

THE LAST YEARS OF SAINT THÉRÈSE

Doubt and Darkness, 1895–1897

THOMAS R. NEVIN



The Last Years of Saint Thérèse

This page intentionally left blank

The Last Years of Saint Thérèse

*Doubt and Darkness,
1895–1897*



THOMAS R. NEVIN

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide.

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other
countries.

Published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

© Oxford University Press 2013

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior
permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law,
by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization.
Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the
Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Nevin, Thomas R., 1944–

The last years of Saint Thérèse : doubt and darkness, 1895–1897 / by Thomas R. Nevin.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-19-998766-5 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Thérèse, de Lisieux, Saint, 1873–1897. I. Title.
BX4700.T5N475 2013
282.092—dc23
[B]
2012043169

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2
Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

Uxori meae

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

<i>Preface: Dwelling Upon Darkness</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	xv
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xix
1. Her Spanish Masters in Darkness: Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross	1
2. Seeking Light in the Bible	37
3. Bearing the Cross of Community	79
4. Her Spiritual Brothers Guide Her Down: Père Hyacinthe Loyson and Léo Taxil	123
5. Final Charity: The Last Autobiography	147
<i>Conclusion: A Human Passion</i>	197
<i>Appendix 1: The Text of Thérèse Witnessing to Her Doubt: Manuscript C 5v–6v</i>	201
<i>Appendix 2: On Another Darkness: Once More, Teresa of Ávila</i>	205
<i>Notes</i>	211
<i>A Selective Bibliography</i>	259
<i>Index</i>	285

This page intentionally left blank

Preface: Dwelling upon Darkness

ACCORDING TO THE Carmel prioress who knew her best, Thérèse, universally known as The Little Flower, spent most of her mature life in darkness. That darkness is not suggested by prayer cards, nor is it associated with the pilgrimages to Lisieux and numerous hagiographies. This book is about that continuous darkness, its sources within and beyond her, in her writings and in her severe education by saints and contemporaries.

The very brief life of this very beloved woman is richly documented by her own abundant writings; by a host of images of her, both photographic and inspirational; by the testimonies of those who knew her; by the ancillary texts of Carmel and of Catholic tradition—one might pause a while before undertaking a journey in her arduous direction toward the truth.

This book, caveat lector, is not a saint's life but the study of a Carmelite sister ordered by her prioresses to bring her life into coherence with the world she knew. She did so as a writer. What makes her recounted life intriguing for any reader who sincerely cares to approach her is that she worked toward that coherence by an irreducible amalgam of reminiscence and self-exhortation. Near death, she confessed she was writing not what she believed but what she wanted to believe. That confession serves as a touchstone for all of her writing life.

To many Christians and perhaps to most of her devotees, Thérèse is the saint of the Little Way of confidence, the sainthood of the ordinary, daily life of small deeds and gifts. She confounds the centuries-old view of sainthood as a remote and lofty attainment of the extraordinary and few. She brings a democratic sweetness and light. This book, however, focuses upon the counterpoint to her confidence: the darkness of doubt, extended to atheism, gathered within her in her last years. I am not arguing that under an almost overwhelming spiritual menace "the real" Thérèse appears; only that the turbulence she had to deal with deeply informs her spirituality and enriches her teaching. Indeed, many Christians know that the darkness she faced is part of their own ordinary, daily life amid benevolence and benefaction.

As a saint, Thérèse, no matter her popular appeal, seems hermetically sealed, like her dust in the gold cask by which she travels yearly around the globe. As a

Carmelite, she was immured from the world for the last nine of her twenty-four years. Hagiographies further seal her off. Yet she came from the wider world, and her vulnerability owes much to it. Short of a detailed, multi-volume biography such as she, along with her family, deserves, we have invaluable archival testimony summoning back that pre-Carmel life and showing how it portended the darkness which engulfed her.

Here are three brief instances. Marie Martin, Thérèse's eldest sister, writing her deposition for the beatification hearings, recalled the ramrod proprieties of their father, Louis. She remembered him leading her and her sisters home from the 7 A.M. mass at the Cathedral of Saint-Pierre in Lisieux: "At this morning hour the occupants of the Galerie de Navarin were getting dressed and we amused ourselves watching them as we passed. One day, my father said to us, 'Pay attention, my children, to all that could tarnish the purity of your heart and don't be looking indiscreetly right and left.'"¹

Another story from Marie: "Next to our house, Les Buissonnets, lived an officer, whose wife, a rather loose woman, used to laugh and run in the garden with his aide-de-camp and that did not escape our notice. Sometimes we watched through the trees. Our father saw it and told us to stop because it was a danger."² Was the surveillance itself a danger, or was Louis referring to the antics of that couple straight out of Zola in the next garden? And was Thérèse present among the "we" on one or another of those "sometimes," as she surely was on the daily strolls home from church?

What is the published hagiographic account given by Marie? Only this summing up about Louis: "He took extreme care to distance us from everything that seemed to him an occasion for temptation."³ But those vivid particulars, which Marie was bold enough to record (only to have them censored by someone's blue marker), say so much more than the monochromatic affirmation of her father's protectiveness. They suggest that the Martin sisters were normal girls, embarrassed into giggles at the sight of nudity and titillated by what they sensed was a lively scandal next door. These are the behaviors of an ordinary adolescence, but not what the panel at the hearings cared to know about. And not what Thérèse chose to tell us about her childhood.

Céline, the sister closest to Thérèse, also speaks from the archive. She recalls a laundress, openly a nonbeliever, who came to their house. Early in 1888, when she was fifteen, Thérèse tried to instruct and persuade this woman about Catholic doctrine but was answered only with mocking jokes. Then Thérèse took from her neck a medallion of the Virgin and gave it to the woman, telling her "I'm going to enter the Carmel. I want to leave you this memory. Promise me that you'll keep it always." Moved, the woman promised. Years later, when Céline saw her, she asked about "the little Carmelite" and showed the medallion around her neck: "I'm keeping my word to her and I'll die with this."⁴ Céline never saw her again.

In that episode Thérèse had recognized and confronted a nonbeliever in the hope of winning her to the Christian faith, a maneuver which seldom succeeds. Frustrated, she resorted to an “act of love.” She does not record it in her first manuscript, but it indicates that she knew firsthand of the world which at her life’s close she situated at a banquet table, in her darkness.

This book begins with a narrative on the first saints of Carmel. Thérèse’s life was powerfully informed by Teresa de Jesús, founder of the Discalced Order of Carmel, and Juan de la Cruz, to whose mystical verse and commentaries Thérèse owed a little, but richly. I refer to them as Teresa and Juan. Although Thérèse is a saint of folk Catholicism, they, with their heady visions, baroque elevations and (above all) centuries of distance, cannot ever be, but both of them introduced her to love’s darkness. They are her spiritual parents, but she learned at great cost that she could not live up to their spirituality. Through them she took her first of many faltering steps.

In the second chapter, I take up the Bible, with Thérèse a keenly selective reader trying to understand the affliction, the cross of doubt given to her. I profile her rapport with Jesus, her would-be mystical spouse. (She remained a novice to her last day.) Over the past few generations, Jesus and God the Father have been depicted as all-merciful and loving. Punitive, terroristic, extortionist Jehovah has been shortchanged, save in the vengeful fantasies of apocalypticism. Jesus the wrathful and judgmental has also been obscured. Thérèse has done perhaps more than any other saint to promote the notion of a divine love that overrides divine justice and subsumes it, but her Jesus is the Suffering Servant heralded by Isaiah: abused, misunderstood, tormented, persecuted, annihilated—all of that depicted in the Holy Face she bore as her own denomination. The Suffering Servant wills that she go to what she called the table of sorrow so that, in true imitation, she too may be a suffering servant.

The third chapter looks at Thérèse’s painful service to the Carmel community, which gave her a first version of the table of suffering, a gospel of darkness shown in her correspondence with Céline. Other young sisters afford no less important, if less extensive witnessing. I draw heavily from their testimonies at the two beatification hearings (1911, 1916). These relationships reveal how imperfectly Thérèse struggled toward the impossible perfection of doing God’s will and how she learned to make her very imperfect self exemplary for other women. Posing their several tests the novices helped her to see, far more discerningly than she had been able to before, the community in a luminous desolation. A new understanding of charity, informed by a loss of faith, forms the mainspring of her last autobiography, Manuscript C.

Two vivid derelicts, highly publicized in their day, occupy the fourth chapter: Fr. Hyacinthe Loyson, an ex-Carmelite friar, and Léo Taxil, a notorious con man. They

helped her downward to the table of sorrow; both scandalized her profoundly and personally. I refer to them as her “spiritual brothers,” as they occupy the dismal community outside of Catholicism, the community where she finally located her doubting and herself.

The final chapter commences with an archaeology of Manuscript C, its burial within the strata of editing Mère Marie de Gonzague and Père Godefroid Madelaine undertook after Thérèse’s death: the product, *The Story of a Soul*, was a benevolent, not altogether beneficent re-casting of Thérèse’s writing. Her sister, Pauline, to whose judgment she had always deferred, wrote the palimpsest. This reworking created a misperception that lasted for over fifty years.

Manuscript C marks the culmination of Thérèse’s reflections on her place in Christian life and community. It was written literally at fever pitch and with the author’s awareness of death’s long and desultory encroachment upon her. It is studded with revelatory passages, yet its importance has been sedulously ignored by establishment writers on Thérèse. I look upon its chiaroscuro of lessons, those of frailty and of strength, of perception and confusion, in which she reaches toward humanity in the stumbling way of the cross she was bearing.

All translations from the French and Spanish have been my own. For the convenience of readers, I have placed the translations within the chapters and have cited the complete original passages in the notes along with the identification of their texts. As in my previous book, *Thérèse of Lisieux: God’s Gentle Warrior*, I have drawn upon two French lexicons that date from her time, Émile Littré’s *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (the edition of 1883–1884) and Louis-Nicholas Bescherelle’s *Nouveau dictionnaire classique de la langue française* of 1897. Because this book, distinct from its predecessor, concentrates upon the prolonged struggle Thérèse undertook against doubt and despair, the annotated bibliography identifies only the works, books and films that address that struggle from different vantages. I call them Theresian because of the candor in their confrontations with precisely those steep and menacing challenges that do not offer Christians sustenance and consolation.

I have happily accumulated many debts through helpful and attentive friends and colleagues. Dr. Doris Donnelly, Director of the Cardinal Suenens Center in Theology and Church Life, John Carroll University, kindly gave me time to air in a public lecture some of my rethinking on Thérèse, as of January 30, 2007.

I wish to thank Dr. Nadia Lokma, General Director of Conservation, who facilitated an address on Thérèse and Islam, which I delivered on December 31, 2007, at the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, Cairo. I thank my sponsor there, Dr Abdel-razer, for his generous hospitality and many tours of Islamic sites during the two weeks of my stay in Egypt. Other very helpful readers, to whom I gave individual

chapters, include Dr. Sharon Voros, Dr. Zeki Saritoprek, Fr. Donald Cozzens, and Fr. John McNamee.

For their help in securing inter-library loan materials thanks to Bridget Borato and Ellen Valentine of the Grasselli Library, John Carroll University. For technological help I am grateful to Carrie Huszczo, Joann Lentine and Norma Piccirillo. For assistance with the photographs I cordially thank Austin Nevin and Serena Martucci.

I am especially grateful to my wife, Caroline Zilboorg, for her time, patience and sharp eye during her reading of each chapter's final draft.

For a summer research grant that allowed me to explore the Carmelitana holdings of the Joachim Smet Library at Whitefriars, in Washington, D.C., I owe much thanks to the John Carroll University Committee on Research and Faculty Development. The Whitefriars have been models of charitable hosting in an optimal setting of quiet and texts. I am grateful to the library's secretary, Patricia O'Callaghan, for opening the library to me and to Duncan, her amiable golden retriever. My thanks go to the prior, Fr. Quinn Connors, and the community of Carmes. I also thank another community, warm and lively, the Society of Saint Joseph and its rector, Fr. Brian Fox, for housing and feeding me during my weeks of research.

The greatest debt I owe to the present community of Carmel at Lisieux, especially to the archival staff who responded to my inquiries and requests with unstinting patience and efficiency. Two of them read my manuscript, not without objections but never without charity. To the community I remain grateful for every opening of their monastic door. I am happy to add that since the completion of this book, the Carmel of Lisieux has all of Thérèse's documentation now online, and a complete English translation will soon be available.

Finally, I wish to thank Cynthia Read and the editorial staff at Oxford University Press, especially Marcela Maxfield and Sravanthi Sridharan, for their steadfast patience with me and Thérèse.

However many errors and acts of folly the reader might discover in this book, they have all been my doing.

This page intentionally left blank

Introduction

IN *THERÈSE OF LISIEUX: God's Gentle Warrior* I set Thérèse's last years in the broad context of her familial and Carmelite lives. The present study focuses on a corridor of darkening rooms: in the first of these, we look upon the high and daunting vaults of the Spanish Carmel she faced, the foundational house of her spiritual life; in another, we find her struggling with fellow novices replete in worldly failings; in another, she pores over the Bible in an effort to bolster herself; in the last, she barely survives the month of her final, sustained writing (June 1897) as her sorely tried spirit matures into the second title of her name, the Holy, hidden Face of the Suffering Servant. There, we reach the last of her three "autobiographical" manuscripts, known simply as C.

During these years Thérèse struggles with numerous questions. What happens when the anticipatory virtues, faith and hope, are subtracted from one's life so that only the practice of charity, the Christian meaning of love, remains? How can this charity suffice? Is the soul, no matter how charitable, not inevitably faced with a doubt threatening to destroy it? How can such a condition be sustained as a distinctly Christian life? Is it a dire aberration that one must shun and pray to be spared—"lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil"—or are there doors opening to a deeper spirituality than can be realized without such a stripping down to nakedness like Job's?

This book thus addresses the doubt within the life and writing of a saint who is best known for the opposite of doubt, confidence. Thérèse's symbolic terms for doubt were "tunnel," "fog," and "vault," each of them suggesting darkness, dimness, enclosure, and a failure or lack of vision. In this spiritual confinement, she spoke of herself as weak and little, helpless in finding a way through and out. But what did doubt mean to her? What was its source and nature? What was its object—herself, Jesus, God, her chosen life in Carmel? Was it wholly a negative force, or in part a healthy skepticism? What syndrome of factors distinguished it from melancholy, boredom, listlessness?

Was this syndrome the product of her environments, secular and contemplative, and thus assimilated, or was it created within and by her fragile "little" self

as a protection? Did she enlist “the world” and the Carmel into an alliance with her susceptibilities, all directed against herself? Was her resolve to stay within the novitiate a refusal to face spiritual maturity?

The catch-all term that the Church had long used for doubt was *acedia*, but that word had and still enjoys a wide valence.¹ Thérèse’s doubt was not the *acedia* of anger expressed or repressed; not the *acedia* of sloth nor aversion; not its dejection nor the tedium that says nothing is worth doing; not a paralysis of the will and emphatically not a refusal of love by willful separation from others.

Thérèse’s writing illuminates her special variety of doubt. Her account of herself is not only descriptive, of places, of people, of events. It is also desiderative. Despite her sometimes treacly style, an impassioned and vulnerable sensibility is within it. As a writer she struggled in psalmic language; she hungered and thirsted. Her sister Pauline, a spiritual mother who knew her very well, attested that Thérèse spent most of her Carmel years in a condition Carmelites then called *sécheresse*, a dryness that sentenced its victim to a masked, performing life.

This term, like doubt, requires close examining. In nineteenth-century French dictionaries *sécheresse* denotes the state of a soul that feels no consolation in practicing piety. Paradoxically, it is a drama in which God is impresario. Eminent seventeenth-century divines reveal some directions in the script, such as “You’ll pluck all the fruit God wants from your aridities,” and “God delivers those he tests to all the dryness of a mournful and bitter virtue.”²

From the Church’s perspective, doubt and dryness were not about hypocrisy but testing and endurance. The daily sequences of monastic life proved a torture for the tested soul, but they were also a stay. Thérèse had to look up to as well as live up to the life of Carmel, but she remained self-convinced she was too inadequate to do so. Then, grey turned to black and helplessness toward despair. What makes her story exceptional is that she reflected, thought, prayed, and, most important, wrote in the midst of losing the center and focus upon which all of her life had been concentrated, the celestial life with God. The Christian paradox is that such a loss was also a process of finding, and she believed her downward path had been set for her by Jesus. It was a path she could never have anticipated and would never have prayed to be given.

Thérèse gives what the theologian Rowan Williams has called a “touchstone of integrity” in witnessing to “so broad and comprehensive an access to the ‘sacred source’ of Christian commitment.”³ Williams’s agents for this integrity—Edith Stein, Thomas Merton, and Dorothy Day—all admired and celebrated Thérèse but took their own distinctive ways, as life and adversity assigned them. Unlike the hypertrophically intellectual Stein, Thérèse was not martyred. Unlike Merton, she did not realize a career in writing and its peculiar dangers in celebrity. Unlike Day, she had no politics to negotiate in the face of an obtusely uncomprehending world. What she did have, however, was a tutelage in twofold dying, physically and

spiritually and on both counts terribly, at an age when she was still green, questing, and naive. Dying stripped her down mercilessly and ripened her fast.

Her third manuscript becomes a riposte to the hazards of doubt. Only by engaging the world in all its horribleness can Christian love have any meaning, but that engagement is risky. Sitting finally with those to whom Christ was wholly unknown, or, if known, despised, Thérèse had to accept Christ as himself a mystery to her; she, in taking his place at the table, could no longer see him within the consoling vantage of her convent life, where he was communally loved and adored.

Thérèse discovered that what at first seemed alienation for her became instead a communion with God at a level deeper than she had known prior to her final testing. She passed into what she called "the abyss of love." Finally, her life finds completion in her internalizing the Christian story of descent into the lowest stratum of human life. Ironically, she is closest to God when outwardly she seems to us most remote from God, because in the lowest stratum the reach of her charity becomes all-inclusive.

She was fearless, not in the sense of a headstrong, reckless defiance of doubt's darkness, but in her sustained awareness that it was the ground for a divine testing of her. All of her life had prepared her for the inner certainty that Jesus had allowed the darkness to come upon her. Jesus had been asleep to her and her longing for most of her twenty-four years, even though, as she fondly put it, his heart remained awake. At times, like the beloved young man in the Song of Solomon, he had been altogether absent, and she, like the beloved young woman of that canticle, had to go in search of him. At no time was Thérèse free of this intimate politics with Jesus. Because Jesus was the center of her spiritual and emotive life, he had to figure in the descent, the dramaturgy of her darkness. He was its agent.

This certainty did not entail a cocksure triumphalism, a presumption that she was due to be rescued from or relieved of the darkness. If she had been kept forever waiting for his awakening to her, why should she not have to remain forever awaiting his return? There is no specious victory here, no bogus uplift, no roseate dénouement. Thy will be done.

Thérèse in her darkness led an unexceptional, if not altogether normative Christian life. Doubt within her claims its integral due as the underside of trust, exerting its tug against the will by a hardy and peculiar resistance to all energies beyond prayer. Doubt forms a rite of passage. One of Thérèse's indispensable lessons is the unperturbed acceptance of helplessness. With acceptance comes imperturbability. Prayer is not helpless, but prayer is a grace, one of the divine abundances, as St. Paul would put it, not of human doing but in it.

Indeed, Thérèse's darkness puts her within a grand, substantially modern continuum of Christian struggle. That struggle derives from the gospels themselves: the Our Father cries out against demonic wiles. This study shows supplications

before darkness and temptation were well posted throughout Thérèse's years in Carmel. Every night, when monastic life was acutely still, became devil-ridden territory in which a nun might stray in confusion and anxiety. Sisters were alone with sometimes morbid fears. In one of the *circulaires* (the Carmel's obituary), a sister confessed to her ongoing dread of rotting away in her grave; others were prey to the certainty of their damnation. The continuous darkness Thérèse experienced would have justified some psychopathic release. Her unfailing lucidity is one of the treasures left to us.

Thérèse, although living within the gospels in this book, is a modern. Like her mighty spiritual brother, Dostoevsky, she came to realize she was a child of her age, subject to the suasions of those she knew of only in privatives: non-Catholics, nonbelievers, materialists, or those whom Feuerbach, anticipating crows against God in the early twenty-first century, denominated anti-theists. Dostoevsky, after his four years of imprisonment, wrote of his discovery that nothing was so beautiful, so true, so good as Christ. Then, he adds, were it demonstrable by modern science that Christ was not the truth or that the truth was somehow beyond Christ, he would stand with Christ, opposite the truth. That assertion seems histrionically extreme, but there is no reason to believe that Dostoyevsky was simply posturing, nor that, like characters in his novels, he had become overly enamored of an idea, rhetorically thriving upon its absurdity.

The point in summoning him here is that truth and truth-wanting were so unshakably vital to Thérèse that we may wonder: How would she have responded to Dostoyevsky's eristic challenge, Christ *or* the truth? Would she have stood with her beloved Jesus if she regarded him as a cherished illusion? One of the chief intents of this book is to indicate why she was not driven to the chasm of either/ or into which Dostoevsky gazed.

Abbreviations

A	The first autobiographical manuscript, 1895
AC	Archives of Carmel, Lisieux
B	The second autobiographical manuscript, September 1896
C	The third autobiographical manuscript, June 1897
CG	<i>Correspondance générale</i> of Thérèse of Lisieux (Paris: Cerf, Desclée de Brouwer, 1974)
CS	<i>Conseils et souvenirs</i> of Thérèse by her sister, Céline (Paris: Cerf, Desclée de Brouwer, 1973)
DE	<i>Derniers entretiens</i> of Thérèse of Lisieux (Paris: Cerf, Desclée de Brouwer, 1971)
LT	Letters of Thérèse, numbered and published in CG
NEC	<i>Nouvelle édition du centenaire</i> , an 8-volume edition of Thérèse's complete writings (Paris: Cerf, Desclée de Brouwer, 1992)
NPPO	Notes prepared by Carmelites for the <i>Procès ordinaire</i> , 1911
NPPA	Notes prepared by Carmelites for the <i>Procès apostolique</i> , 1916
OC	<i>Oeuvres complètes</i> , a one-volume edition of Thérèse's complete works (Paris: Cerf, Desclée de Brouwer, 1992)
PA	<i>Procès de béatification et canonisation: Apostolique</i> , hearings conducted in 1915–1917 for Thérèse's beatification and canonization (Rome: Teresianum, 1976)
PE	<i>Pensées sur la charge de Maitresse des Novices dans l'ordre de Notre-Dame du Mont-Carmel</i> (Aix: Nicot, 1873)
PN	<i>Poésies</i> (Paris: Cerf, Desclée de Brouwer, 1992)
PO	<i>Procès de béatification et canonisation: Ordinaire</i> , hearings conducted in Bayeux, 1910–1911 for Thérèse's beatification and canonization (Rome: Teresianum, 1973)
Pri	<i>Prières</i> (Paris: Cerf, Desclée de Brouwer, 1992)
RP	<i>Récréations pieuses</i> (Paris: Cerf, Desclée de Brouwer, 1992)
VT	<i>Vie thérésienne</i> , trimestral review published since 1961

This page intentionally left blank

The Last Years of Saint Thérèse

This page intentionally left blank

*Her Spanish Masters in
Darkness: Teresa of Ávila
and John of the Cross*

TERESA (1515–1582)

*Llega a Su Majestad me dé gracia para que no esté
siempre en principios. Amen.*

*[May His Majesty be pleased to give me grace that I
not always be at the beginning. Amen.]*

LIBRO DE LA VIDA, 31:25

*Pensáis que son pocos los trabajos que padecen los que
el Señor hace estas mercedes?*

*No, sino grandísimos y de muchas maneras. Qué
sabéis vos si seríais para sufrirlos?*

*[Do you think those to whom the Lord gives graces have
light tribulations? No, they're enormous and of many
sorts. How do you know you'll be up to suffering them?]*

MORADAS, VI, 1577

*Que propia de vieja poco humilde va ésta llena de
consejos!*

*[How fitting that a scarcely humble old woman be full
of advice!]*

LETTER TO NICHOLÁS DORIA, February 10, 1579

*Porque toda mi vida se me ha ido en deseos, y las obras
no las hago.*

*[Because I have passed all my life in desires I have not
made them into works.]*

FUNDACIONES, XXVIII, 1580

THE FOUNDATIONAL HISTORY of the Carmel provides the first step to understanding Thérèse's descent into doubt. To know something of the founders, Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross, is to know her by half. They set the high bar of perfectability toward which she struggled in vain. Each prescribed a spiritual path she presumed would be hers. It is they with whom she had to contend and from whom she had to depart.

I. "Our Saintly Mother" and Those Times in That Land

The first and arguably the best portrait of Thérèse was made three hundred years before she was born and comes from Spain, not France. It is presented during a tour of the fifth, sixth, and seventh of the dwellings (*moradas*) making up the *Castillo Interior* (1577), an edifice whose guide had founded the reformed order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in 1562. The guide and portraitist, Teresa de Jesús, known as Teresa of Ávila, revered from the first and for several centuries, has become a favorite of feminists, a model of assertion and triumph in the face of the most substantial and enduring male hierarchy in Western history, "O thou undaunted daughter of desires!" in Richard Crashaw's famous apostrophe.

Every sister of the Reformed Carmel throughout its history has had an implicit bond with this woman, its founder. It could not be otherwise, as she determined the course of its life of prayer and left behind an enormous trove of literal signposts: her autobiography, which enjoys repute well beyond the Carmel and Catholicism. Complementing it are the *Castillo interior* (usually known as *Moradas*) and the *Camino de perfección*, the way to spiritual perfection through contemplative prayer.

Beyond these three central texts, however, come several others: a commentary on the *Song of Songs*, the only writing that Teresa was not ordered (that is, sanctioned) to undertake and that she was obliged to burn (copies had been made); next, the record of her founding Reformed Carmel monasteries throughout Spain, *Fundaciones*; then, the *Cuentas de conciencia*, a miscellany of "accounts of conscience," and another miscellany of *dichos*, sayings attributed to her from others' recollections; some poems and some prayers; and last yet foremost in catching her day by day, the twenty years' span of *cartas* known as the *Epistolario*, letters she wrote to people within and without her foundations, from anonymous young women to Philip II, king of Spain, her trusted protector. Among those letters she is at her most relaxed and intimate with the love of her life, Jerónimo de la Madre de Dios, better known as Gracián.

It is not easy to establish common ground between Teresa and Thérèse, her obscure little daughter so far from her in time and place. Thérèse refers to the foundress of the Reformed Carmel surprisingly seldom: only six times in all of her writing does she mention the *Vida* and another six, the *Castillo*. The *Camino de perfección*, at thirteen allusions, seems to have been her preference. Indeed, it

cued her at age thirteen to her mission: Teresa had written that she would give a thousand lives to save one soul. In that statement, we find the first shared characteristic of mother and daughter, a penchant for dramatic excess, for a grandiloquent *I*. (See Figure 1.1)

Thérèse refers to other works in the Mother's canon: the prayers known as *Exclamaciones del alma a Dios* and some poetry. A reference to the commentary on the *Song of Songs* occurs toward the very end of Manuscript C. Thérèse herself wished to write a commentary on the same text, but neither her physical debility nor her sister Pauline allowed it. The citations and allusions remain few enough to call into question an affinity between these women, but it is more substantial than has been recognized. Teresa informs Thérèse in ways that signify much beyond the osmosis any sister of the Reformed Carmel would experience. Indeed, Teresa's high-flying spiritual agenda remained well above Thérèse's capacity to respond. Initially unaware that she would have to find her own way, she responded to Teresan injunctions with a helpless groping. It dismayed her that she would never be able to live up to the demands of Carmelite life.

Teresa made occasional forays into poetry, but her whole being argued the diurnal ruggedness of prose.¹ One of her best known passages in the *Fundaciones* says that God moves among kitchen pots.² Her salient feature as a writer is this steady attention to the ground levels of ordinary life. Her *dichos* abound in this rootedness. Sometimes they are vulgar, but she knew better than ever to lose touch with the many women who were struggling to attain the life she wanted for them in the houses she founded, a life of poverty and joy.³

Teresa is best known for her autobiographical accounts of visitations. She enjoyed frequent consultations with the creator of the universe and faithfully transcribes them, underscoring how astonishing these experiences could be; they overwhelmed her with instruction more than with uplift. Her famous ecstasies and levitations, observed and recorded by sisters close to her, embarrassed her. Thérèse gave them no heed.⁴



FIGURE 1.1 The Reformed Carmel of Saint Joseph, Ávila, founded in 1562. The present convent is situated atop Teresa's family residence. Photograph taken by the author.

What was Christian Spain as Teresa knew it? Midway through the sixteenth century of Christianity, Spain was teeming with diverse persuasions of spirit, and not merely within the several orders, Cistercian, Dominican, Franciscan, Jesuit, Augustinian, Carmelite. The Catholic Reformation had begun two generations earlier, before Teresa's birth (1512), when the Cardinal of Toledo, Ximénez Cisneros, a Franciscan, confessor of Queen Isabella, founder of the University of Alcalá, and Grand Inquisitor, promoted the first edition of a polyglot Bible: texts in Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. Some four hundred and fifty years before the Second Vatican Council, Cisneros anticipated its call for a universal advance of Christian souls, laity no less than clergy, toward God through learning. Cisneros had books on devotional prayer translated into Spanish and disseminated in convents and monasteries from where the laity in turn was educated. A four-volume compilation of gospel passages and patristic writings known as the *Vita Christi* attained wide and lasting popularity among the literate.

Publishing houses in Salamanca, Alcalá (that one established by Cisneros), Montserrat, and Seville churned out instructive books on the varieties of prayer and how to practice them for the inner life. Made in the divine image, every soul could reach God through contemplative endeavor. The better educated dared to form Bible study groups independent of clerical control. Foreign influences gradually obtruded, including the forbidden works of Luther,⁵ the *Enchiridion* of Erasmus (dear to Cisneros), works of neoplatonism⁶ and a humanism named for Socrates. (See Figure 1.2.)

With the ignominious expulsion of Jews and Muslims in Spain, a new class arose, the *conversos*. They were members of Islamic and Judaic families who accepted the Church's offer of baptism as an alternative to exile and agreed to



FIGURE 1.2 Alcalá de Henares, the square facing the University founded by Cisneros (1499). In this town, the birthplace of Cervantes (1547), Teresa established a school for Reformed Carmelites (1570), with Juan de la Cruz as its rector. Photograph taken by the author.

practice the Christian faith. The term *marrano* emerged as a popular derogation of these converts whom the Church continued to suspect of the hypocrisy which its own program of an accommodating conversion necessarily implied. *Marrano* was synonymous with brute and traitor.

Many converts embraced Christianity sincerely as though in spite of an official expediency and its extortionist decrees. But a closed domestic culture of Jewish and Muslim practices and rituals continued. Jewish and Islamic Spain thus contributed their substantial, if hidden share (so hidden as to be rarely remarked even today) to the words and thoughts of both Teresa and Juan.

An age so vigorous in both piety and literacy could not thrive without hazard. Thanks to Jan Hus and Martin Luther, churchmen were well aware of the contagion of heterodoxy. That time is caricatured in the agency by which the Church sought to defend itself against Satan and all his works, the Inquisition.⁷ It is facile to assume that this agency served some sinister end, Orwellian *avant la lettre*, to control thought and repress any gesture toward freedom. Rather, in the challenge of such a private enthusiasm as the *alumbrados* posed, the Inquisition was up against spiritual chaos, as early as the 1520s.

Alumbradismo took its impetus from Franciscan teachings about mental or inner prayer, known as *recogimiento*, and invested authenticity within individuals. They claimed divine inspiration via prayer entirely independent of Church tradition and its guiding norms. Spiritual directors and theologians were no longer necessary. The telltale sign for the Inquisition was arrogant defiance from *alumb-rados*, including some women who attained repute and then notoriety when they instructing men, even Franciscan friars.⁸ The Church had no way to determine which inner paths of prayer were genuine, but a conspicuous pride imputed to *alumbrados* said enough. The *alumbrados'* protestation of a love for God, even to the rejection or abandonment of individual will, offered no extenuation. Worst of all, they denied the humanity of Christ. They had a singular devotion to the Eucharist, but that could not redress their derelictions regarding elementary Christian doctrine. Inquisitors believed that such a movement could only be demonic.

Although the Inquisition moved against them in the 1520s and 1530s, their example was so powerful as to cast a lasting discredit upon any pursuit of inner or mental prayer that was not firmly adherent to the guidance of spiritual directors and theologians. That is why Teresa's autobiography gives so much space to witnessing her humility before learned authority. Yet she spends hardly less time in stating her constant need, often frustrated, of authoritative guidance from confessors.

In her story, the real tensions have nothing to do with the flood of importations such as Savanorola's works, which reshaped Spain's Dominicans, or the *Enchiridion* of Erasmus, which heaped scorn on ecclesiastical rituals, the veneration of images, and vocal prayer. There is no evidence that Teresa read Savonarola, Erasmus, or Luther. Rather, those tensions were determined by an ongoing struggle between

two states of mind within the Spanish Church's hierarchies over the issue that the *alumbrados* had brought forward and that required juridical mediation.

One group was composed of men who studied and interpreted scripture: the theologians, or those whom Teresa called "people of the book, of learning and understanding."⁹ The other group, *espirituales* or *experimentados*, took the inner life and its potential light to degrees of private vision generally known as quietism and pietism. Implicitly, as mystics they were antinomian, a present danger to Tradition and its guardians, the theologians. A notorious, monitory instance of the aberration latent within a feminine sensibility had once come in the mental vagaries of a Dominican nun, Maria de Santo Domingo, known as the Blessed Woman of Piedrahita, presumed to be blessed for having received visions and even the stigmata, until she was put away and corrected. She could well have gone up in smoke. Such a dangerous example obliged Teresa's Jesuit confessors to be skeptical, at times punitive toward her.

Teresa achieved a delicate peace for herself between both camps. She wrote and lived as one of the spirituals. Her *Castillo interior* abides as a masterwork from their quarter. It is not only a celebration of the contemplative life Christians might seek for a journey toward God. It also achieves equipoise between the heights and depths within that journey, the gradual ever prayerful proximity to God by a divine and wholly unmerited favor, and the perils that could at any time or station (*morada*) confound a soul and send it back down to the nullity from which the journey commenced. Teresa had an acute, almost over-ripened awareness of human foibles, those of women in particular. Her *Castillo* reads as a kind of literary and spiritual makeover of Chutes and Ladders.

Her cautions were informed by theologians she tactfully courted for advice and guidance. These very men could have put her life at risk or required that her manuscripts be destroyed. (When she died, in 1582, she did not know whether the Inquisition would permit the publication of her *Vida*, written almost twenty years before.) Some of them had been suspicious of her, and yet she sometimes disarmed them, even brought a few, such as Ibañez and Garcia de Toledo, round to the mystical life. It is difficult to overestimate the agility of her charm or her earnest sincerity in her consultations with the erudite *hombres de tomo*, for such agility, charm, and sincerity are qualities apparent in her writing. In her autobiography she speaks of theologians as servants of God and makes clear that she does not regard them as adversaries to the *experimentados*: "Let us not deceive ourselves by saying that learned men who do not practice prayer cannot be suitable directors for those who do. . . . [T]hey are not enemies of the spirit or ignorant of its nature, for they are familiar with the Holy Scripture, where the truth about it can always be found."¹⁰

That is adept diplomacy, the fruit of her having moved among eminences in the orders (not to mention her many connections with the Spanish nobility) and having secured from them some lasting friends: the Jesuits, Borgia and Alvarez; the

Dominicans, Bertrand and Granada; the Franciscans, Alcántara and Laredo. Such diplomacy she performed before some who would not have scrupled to pounce upon defamatory reports of her or her Carmelite sisters. She had to protect both herself and those sisters, but the assiduous solicitude she showed them in advancing them along the road to God, the *Camino de perfección* (1566), does not go to the heart of her life's story.

In her writing, she loaded herself down with negatives. She believed herself a lowly creature (yet she was born into the minor aristocracy of *hidalguía*), ignorant (she was educated in religious life at a convent school), worthy of damnation (a possible destiny for any soul), and foolish (which meant she knew she was a woman). She sounds these notes of self-recrimination and self-deprecation repeatedly in her *Vida* and elsewhere.¹¹ As they are so frequently bound into a theistic context which indicates that God is blessing her with divine assignments, some modern critics have seen her confession as a coy rhetorical angling against the ecclesiastical authority she was addressing.¹² Hagiographers see only Teresa and God; moderns see only a Teresa in an imbroglio of ecclesiastical power challenged and subverted a generation after the *alumbrado* interrogations. Embedded inextricably as she was in the Church's politics and yet having to struggle as a woman for authentication within it, she fought back with self-empowering doses of ironic and polemic savvy.¹³ As Teresa was canonized within a generation after her death, her life and work read as a stupendous triumph against the odds. (See Figure 1.3.)

Like that other masterly self-deprecator, Augustine of Hippo, whose *Confessiones* she knew well,¹⁴ Teresa addresses herself almost entirely to God. Her chief avenue to authentication of herself as a *mujercita* or little woman (a tautology, as she knew) was to invoke the example of women in the company of Jesus himself, as in this bracing passage from the *Camino*, damaged in manuscript by official erasure: "O, my Creator, you are not ungrateful, for when you were in the world, Lord, you did not loathe women but, on the contrary, you always favored them with much compassion and you found in them as much love and more trust than in men, as your most saintly Mother was there, by whose



FIGURE 1.3 From Therese's large collection of prayer cards. She never experienced a mystical ecstasy such as Teresa's, who felt Christ piercing her heart with a spear.

Copyright Archives du Carmel de Lisieux

merits—and because of our wearing her habit—we deserve that of which our failings make us undeserving.”⁵ Closing her *Vida*, when discussing how souls may experience union with God, she leaves this parting shot from her beloved Franciscan: “The Lord grants such graces to many more women than men, I have heard the saintly friar, Pedro de Alcántara say (and I have seen it myself). . . .”⁶

Such is her kind of omega, earthly and tenuous, a brief on behalf of the women sequestered in the cenacles she had founded. But the alpha, the struggle of beginnings, was never absent from her consciousness. It is that susceptibility that endears her perhaps most of all to her readers, the steady absence of self-righteousness or any smug sense of arrival. Yet the sources for her fit-for-hell self-estimate cannot be located precisely. It is not enough to say that it had been nourished in a culture of fear: fear of God’s wrath, fear of damnation, fear of authority. She tells us that before she discovered Francesco de Osuna’s *Tercer abecedario* (1527), a book she clung to for over twenty years in the absence of a proper spiritual director, her religion was egocentric. She also says she was tormented not by God’s silence and apparent absence but by the abundance of graces (*mercedes*) to her. Even so, she could not shake free of her need for human amity, no matter her desire to be solely God’s; hence, a recurring dread of offending divine love. Behind these limits and failings is the message that God is the source of all virtues, including her desire for service to God. She admits that she took a long time to learn that all human efforts are futile until we banish reliance upon ourselves and find rest wholly in God.⁷

That is no sappy concession to piety. Teresa, unlike Thérèse, did not live in an age of sentimentality. In acknowledging God’s primacy, she undercut whatever voluntarism threatened her *camino*, for such an emphasis upon the human will, common in Franciscan and Jesuit spirituality, held as great a danger as its opposite, abandon, in the *alumbrado* persuasion. Teresa had to mediate cautiously, not only between theologians and spirituals but between extremes in her own sensibility. She had to develop a robust sense of self-criticism, a steady vigilance upon herself.

Her keenest phrasings in self-reproach served a double means to a single end: by remembering her adolescent foibles and exaggerating their gravity, not to mention her attachments to friends in adulthood, she was humbling herself in the initial, purgative stage of prayer. She was also following the injunction of Osuna who had described humility as a trench to be dug to lay the foundation for a dwelling in prayerful life. He spoke of humility as a dunghill, and she made it a word describing herself.⁸

How did she arrive at such an accomplished self-scorn? The account of her childhood holds barely a clue. She had been blessed with a saintly Jewish Christian father, Alonso Sanchez (her paternal grandfather, Juan Sanchez, a wealthy linen merchant of Toledo, was a converted Jew).⁹ She had a formal upbringing in the Catholic faith and the stimulation her father provided by reading to her throughout her childhood. He instilled in her a keen love of books, which means he remained a Jew and she

was raised one. In a Jewish household, intellectual curiosity was matured in the posing of questions. Teresa grew up as a very bright and decided girl.

Was she, then, educated into self-reproach and self-debasement? Theological training was, of course, denied her as a woman. In 1531, at sixteen, Doña Teresa de Ahumada, as she was then known (Ahumada was her mother's family name), was sent by her father to the Augustinians but was put off by their austerities in piety and penance. She returned home ill. Her *Vida* indicates that she never experienced any of the positive signs pointing to conventual life: a vision or a summoning voice, an experience of unearthly joy, the tell-tale sense that she would love God more than family. What decided her was thoroughly negative, that she perceived the brevity and vanity of mortal life. Whatever her faults or misdemeanors, she believed they would dispatch her to hell. She saw the convent as a kind of substitute for purgatory. It would rescue her from a morbid fear of damnation.

Why did she not enter one of the other orders, the Cistercian (which locally subsumed four Benedictine monasteries) or Dominican or Franciscan? All of these were acutely strict. Her entry into the Carmel of the Incarnation seems to have been prompted by a banal but important factor, the presence there of her friend, Doña Juana Suarez. From her, the adolescent Teresa learned of the Carmelite spirituality of that time. Doña Juana convinced her that the Carmel offered a purgatory as good as any. (See Figure 1.4.)

Irony plays thick here. One of the foremost saints of Christian mysticism began her spiritual life on craven grounds, a fear of hell, and it was only through the example of a friend (hardly a reliable basis for action and one in risk of attachment) that she was brought into the order that she was to transform magnificently. For much of her life she suffered from an inclination to human attachments. She knew from scripture that a true follower of Christ forsakes the earthly bonds of



FIGURE 1.4 The Carmel of the Incarnation, outside of Ávila. Teresa entered it when she was 20, in 1535, and returned as its reforming prioress, in 1571. Photograph taken by the author.