular *recogimiento*. I will conclude the paper by highlighting six ways in which I believe she does this.

1. The Direction of Locution

After Teresa's death in 1582 the Discalced Carmelites, on the recommendation of St John of the Cross, approached the *converso* Augustinian friar and professor of Hebrew at Salamanca University, Fray Luis de León, to edit her texts for publication. Luis, as a theologian with a humanistic bent and from *converso* origins himself had also spent five years in the prisons of the Inquisition so knew something of the dangerous climate within which such mystical texts would be received and engaged in his task with perception and insight (See Rivers 1984: 122). The first edition was published with remarkable speed in 1588 with a dedicatory letter to Ana de Jesús, Prioress of the Discalced in Madrid and close friend of John. Luis begins his letter by stating: "I never knew, or saw, Mother Teresa of Jesus while she lived on earth; but now that she lives in Heaven I do know her, and I see her almost continuously in two living images of herself which she left us – her daughters and her books (Peers CW III: 368).

From the beginning Luis recognized how 'alive' Teresa's texts were and how dependent they were on the 'oral community' of Carmelites that she had created:

I believe that your reverences are important witnesses, for you are quite similar models of excellence: I never remember reading her works without imagining that I am listening to Your Reverence's voices, nor, conversely, do I ever hear you talk without feeling that I am reading the words of the Mother. Those who have experience of this will know that it is the truth (Peers CW III: 372).

For Luis, Teresa's writings *must* be understood within the context of the oral community. They benefit from being read aloud and strive to repeat the patterns, rests and pauses of speech with which she was familiar. The texts are peppered with 'erss', 'umms' and 'puess' as she seeks at headlong pace to transcribe the oral to the written. Take, for example, this breathless interruption to the exposition of the 'Prayer of Quiet' in Mansion Four of the *Moradas*:

God help the mess I've got in to! I've already forgotten what I'm writing about as business and poor health have forced me to put this work on one side until things were better, and as I have a bad memory everything will come out confused as I can't return to read it all over again. Perhaps everything I say is confused – that's what it feels like anyway¹⁶ (M: 4.2.1).

Writing on Teresa's style in 1941 (and possibly having in mind passages such as the above) the Spanish critic Menéndez Pidal wrote: "St Teresa does not really write, but speaks through writing; thus the excitement of her emotional syntax constantly overflows the restrictions of ordinary grammar" (Menéndez Pidal 1942:135). As De Certeau suggests, when we read passages such as the later ones from the *Moradas* where she has perfected her craft it is almost as though we can see the sisters round us, pressing nearer to hear what she has to tell us (See also M: 6.4, 3.1, 4.1, 4.2). Her discourse then presupposes and creates a community of discourse.

2. Contradiction

In his dedicatory letter Luis de León also defended Teresa's habit of 'failing to carry her argument to its conclusion, but introducing other arguments which often break the thread of her sense' (Peers CW III: 373). Throughout her writings Teresa is not

¹⁶ *Válame Dios en lo que me he metido! Ya tenía olvidado lo que tratava, porque los negocios y salud me hacen dejarlo al major tiempo; y como tengo poca memoria irá todo desconcertado, por no poder tomarlo a leer, y an quizás se es todo desconcierto cuanto digo. Al menos es lo que siento.*

concerned to reproduce the classical Latin style of the new Renaissance humanism. Hers is a 'rough and ready' style whose directness is its appeal.

As befits the *stulta sapientia*¹⁷ of the *theologia mystica* Teresa, like Osuna, frequently employs paradox to shift meaning to the point where it begins to break down. The soul in the third degree of prayer in the *Vida* is: "Rejoicing in this agony with ineffable joy ... the state is glorious folly... a heavenly madness... delectable disquiet ... So delectable is this distress that life holds no delight which can give greater satisfaction" (V: 24).

Menéndez Pidal writes of her style in a similar vein as Luis de León: "Her incessant ellipses; confused grammatical arguments; enormous parentheses, which cause the reader to lose the train of thought; lines of reasoning that are never completed because of interruptions, verbless sentences" (Menéndez Pidal 1942: 135). I would argue that Teresa *deliberately* writes in this confusing way as a true daughter of the *theologia mystica* of de Osuna and *Los Recogidos*. The understanding, as for Osuna, must be thwarted to allow the soul's direct access to God through *recogimiento*. The tumbling morass of sentences, adverbs, meandering constructions and exclamations only helps to serve that purpose. Rivers again: "She refuses to accept the analytical or linear sequentiality of linguistic discourse, and she strives for simultaneity, for saying everything all at once, as it actually happens, "writing with many hands" (Rivers 1984:127, see, for example, CV: 20:6).

3. Avoiding Conclusions: Humility

The whole groundwork of prayer is based on humility and that the more a soul lowers itself in prayer the more God raises it up (V: 22.11).

In an important essay on Teresa's *Moradas* published in 1983 (Flasche 1983) Hans Flasche points out the importance of the verb *parecer* – 'it seems, it appears' in *Las Moradas*. *Parecer*, he writes, 'is one of the most important words in Saint Teresa's lexicon' (Flasche 1983: 447). She uses the verb repeatedly in all her texts creating a deliberate atmosphere of uncertainty and provisionality which can only assist in the 'disguising' of Teresa's intentions with regard to her exposition of the 'mystical theology'. Pictures and suggestions are 'offered' to the reader as possible solutions and answers she has found: once again we have the familiar 'stammering, broken voice' of Teresa. In the *Moradas*, for example, it appears frequently: '*Paréceme*

¹⁷ Literally 'foolish wisdom' – a medieval term for the *theologia mystica* ultimately taken from Dionysius (See Tyler 2010).

que aun no os veo satisfechas/ It seems to me that you're still not satisfied' (M: 5:1), *'Paréceme que estáis con deseo de ver qué se hace esta palomica/ It seems to me you have a desire to see what this little dove is doing'* (M: 5.4), *'Paréceme que os estoy mirando cómo decís/ It seems to me that I can see you asking'* (M: 6.6). Once again the rhetorical strategies we identified above are coming into play. Accompanying this studied uncertainty is Teresa's continual insistence that as an unlettered '*mujercilla*'¹⁸ she is not qualified to talk on such lofty matters: "For the love of God, let me work at my spinning wheel and go to choir and perform the duties of religious life, like the other sisters. I am not meant to write: I have neither the health nor intelligence for it" (Peers CW: 1 .xxxix).

Frequently she tells us she is unqualified and useless to the task: "God help me with what I have undertaken! I've already forgot what I was dealing with, for business matters and poor health have forced me to set this work aside just when I was at my best; and since I have a poor memory everything will come out confused because I can't go back to read it over again. And perhaps even everything else I say is confused; at least that's what I feel it is. (M: 4.2.1 immediately followed by a *Parece*: 'It seems to me I have explained the nature of consolations in the spiritual life').

It is notable that these linguistic devices become more evident when Teresa talks of the more 'inexpressible' elements of prayer such as in the Fourth Mansions quoted above. The phrase 'little woman' or 'stupid woman' was a typical theological attack on women's inadequacy when it came to questions of doctrine or theology. Bartolomé de Medina had denounced her as '*mujercilla*' saying that her nuns would be better off 'staying in their convents and praying and spinning' (Weber 1990: 36).

As Weber shows in her classic exposition of this tactic, Teresa's defense was to 'embrace stereotypes of female ignorance, timidity, or physical weakness but disassociate herself from the double-edged myth of woman as seducible/seductive' (1990:36). For example in *Vida* 11:14:

As for a poor woman (*mujercita*) like myself, a weak and irresolute creature, it seems right that the Lord should lead me on with favours (*regalos*), 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 (*de tomas, de*

¹⁸ Literally 'little woman'.

letrados, de entendimiento) worrying so much because He is not giving them devotion, it makes me sick to listen to them... They should realise that since the Lord does not give it to them they do not need it.

As Weber remarks 'With disarming modesty she concedes to women's intellectual inferiority in a way that frees her to explore a new theological vocabulary' (1990:38):

I shall have to make use of some comparison, for which I should like to apologise, since I am a woman and write simply what I am ordered to write. But this spiritual language is so difficult to use for anyone who like myself has not gone through studies, that I shall have to find some way of explaining myself, and it may be that most of the time I won't get the comparison right. Seeing so much stupidity will provide some amusement for your Reverence (V: 11.6).

As Weber comments: "In these passages, and in many others, Teresa concedes to women's weakness, timidity, powerlessness and intellectual inferiority but uses the concessions ironically to defend, respectively, the legitimacy of her own spiritual favours, her disobedience of *letrados*, her administrative initiative, her right to 'teach' in the Pauline sense and her unmediated access to scripture" (Weber 1990: 39/40). For both reader and writer, then, humility is required. The opening sections of the *Moradas* stress the need for 'humility', not just morally but intellectually. Only by this *stulta* can the means be prepared for God to impart *sapientia*. Teresa's 'little woman' is thus the first cousin of the 'unlettered woman' presented by Gerson, Laredo, Osuna and the other masters of the *theologia mystica*.

4. Disorientation

In Luis de León's letter to Ana de Jesús mentioned above he points out that he does not feel it is necessary to amend the style with which Teresa presents her writing:

I have neither amended them verbally nor adopted the considerable changes which copies now in circulation have made in the text of them either through the copyists' own carelessness or out of presumption or error... If her critics had a real understanding of Castilian, they would see that that of the Mother is elegance itself. For even though, in certain passages of what she writes, before she completes the sentence that she has begun, she contaminates it with other sentences and breaks the train of thought, often beginning anew with interpolations, nevertheless she inserts her digressions so skilfully and introduces her fresh thoughts with such grace that the defect itself is a source of beauty, like a mole on a lovely face (Peers CW: III. 373).

As we have seen Luis, her first editor, recognised at the outset that the meaning of Teresa's message was inextricably bound up with the medium of the message: that rag-tag bag of flooding prose full of errors, inconsistencies, *puess*, *but*s and *errs*. The very same style that makes the whole work comes alive for the reader. Exclamations litter Teresa's text, as do lengthy repetitions and interpolations in the text. In the *Vida* in particular the sentences tumble out making it difficult for the reader, and the translator, to keep up:

At first these things did me harm - so it appeared (*me parece*) -, and it shouldn't have been her fault, but mine; for afterwards my own wickedness was bad enough, together with the servants we had, whom for every wrong they were able to assist; that if one had given me good counsel, to benefit me; rather self-interest blinded them as did desire me. And because I was never inclined to much wrong - because I naturally abhorred bad things - , but to the pastime of pleasant conversation; yet, placed in the situation, I was in the hand of danger, and would be placing my father and brothers in it as well (V 2.5).¹⁹

¹⁹ My translation: This is a very difficult passage to translate and should really be left as it stands: *Al principio dañáronme las cosas dichas - a lo que me parece - , y no debía ser suya la culpa, sino mía; porque después mi malicia para el mal bastava, junto con tener criadas, que para todo mal hallava en ellas buen aparejo; que si alguna fuera en aconsejarme bien, por ventura me aprovechara; mas el interese las cegava, coma a mí la afeción. Y pues nunca era inclinada a mucho mal - porque cosas deshonestas naturalmente las aborrecía -, sino a pasatiempos de Buena conversación; mas puesta en la ocasion, estava en la mano el peligro, y ponía en él a mi padre y hermanos.*

Kavanaugh/Rodriguez and Allison Peers both give two varying translations which at times verge on the ungrammatical like my crude translation above. I give both in full to illustrate the problems and pitfalls of translating Teresa:

'These things did me harm, I think, at the beginning, and it wasn't her fault but mine. For afterward my malice was sufficient, together with having the maids around, for in them I found a helping hand for every kind of wrong. If there had been one of them to give me good counsel, I perhaps would have benefited by it; but self-interest blinded them as my vanity did me. I was never inclined to great evil - for I naturally abhorred indecent things - but to the pastime of pleasant conversation; yet, placed, in the occasion, the danger was at hand, and my father's and brothers' reputation was in jeopardy as well.' (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez CW 1:59)

'At first, I believe, these things did me harm. The fault, I think, was not my friend's but my own. For subsequently my own wickedness sufficed to lead me into sin, together with the servants we had, whom I found quite ready to encourage me in all kinds of wrongdoing. Perhaps, if any of them had given me good advice, I might have profited by it; but they were as much blinded by their own interests as I was by desire. And yet I never felt the inclination to do much that was wrong, for I had a natural detestation of everything immodest and preferred passing the time in good company. But, if an occasion of sin presented itself, the danger would be at hand and I should be exposing my father and brothers to it.' (Peers CW 1:15)

Teresa seems to recognize that in order to maintain the vitality of the spiritual world she is trying to convey to her reader she must also retain the rough edged inconsistency of speech in real time. Her texts 'show' as much through what they do not say as through what they do. Accordingly, Teresa will often use pictures, metaphors and images to 'disorientate' the discursive intellect and take it to places it would rather not go.

As we have seen above, Teresa frequently uses the 'rhetoric of incompetence'. Thus in *Moradas* 1.2.7 we find the following passage:

These interior matters are so obscure for our minds (*tan oscuras de entender*) that anyone who knows as little as I will be forced to say many superfluous and even foolish things in order to say something that's right. Whoever reads this must have patience, for I have to have it in order to write about what I don't know. Indeed sometimes I take up the paper like a fool (*una cosa boba*), for I don't know what to say or how to begin (M: 1.2.7).

Following Gerson and Osuna, the 'fool' (or 'little woman') is the one who is wise in the '*theologia mystica*'. Perhaps, she implies, all of us, writer and reader alike, must become fools before we can enter the strategy of the 'mystical theology'.

5. Humour

"The soul sometimes laughs to itself when it sees seriously religious and prayerful persons make a big issue out of some rules of etiquette which it has already trampled under foot" (V: 21.9).

As is attested by many of her contemporaries and is clear from her writing, humour was always an important part of Teresa's armoury in her struggles to establish the Discalced reform. Although examples of this abound throughout her work perhaps the clearest examples are in the *Libro de Las Fundaciones* ('Book of the Foundations', hereafter F) describing in open fashion the recent events around the founding of her convents in Spain. As Weber points out (Weber 1990:126) the topics dealt with had to be done so with tact and care as many of the protagonists were still alive and the tension between the Discalced reform and the Carmelites of the Mitigated Rule remained high. She describes her style in the prologue to the book as *tan pesado* ('too heavy') and suffering from too much *grosería* ('coarseness'). Weber describes the history as 'picaresque': "She slyly reveals that in her determination to do God's work she must rely on her charm, ingenuity, and, at times, deception in order to outwit unenlightened souls, be they landlords, town councilmen, or archbishops" (Weber 1990:128).

A few examples will suffice:

- Chapter Thirty One describes the difficult foundation at Burgos. Here the Archbishop, Don Cristóbal Vela was initially enthusiastic, encouraging the sisters to come prior to his granting a licence for the foundation.²⁰ Teresa describes the struggles to get to Burgos, the rivers in full spate and her own illness. Having finally arrived Teresa describes how the Archbishop does not want them there and tells them if they do not have an income and a house of their own they should leave to which Teresa comments: 'The roads of course were charming and it was such nice weather!' (F 31: 21).
- Chapter 19 describes the foundation of Salamanca with the full vigour of the picaresque. The house they had chosen (which still presently stands on the Plaza de Santa Teresa) had previously been occupied by students and Teresa's description of the first night herself and an elderly sister, terrified of the evicted students returning on Hallowe'en is a masterpiece: "When my companion found herself shut up in the room, she seemed to be a little calmer about the students, though she did nothing all the time but look about her fearfully, first in one direction then in another... "What are you looking for?" I asked her. "Nobody can possibly get in here." "Mother", she replied, "I am wondering what you would do all alone if I were to die here." ... So I said to her: "Well, sister, I shall consider what is to be done if the occasion arises: now let me go to sleep" (F: 19:5).
- One of the most interesting depictions of humour occurs in Chapter Six which begins with Teresa back with her favourite topic of the *Vida* and the *Moradas* – vis. the spiritual life and how progress can be made in prayer. Almost immediately she reaches the 'point of unknowing': 'I wish I knew how to explain myself here, but it is so difficult that I do not know if I shall be able to do so' (F: 6.2). However in this chapter she touches on the controversial subject of raptures and ecstasies, so easily associated with the *Alumbrados*. The chapter also deals with the controversial topic of the relationship between spirituality and sexuality and the proximity of sensual with spiritual delights. She gives clear guidelines that prioresses should beware these prolonged 'swoons' or 'raptures' and not encourage them in their sisters. To make her point with humour she refers to an incident that took place at Medina del Campo with a choir nun, Alberta Bautista and lay sister Inés de la Concepción (See Peers CW: III.30 fn. 1). In their desire to experience ecstasy they asked for frequent communion from their confessor: 'the result was such an increase in

²⁰ His uncle was Teresa's godfather, see Peers CW III: 184 fn 2.

distress that unless they communicated daily they thought they were about to die' (F: 6.10). Teresa realizes how unhealthy this attachment has become but has to deal with an obdurate confessor who refuses to believe this can cause anything but good for the sisters. Let Teresa complete the story herself:

I started to talk to the nuns and to give them many reasons, sufficient, in my opinion, to prove to them that the idea that they would die without this particular help was pure imagination. But the notion was so deeply rooted in their minds that no argument could eradicate it and it was useless to reason with them further. So, seeing that it was in vain, I told them that I had those very desires myself and yet I should stay away from Communion, so that they might realize that they ought not to communicate except when all the nuns did so together: we would all three die together, I said (F: 6.11).

Potential heretics, timid and difficult nuns, and wavering clerics, Teresa encounters each with humanity and warmth allowing her humour to pepper the narrative and convince us, her readers, of the correctness of her remedies and solutions. Perhaps the key to her use of humour in the *Fundaciones* lies at the beginning of the prologue where she stresses the need for humility (*humildad*) in the enterprise (see 3. above). Humility, humour and grounded or ordinary language: all three rotate around each other to produce the necessary effect on the reader. As we read the accounts we realize that she is gently laughing at us the reader – with all our pomposities, obsessions with prayers, worldly concerns and judgemental attitudes. Yes, we can laugh at the targets of her humour in the *Fundaciones*, but we must always remember that her comments are directed equally at us, her readers.

6. Ordinary Speech

As we have seen Teresa herself is conscious of her style, she calls it 'my rough style rather than that of those more elegant' (*mi grosero estilo que por otros elegantes*) (CVA: 16.9) full of 'imperfection' and 'poverty' (CVA: Prologue). As Allison Peers points out in his 1953 essay *Saint Teresa's Style: A Tentative Appraisal* (Allison Peers 1953) the key note in her style is down-to-earthiness and naturalness. Here again she appears to be a disciple of Osuna and the simple direct style of the *theologia mystica* of the *Tercera Abecedario*. She states that the manner of writing (like talking) adopted by nuns should be:

Simple, frank and devout, rather like that of hermits and people who live in retirement. They must use none of the newfangled words – affectations, as I think people call them – which are current in a world always eager for new-fangled things. In all circumstances let them give preference to common expressions rather than to unusual

ones ('Method for the visitation of convents of the Discalced Carmelite nuns' in Allison Peers CW: 3.251).

As Allison Peers points out, she avoids learned words (Allison Peers 1953:84) and her text is notable for the lack of precise theological terms especially concerning 'mystical theology'. Indeed, as we have seen, the word 'mystical theology' is only used a handful of times in the *Vida* before it is dropped not to be used again in her work. The humility of ordinary language is close to the humility of humour and central to the effect she wants to produce in her readers.

In his study *The Vernacular Mind of St Teresa* (Rivers 1984), Elias Rivers points out how Teresa's 'vernacularism' was a part of the sixteenth century Spanish humanist movement which deliberately sought to communicate to 'ordinary people' through Castilian rather than Classical Latin. Rivers suggests that in this, as we have seen before, the simple Latin of Augustine's *Confessions*, an influential text on the young Teresa, was clearly an important influence (Rivers 1984: 117): "Teresa of Jesus knew very little Latin, and she deliberately refused to imitate the new style of classical Spanish prose; in a true patristic spirit, she invented her own vulgar style of substandard written Spanish, a style that is clearly anti-academic and even anti-rational" (Rivers 1984:120).

Thus, in her prose we find that 'classical' Castilian spellings are twisted and subverted, often using more phonetic spelling than grammatical. Thus she uses *ylesia* and *yglesia* for *iglesia* ('church'), *naide* for *nadie* ('no-one'), *relisión* for *religion* ('religion') as well as a host of diminutives and familiarisations of words: *mariposita* (a little butterfly), *pastorcito* (little shepherd boy), *avecita* (little bird). Peers suggests that she creates words of her own invention 'charging them with emotional content which another language can only approximately express' (Peers 1953:85): *un disgustillo* (V:12) 'a little annoyance' / 'a little feeling of frustration'; *estos temorcillos* (V:31) 'these little fears'; *centellica pequenita* (V:15) 'the tiniest of tiny sparks' – this latter being her appropriation of the classical phrase *scintilla* from the *theologia mystica* to describe the point at which the soul meets the divine.

Her conversational and immediate style, Rivers suggests, is deliberate and intentional:

She learned to read Spanish fluently as a young girl and knew that she had an advantage there that she could never have in the official Scholastic language of the Western Church, with its exclusively male priesthood. Her Spanish was not structured, as Louis of Granada's and John de Valdés's was, by a familiarity with written Latin, whether ecclesiastical or neo-classical. When she wrote, she neglected, or perhaps deliberately

avoided, the normal spelling and syntax of the Spanish texts that she had voraciously read (Rivers 1984:121).

Antonio Marcos (1997:153) suggests that she deliberately uses the '*avulgarización intencionada*' of the '*estilo de ermitaños*'. If this is the case, Teresa in her 'rough speech' is deliberately positioning herself in her writings with her beloved *espirituales* of the *recogimiento* movement such as Pedro de Alcantara rather than the sophisticated *letrados* with their more polished and scholastic Latin rhetoric. Teresa's language, then, may be considered coarse, vulgar or stupid, but she is happy with this as it serves the purpose she wants, to 'change the aspect' of her reader:

Your behaviour and language must be like this: let any who wish to talk to you learn your language; and, if they will not, be careful never to learn theirs: it might lead you to hell. It matters little if you are considered coarse (*groseras*) and still less if you are taken for hypocrites: indeed, you will gain by this, because only those who understand your language will come to see you (CVA: 20:4-5).

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that the context of Teresa of Avila's circumstances, especially inquisitorial pressure as a result of traces of *alumbradismo*, her status as a woman and her interest in mystical prayer means that her texts have to employ a particular 'mystical strategy' that I have termed the *theologia mystica*. This strategy, inherited from the medieval Dionysian tradition emphasizes both *affective* and *deconstructive* approaches to mystical writing. In this paper I have concentrated on six so-called *strategies of deconstruction* in Teresa's writing, *vis*: direction of locution, contradiction, humility, disorientation, humour and ordinary speech. By employing these strategies, I conclude, Teresa of Avila shows herself to be a true heir to the 'mystical masters' she studied as a young woman. She also shows herself to be a true master of 'mystical strategy' in preserving the importance of personal affective prayer in times of great institutional pressure against these forms of prayer.

Bibliography

Works by Teresa of Avila

1. *Obras Completas de Santa Teresa de Jesús* ed. Efrén de la Madre de Dios and Otger Steggink, 9th ed. Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1997.
2. *Santa Teresa Obras Completas*. Ed. T. Alvarez, 10th ed. Burgos: Editorial Monte Carmelo, 1998.
3. *The Collected Works of St Teresa of Avila*. Trans. K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez. 3 Vols. Vol. 1: 2nd ed.; Vols 2 & 3; 1st ed. Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1980 - 87 (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez CW)
4. *The Complete Works of St Teresa of Jesus*. Trans. by E. Allison Peers. 3 vols. London: Sheed and Ward, 1946 (Peers CW)

Abbreviations

C = *Meditaciones del amor de Dios*

CE = *Camino*, Escorial Codex

CV = *Camino*, Valladolid Codex

CT = *Camino*, Toledo Codex

Exc = *Exclamaciones*

M = *Las Moradas*

V = *El Libro de La Vida*

1. Ahlgren, G. *Teresa of Avila and the Politics of Sanctity*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996.
2. Allison Peers, E. 'Saint Teresa's Style: A Tentative Appraisal' in *Saint Teresa of Jesus and Other Essays and Addresses*. London: Faber and Faber, 1953.
3. Andrés Martín, M. *Los Recogidos: Nueva Vision de la Mística Española (1500 – 1700)*, Madrid: Fundación Universitaria Española, Seminario 'Suarez', 1975.
4. Antonio Marcos, J. 'Recurrencias y Concatenadores: La Cohesión en el Discurso Teresiano' in *La Recepción de los Místicos Teresa de Jesús y Juan de la Cruz*, ed. S. Ros García. Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad Pontificia, 1997.
5. Bataillon, M. *Erasmus y España*. Mexico: Fondo de cultura económica, 1982.
6. de Bujanda, J. (ed.) *Index de L'Inquisition Espagnole 1551,1554, 1559/Index des Livres Interdit*, Vol. 6. Québec: Éditions de l'Université de Sherbrooke, 1984.
7. Flasche, H. El Problema de la Certeza en el "Castillo Interior" in *Actas de Congreso Internacional Teresiano* ed. T. Egido Martínez, V. García de la Concha and O. Gonzalez de Caredal. Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca, 1983.

8. Francisco de Osuna. *Tercer Abecedario Espiritual de Francisco de Osuna*, ed. S. López Santidrián. Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos. 1998.
9. Francisco de Osuna. *The Third Spiritual Alphabet* Trans. M. Giles. New York: Paulist. 1981.
10. Hamilton, A. *Heresy and Mysticism in Sixteenth Century Spain: the Alumbrados*. Cambridge: James Clarke, 1992.
11. Llamas Martínez, E. *Santa Teresa de Jesús y la Inquisición española*. Madrid: CSICm 1972.
12. Márquez, A. *Los alumbrados: orígenes y filosofía (1525 –1559)*. Madrid: Taurus, 1980.
13. Menéndez Pidal, R. "El estilo de Santa Teresa" in *Escorial 2* (1941): 13-30. Reprinted in *La lengua de Cristóbal Colón*, Col. Austral No. 280 (Madrid, 1942).
14. Rivers, E. 'The Vernacular Mind of St Teresa' in *Carmelite Studies*, 1984. Washington: ICS, 1984.
15. Tyler, P.M. 'The Catholic Mystical Tradition as a Guide to Contemporary Pastoral Care' in *Keeping Faith in Practice: Catholic Perspectives on Practical and Pastoral Theology*, ed. D. Lonsdale, J. Sweeney, G. Simmonds. Norwich: SCM-Canterbury, 2010.
16. Tyler, P.M. *The Return to the Mystical: Ludwig Wittgenstein, Teresa of Avila and the Christian Mystical Tradition* (London: Continuum), 2011.
17. Tyler, P.M. *The Way of Ecstasy: Praying with St Teresa of Avila*. Norwich: SCM-Canterbury, 1997.
18. Weber, A. *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990.