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Ego-documents or ‘Plural Compositions’? Reflections on Women’s Obedient Scriptures in the Early Modern Catholic World

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Abstract

This article focuses on a common textual genre in early modern Catholic Europe conceived and produced in the context of a close spiritual director/penitent relationship, variously defined as ‘autobiografía por mandato’, ‘obedient writing’, or ‘autobiographical report’, and so on. Starting out from the large number of studies of this text type, a number of considerations are made on two themes: 1) their specificity and the social practices underpinning them 2) the modalities and ways of partial or integral publication in print of some of them. An attempt will be made to highlight to what extent and how the intricate question of authorship(s) can be addressed. Special attention will be devoted to the somewhat widespread category (in comparison with ‘autobiography’) of the ‘ego-document’, meaning, by this term, any type of text in which an author or authoress, deliberately or unintentionally writes about his/her acts, thoughts and feelings.

Keywords: Early Modern Catholicism, Ego-Documents, Spiritual Autobiography, Spiritual Direction, Women’s Religious Writing.

1. *Introduction*

Quisiera yo que, como me han mandado y dado larga licencia para que escriba el modo de oracion y las mercedes que el Señor me ha hecho, me la dieran para que muy por menudo y con claredad dijera mis grandes pecados y ruin vida. (Teresa de Avila 1982, 117)¹

With these words, Teresa de Avila opened her *Libro de la vida* which, thanks to its publication in print, translations into diverse European languages and obviously its author’s renown, is the best known example of a textual typology which was widespread in early modern Catholic Europe: the typology which historians have defined as ‘autobiografía por mandato’, ‘obedient writing’, ‘autobiographical report’, ‘soul writing’, ‘spiritual autobiography’, or ‘spiritual diary’.² These definitions were coined in different geographical and linguistic contexts and are not all synonymous since each one emphasizes some of the characteristics of these writings and/or some of their modalities of production.

In the pages that follow, starting from increasingly numerous studies of texts of this kind, I intend to discuss their peculiarities and the social practices from which they originate, as well as the modalities and ways of the partial or integral publication in print of some of them. In doing this, I will also consider to what extent and in what way the thorny question of these texts' authorship (or multiple authorship) can be posed. In particular, I would like to discuss these texts taking into consideration the category of 'ego-document', a rather extensive category and much wider than that of 'autobiography', by which I mean any kind of text in which an author, either willingly or unwillingly, 'writes about his/her acts, thoughts and feelings' (Dekker 2002, 7).³

2. *Spiritual Direction and Writing*

We know that the dispositions on the sacrament of penitence dictated by the Council of Trent referred exclusively to the auricular forms of confession and that they insisted on its necessary secrecy. However, the Tridentine conception of confession, which was more and more meant as a spiritual accompaniment and a direction of conscience grounded in a consolidated and lasting relationship between the penitent and his/her confessor-director, actually represents the main premise for the writing practice generally defined as 'report of conscience'. The Jesuit practice, on the other hand, imposed a self-examination and daily account of one's drawbacks and progresses along the way to inner perfection by leaving a graphic mark. The practice of general confession, in turn, was meant as reflection on, and rethinking of, one's whole existence, aimed at interior conversion and rebirth. It is indeed very likely that these two practices were a stimulus to the use of writing strictly connected to the sacrament of penitence and either functional or complementary to it.⁴ We have extensive evidence of this fact even in the writings of Loyola, in whose autobiography we read that every day he wrote down what happened to pass through his soul, so that, in the course of his existence he had collected 'a rather large packet of writings'. He added that he used to write 'while sleeping, by feeling that [his] hand was guided, not knowing what [he] was jotting, that is, ecstatic' (1991, 187). In the confessors' manuals written by Jesuit authors the practice of self-examination and general confession takes on a great importance: the instructions become explicit, precise and articulate and a similar importance is attributed to the constant reference to the function and role of the spiritual confessor-director. This is the main point which profoundly distinguishes Catholic practice from similar practices of other denominations.⁵ This difference must therefore be taken into consideration if we want to establish a relationship with reports and spiritual autobiographies produced in other denominational contexts. In the Catholic world the practice of introspective analysis, daily account and inner improvement must not be initiated and performed in solitude, but under the guidance, advice and supervision of a director of conscience whose task was to

accompany the penitents and help them advance on the ways of the spirit, but also that of controlling, inspecting and scrutinizing.

Confessors/directors had to be experts in the arduous science of the so-called *discretio spirituum* which, in the course of the modern age, was more and more elaborated and refined by theologians. The directors of conscience were expected to be able to establish whether the motions of the penitent's soul, especially when they presented exceptional features, came from God, the devil or purely human factors (Zarri 1991, Malena and Solfaroli Camillocci 1998, Prosperi 1999, Sluhovsky 2007). Starting from the late Middle Ages and from the wave of visionary mysticism which spread over many urban contexts in different areas of Europe, involving men and especially women – some belonging to religious orders, but mainly lay persons – experts in the doctrine and practice of *discretio spirituum* sharpened their own theoretical, conceptual and methodological tools in view of testing and judging the diverse manifestations and expressions of mysticism, which became more and more suspect (Cabibbo 2010, Zarri 2010).

As many historians have remarked, between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries a progressive change in the conception and practice of discernment of spirits was carried out. This tended more and more to become the inquisitors' instrument for unmasking, controlling and repressing the so-called simulation or pretence of holiness; in other words, spiritual 'hypocrisy' in all its expressions and facets. What was taken into consideration was not only the possible diabolic inspiration, but also – and ever more frequently – the exquisitely human aspects of deliberate pretence, of voluntary deceit as well as those much more subtle and elusive cases of self-deceit and self-suggestion (Zarri 1991, Schutte 2001a, 2001b, 2010).

Among the main instruments of discrimination we find – in theoretical treatises, but mainly in practice – the activity of self-report and, more precisely, written self-report. In his treatise *De ecstaticis mulieribus* (1616), Cardinal Federico Borromeo writes:

Un altro buon criterio per conoscere le persone è quello di interrogarle insistentemente sulla loro vita, mettendo per iscritto, secondo le circostanze e le occasioni, tutto quello che dicono. Così, in un secondo tempo non possono negare le cose dette. Se quelle persone continuassero a raccontare stupidità, o perché esse stesse ingannate o perché volessero prendere in giro gli altri, sarebbero in tal modo smascherate. (1616, 41)⁶

It should also be stressed that confessors and directors of conscience, when in the presence of penitents who showed exceptional charisma, had a further motive for inducing the 'holy man' or the 'holy woman' to write: the preparation and collection of materials which would one day serve for the man's or woman's posthumous cult and for the possible and wished for trial of beatification (and afterward canonization). Especially following the new norms on canonization (the early seventeenth-century decrees of Pope Urban VIII), the examination of

the writings of the potential male or female saint became a fundamental step in the long process which led to the altars and it could irremediably compromise the acknowledgement of sainthood if these writings raised doubts about their orthodoxy (see, on this topic, Prosperi 1996, Gotor 2004 and Boesch 2005). Furthermore, as Isabelle Poutrin has brilliantly shown by analyzing 113 cases of women's spiritual autobiographical writings in early modern Spain, in the hagiographies which were written – often by the same spiritual directors – after the death of the would be saint, several, even quite ample fragments were inserted in the saint's handwriting, or dictated by her, with a technique which Poutrin defines as 'coupure and collages', i.e., copy-and-paste (1995, 269). As Adriano Prosperi remarked, the circulation of many autobiographical texts by women who were candidates for sainthood 'through the filter of biographies written in view of beatification trials' was the fall-out of a conspicuous institutional transformation: 'that of the beatification trials, which were assimilated to the model of inquisitorial trials and therefore were obliged to investigate truth by means of the witnesses' examination and the analysis of their written texts' (1999, 359-360).

Thus, precisely thanks to the pervasive and continuous resort to written texts, many stories of men and women mystics of the early modern period have survived; and it is apt to recall that almost all of them were transmitted through either hagiographic or inquisitorial sources. These stories mostly illustrate cases of coveted, sought, imperfect, and in the end failed holiness – at least as far as official recognition was concerned. Such cases were dealt with by confessors, exorcists and physicians, but also by judges of the faith, since the 'pretence of holiness', starting from the end of the sixteenth century, acquired the status of inquisitorial crime, and it is precisely for this reason that the archives of the Inquisition kept both the writings of men and women who reached the glory of the altars and the cases of failed holiness mostly concerning women, both lay and religious, or belonging to a semi-clerical state like *bizzocche* and tertiaries, who were in many cases of humble origin and modest education. As I have argued elsewhere (Malena and Solfaroli Camillocci 2011), in recent times, mainly thanks to the opening of the Central Archive of the Roman Holy Office, a large quantity of writings of this kind, mainly produced more or less between the second half of the sixteenth century and our days, has surfaced. These belong for the most part to the Italian area and are of interest from different perspectives. To quote only a few, the strictly historical-religious ones, that of gender and women's history (especially meant as the history of women's subjectivity), of the history of writing (mainly of women's writing activity and that of the so-called semi-cultured people; see D'Achille 1994), as well as, obviously, the history of mysticism in the widest meaning of the word.

3. Sources

The texts I am dealing with vary conspicuously in length and, generally speaking, consist of a proper autobiographical narration (the 'spiritual autobiography')

strictu sensu which, in most cases, occupies the initial part of the text), reports of conscience which often appear in the guise of a 'spiritual diary' and deal with interior life, sins, temptations, torments, scruples, moments of spiritual barrenness and, more generally, all the soul's motions. They also deal with reports and descriptions of ecstasies, visions, interior locutions, and all those phenomena which are considered mystic gifts. It is however to be stressed that these are rough and simply indicative distinctions, since the various discursive layers are often interwoven, blended and overlapping, so as to undermine any schematic treatment. But, although each text has specific features, they all appear characterized by a strong dependence on well-established, stereotyped hagiographic models and therefore on the reading of devotional texts, either direct or mediated by the confessor. Theirs was indeed a journey which 'from certain texts landed on other texts' (Prosperi 1999, 354), in most cases by passing through 'real lives'. However, in spite of the seeming repetitiveness and standardization of these writings, it is interesting to highlight their deviations from the hagiographic stereotypes and analyze the ways in which the models of holiness which were suggested/imposed by the ecclesiastical authorities were received, as well as the possibilities of selecting and choosing among these models and the texts which transmitted them; in other words, the kind of relationship the devout women established with these texts, sometimes refashioning or re-reading them with results which were not always predictable.

Furthermore, those who arranged and collected the 'obedient writings' for future printing had the often overtly expressed intention to produce and offer an edifying and even model-creating text. In the famous *Prattica spirituale d'una serva di Dio*, a key-text in Italian sixteenth-century spiritual literature, which was published without the name of the authoress, the author of the 'Preface', Nicolò Sfondrati, Bishop of Cremona and future Pope Gregory XVI, affirmed his wish to offer to the nuns and to 'other spiritual persons of our town and diocese' true 'spiritual food' by means of an

operetta scritta a mano, e composta ... da una divota religiosa ben pratica di quello che ella ragiona, come l'istessa opera ne rende chiaro testimonio, ben ch'ella per humiltà, e per fuggir la iattantia non habbi voluto far manifesto il suo nome, anzi *dichi* d'haver fatta questa fatica per obbedire al suo padre confessore, il quale volle che ella mettesse in scritto i suoi essercitii spirituali, co i quali se n'andava caminando per acquistarsi il palio della superna vocazione. (Besozzi 1577, 6)⁷

The author, behind whose anonymity the famous, although controversial, name of the 'divine mother' Paola Antonia Negri was hidden, opens her work by professing indignity and humility and then declares she had started writing because she was

spinta e comandata dal mio confessore e padre spirituale, son sforzata a riferire tutte le Vostre [di Dio] misericordie, le quali non risguardando alla mia ingratitudine e infinita negligenza, pietosamente mi havete dato, dandomi vero et efficace desiderio

d'emendarmi, con un affetto e sentimento d'oratione, e vive lagrime, per poter ottener da voi tante gratie. (10)⁸

It was indeed mainly those on whom exceptional gifts and graces were bestowed that were asked to write down their experiences. As we have seen, writing was a fundamental step for those who wished their holiness to be acknowledged. On the other hand, for the confessors, directors and judges of faith it was the only way to attain such phenomena as the mystic experiences which were by definition invisible and unspeakable in order to examine them accurately with 'cool and detachment', discern their source and, finally, 'take decisions about the nature of the spirits which ... troubled' their protagonists (Prosperi 1999, 355). It usually happened that the confessor, either on his own initiative or ordered by a superior authority, asked the penitent to write down the story of her life (something like a 'general confession', but in written form) and all the devotee experienced in her inner self. The order to write was addressed both to those penitents who could master writing – as in the case of the nun Teresa de Avila – and to women who scarcely knew how to read and write, or who could only read or could neither read nor write. These women took up this heavy task, which was often a source of unimaginable strain and frustration to fulfil their duty of obedience and often considered it as one of the instruments of penitence and ascesis. For example, the Chilean nun Ursula Suárez (1666-1749) asserts that she felt utter repugnance for this task. She defines the obligation to write as a 'torment' and repeatedly asks her confessor to inflict any other penitence on her (1984). Expressions recalling the duty of obedience (the only source of legitimation for communicating extraordinary graces and contacts with the divine, which otherwise could be deemed pride and vainglory and dangerous lack of humility), the strain and mental and physical suffering which the practice of writing involved are constantly repeated in these writings in rather stereotyped forms. As has been observed, these formulae are part of a distinct rhetorical and interpersonal strategy. Alison Weber, analyzing Teresa de Avila's texts, has discussed these womens' strategies as a 'rhetoric of femininity' aimed at justifying and legitimizing the communication of the mystical experience and the taking up of the word through repeated allusions to their position of subordination and marginality (1990). On the other hand, many of the expressions and stylistic features used refer to the empirical elements of a particular social practice, that of writing out of duty of obedience, which was widespread within Catholic spiritual direction starting from the early modern age.

Many of the women authors of these 'autobiographical reports' learned to write, so to speak, 'by writing'. Angela Mellini, a needlewoman (c. 1664-c. 1707) who was the protagonist, in mid-seventeenth-century Bologna, of an extraordinary case of spiritual motherhood, learned to write from her confessor in a rather elementary way. She received a sort of primer which consisted

of a number of plates containing a model alphabet and, starting from there, she had to drill by herself by finding phonetic parallels (which, being able to read, she already recognized in printed texts) and then learning to 'draw italics with all their ligatures and to actively connect those signs with the forms of her oral language, so different in the dialect from those she read in printed books' (Pozzi and Leonardi eds, 1988, 543).⁹ In the *incipit* of her diary, addressing her confessor, she writes:

Vostra reverenza mi comanda che io scriva e sa che io non so scrivere e non posso se non commettere molti difetti e goffaggini, ma a me poco importa. Mi basta accontentare il mio Gesù. Sono contenta e diffido di me stessa, e confido tutto al mio Gesù e in Maria. (546)¹⁰

But she also revealed: 'Molto tempo è che mi sentiva inclinata di farlo, ma non aveva ardire' (545),¹¹ thus showing a tension which represents the characteristic feature of this and other similar texts, that is, the alternative strain of, on the one hand, the desire to express and communicate and, on the other, the limits imposed by the objective condition of one's own marginality and the duties of obedience.

The lay woman from Livorno Barbera Fivoli (1717-1764) who, by the middle of the eighteenth century, wrote a diary in several volumes which stretches for about four thousand pages, at the beginning of her enterprise could read but not write (Prosperi 1999, Bottoni 2000 and 2001). Every day her confessor handed her a folded sheet of paper, instructing her to fill in the four sides for the following day. With ever increasing fluency and constant regularity, the forty-year-old woman – whose progress in writing is, as in many other cases, described as miraculous – set in written form her thoughts, 'visioni e illuminazioni divine ..., lotte eroiche contro i demoni ..., digiuni e veglie, ... penitenze e mortificazioni, ... grazie e favori divini' (Bottoni 2000, 278),¹² producing a torrential diary which is the outcome of her relationship with her director. The director gathered the sheets which Barbera entrusted to him, reorganized them by assembling them into separate files, occasionally brought corrections, mainly in the orthography, but without modifying the flow of the woman's writing; indeed, her hand – as she herself says – was directed by God: 'tutto questo che io scrissi fin qui, fu il solo i Dio che guidò Lui la mia penna, imperoche io col mio intelletto, mi trovavo in quell'istante, nel cuore amoroso del mio Giesù e con molta chiarezza, mi dettava tutto ciò che io scrissi' (282);¹³ up to the point that at times Barbera alleged that she wrote 'dormendo, con sentirsi guidare la mano, senza sapere ciò che annotava, cioè estatica' (282).¹⁴ The director, on his part, wrote down notes and reports on the spiritual progress of the penitent, which he deemed to be authentic, and on the suggestions and directions which he imparted to her, thus bequeathing to us the precious witness of a point of view which was 'external' to the mystic

experience of the protagonist of the *Diario* and almost producing a sort of countermelody to her writings. This is one of the very few cases in which the social character of the auto-biographical text written for obedience acquires a higher complexity through the interweaving of two voices: those of the mystic and her director. As Jodi Bilinkoff has shown in her studies, in such cases, that is, when a relationship of mutual acknowledgement between the devotee and her director is established, the identity of both ended up by being strengthened: on the one hand, the charismatic, thanks to the approbation and support of her confessor, could rely on the institutional acknowledgement of her role as 'mother' and mystic, thus conquering an otherwise unthinkable liberty of expression and action; on the other, the confessor/director expected, as the result of this relationship, his own personal transformation and spiritual renewal, as well as the acquisition of new 'professional' skills and a confirmation of his pastoral role.

The relationship with the activity of writing of the Capuchin nun Veronica Giuliani (1660-1727, canonized in 1839) appears to have been greatly tormented and painful. Veronica was a 'reluctant graphomaniac' (Pozzi and Leonardi eds, 1988, 506) who wrote indefatigably for almost 25 years piling up more than 22.000 sheets by order of her confessors (as many as 39) who alternated as her directors and some of whom, far from supporting her, seemed to be moved by feelings of suspicion and diffidence. Her sheets are marked by, and become the instrument for expressing, the suffering and pain, by reluctance to write and the pleasure felt in even accepting this suffering as obedient penitence. The mental and physical pain of writing appears to mingle with the pain of communication, or better, the obstinate attempt, undertaken for obedience, to communicate the ineffable, to wish to say the Nothing, which was the abysmal centre of her mysticism: 'Dico e ridico e non dico niente' (508)¹⁵ is her mark; and of divine love she says that 'più se ne dice, niente si dice, niente si può dire. Tutto ciò che si sa, è niente; nisuno pò penetrare cosa sia amore' (508).¹⁶ The directors handed in to her one file at a time and the ecstatic had to compile them without either re-reading or correcting her writing and finally hand them back to them. She wrote at night, in the dark and in extremely uncomfortable positions. Although she shows remarkable argumentative originality and exceptional stylistic creativity, Veronica – as many other authoresses of 'obedient autobiography' – never acquired complete mastery of writing means. Her spelling often appears uncertain, punctuation and word-separation do not follow canonical usage. Her language is indeed marked by a very strong dependence on orality, even as far as vocabulary and syntax are concerned, even – paradoxically – when she expresses exceptionally lofty and complex concepts. The peculiar circumstances in which her *Diario* was written are – as in all other cases of 'obedient writing' – crucial in any attempt to understand these texts. As Giovanni Pozzi appropriately remarked, to approach the *Diario* of Veronica Giuliani, namely, the finished product, from the point of view of the reader inevitably means to approach

it from a false perspective, because it is 'not consistent with the one the saint experienced while writing' (508). It is indeed important to recall that Veronica 'had before her a file to fill in, which disappeared from her eyes forever once she had performed her task; that she wrote without the help of what she had written before and with no future plan, not knowing how long the task would last'. For these reasons, the reader should assume the perspective

of the page which is growing before her; indeed, if 'obedience' had ordered her to the contrary, the writer's hand would have stopped even before the following full stop (which was then not in use). Thus suspended, Veronica wrote in an absolute present, or in a past so near to the present that she felt obliged to stress the very slight distance with her usual 'it seems to me'. Her word is directly present in the event, is developed and interwoven in the knowledge of the event without the mediation of rhetoric, style, culture, without the guise of those oratorical models or models of spiritual writing which directed her edification. However, since that event is by definition unknowable, the word winds it up exceedingly, 'con modo senza modo' [in a way which is unrestrained], as she loves to say. (508)

These considerations and the approach they imply may also be applied to other analogous writings because they highlight some key-points which concern the peculiar character of all these texts. It is precisely starting from these critical reflections that I would like to make a few general comments.

4. *Whose Auto-bio-graphy Is This?*

In the first place, it is apt to stress again the inadequacy, for describing these texts, of the category of 'autobiography'. This category indeed involves an 'autobiographical pact' between writer and reader and leaves to the author the liberty of organizing his/her materials according to a unitary, organic and coherent narrative project. The perspective of someone who writes 'out of obedience' or 'under injunction' is evidently completely different and always determined by a relationship between two persons; a relationship in which either the marks of control and coercion, or those of collaboration and mutual legitimation and promotion may prevail, but whose final aim is never the 'neutral' transmission of a subjective point of view about past events. These texts are always the product of a 'narrative transaction' in which what is at stake needs each time to be specified on the basis of the kind of relationship which defines the transaction (see Davis 1987). Actors in this relationship – which is to be considered one of power – are obviously the mystic and her director or directors, but quite often also the inquisitors and all those who will have to, or could, examine her texts, the clerical hierarchy, the audience of believers and devotees of the 'holy woman' who would support her worship and, more generally, all the readers of her hagiography.

In a recent debate about the ego-documents and the *écrits du for privé*, commenting on the *autobiografías por mandato*, Alison Weber has aptly suggested that, apart from the binary relationship between penitent and confessor which is at the basis of these writings, scholars should also consider the ‘wider “social life” of the text’, a suggestion which Weber derives from the notion of ‘social text’ developed by Jerome McGann. According to McGann,

texts are produced and reproduced under specific social and institutional conditions, and ... every text, including those that may appear to be purely private, is a social text. This view entails a corollary understanding, that a ‘text’ is not a ‘material thing’ but a material event or set of events, a point in time (or a moment in space) where certain communicative interchanges are being practiced. (McGann 1991, 21; quoted in Weber 2005, 118)

The nature of ‘social text’ of the *autobiografías por mandato* concerns, according to Weber, both the origin of these texts and their circulation and fruition; in other words, the social exploitation of a text (‘las diversas vidas de una “vida”’, 118) which, although born as trial and exercise directed to one particular addressee, may end up by reaching – either in print or manuscript – a much wider audience.

When analyzing the so-called ‘obedient writings’, it seems to me that it would be important to describe in each case the nature and characteristics of the ‘events’ (to quote McGann), their time coordinates and the communicative exchanges which are at their basis, in an effort of contextualization which also includes the diverse functions and discursive levels which these texts present. Only by dealing with these texts in this perspective will we be able to unravel the problem of subjective writing and of the legitimacy to consider the ‘obedient writings’ as (also) writings which concern the self, or ‘ego-documents’. In order to avoid a naïve, and essentially improper, use of this category, it seems to me that it would be more correct, when dealing with these sources, to speak of the possibility of tracing in them ‘a certain amount of ego-content’ (Pomata 2001, 331), but always keeping in mind a fundamental uncertainty which concerns precisely the issue of authorship: that is, that such individual and subjective elements may belong both to the author/protagonist of the autobiography and the director who orders the person concerned to write (see Bilinkoff 2005, 46-75).

According to some scholars, the perspective of the devotee who writes for obedience and the language she uses are wholly conformable with those of the ecclesiastical institution. As Adriano Prospero writes, ‘the woman who has learned to write in the context of a relationship of spiritual direction which relegates her to a subordinate position expresses, in her pages, the point of view of the ecclesiastical culture and makes use of the stylistic features of that culture’ (Prospero 1999, 364). This position certainly highlights the irrefutable ‘main street’ of Catholic Counter-Reformation pedagogy, namely, the transition – to use again an apt formula coined by the same author – from the era of the

'divine mothers' to that of 'spiritual fathers' (Prosperi 1986). However, I am of the opinion that, in point of fact, this evaluation may turn out to be restrictive in many ways. If one examines each of the 'communicative exchanges' trying to deconstruct these power and subordination relationships, in some cases the margins of this negotiation and the possible transactions are visible and even some traits of subjectivity can be discerned. The Ursuline nun Brigida Morello from Piacenza (1610-1679), for instance, subjecting herself, out of obedience, to the duty of writing which was imposed on her by her Jesuit directors, shows that she accepted the norms prescribed in a way which was rather selective and all but uncritical. Scornful, or at least indifferent to the rules of grammar, spelling and rhetoric, on many occasions Brigida engaged in ruthless negotiation with her directors about the language to be used in order to describe her mystic experience. Indeed, – as the pioneering studies by Giovanni Pozzi and the more systematic analysis by Guido Mongini have shown – (Pozzi and Leonardi eds, 1988, Mongini 1998 and 2004), once she reached, through writing and through the practice of introspection, a remarkable stage of self-consciousness and deep understanding of her own self, Brigida refused

The conceptual apparatus which was offered by theologians, starting from that terminology – even the most elementary – which defines the contemplative states and the types of graces. She does not want to use 'questo nome d'estasi, da me aborrito'; and uses, that and others, out of pure concession to her director: 'Per obedire a vostra riverenza che me l'ha ordinato, dirò schiettamente il nome di ratto, *ancor che io* abbi sempre avuto tanto timore e aborrimiento a questo nome'. (Pozzi and Leonardi eds, 1988, 470)¹⁷

The obedience formulae and concessions to her confessor, several times stressed and repeated, only serve to point out the mystic's distancing from the language and conceptual store of theologians: 'In quelle cartucce che vidde vostra riverenza prima di partire, dove dicevo di quell'impeti d'amor di Dio, *già che vostra riverenza così vuole*, dico ch'erano ratti' (470).¹⁸ So, as Giovanni Pozzi concludes, 'the linguistic difference between "outbursts of love" and "raptures" marks the boundary between what is for her acceptable and what is not: she accepts the experience and the words which designate it, but rejects the texts of the doctrine and its sources, which do not agree with her meaning' (470). Indeed, Brigida generally opted for the use of less theological terms which better expressed the experiential nature of her knowledge of the divine (for example, 'to enter in one's self' and 'to go out of one's self', 'to go up', 'to go down' and 'to sink down', etc.). Generally speaking, her linguistic and conceptual choices appear entirely conscious and all but passive with regard to her superiors' precepts. I am of the opinion that, in such cases, the autobiographical writings 'por mandato', accepted out of obedience towards the confessors and directors of conscience who had the task of examining and evaluating, could become real 'anatomies of the soul'. The practice of written self-analysis

could eventually become a form of ‘anatomy of the self’, thus representing, for the writing subject, a precious tool of introspection and – as remarked by Gabriella Zarri – of ‘self-care’ (2003, 138). In the folds of these narrations, of the ever recurring formulae and rhetorical models, and the stereotyped stylistic features, it is possible to single out some traces of subjectivity – some fragments of the self. Not necessarily, however, of one sole subjectivity and one sole self. This last observation is a necessary premise when considering these sources of ‘plural composition’ (although with the necessary cautionary attitude) as ego-documents. This problem calls into question the issue of these texts’ authorship – or, better, of its deeply ambiguous nature.

Il y a plus d’un Auteur; il y en a deux, & l’un e l’autre étoient nécessaires pour achever l’Ouvrage. Cette grande Servante de Dieu a travaillé elle-même, & son fils a mis la dernière main, en sorte néanmoins qu’il n’y parle que comme un écho qui répond à ce qu’elle dit par ses propres paroles. (Martin 1677, *Préface*, aij v)¹⁹

Thus wrote the author of the *Préface* to the life of Marie de l’Incarnation, printed in Paris in 1677, highlighting the dilemma of authorship in such texts: ‘Whose life is this anyway’, as Bilinkoff says in the title of one chapter of her *Related Lives* (2005, 46-75). In other words, are we reading a biography or an autobiography? And whose autobiography? What is the role of the diverse authors of the work? The answer to these questions is not easy and one can only try to solve the thorny problem by considering and examining the specific features of each text. In the case of the *Vie* of Marie de l’Incarnation, for example, the issue is rather intricate. The second author is no one else but Claude Martin, Marie’s son, whose role is much more complex than one of collector and editor of the writings of ‘God’s servant’ in view of the beatification trial. Analyzing this work, Natalie Zemon Davis has highlighted the interaction between the two and the fallout of their complex relationship on the printed text by underlining the role of Claude who, as hagiographer and theologian, was worried about the doctrinal orthodoxy of his mother’s writings. By comparing Marie’s manuscripts with the printed text, Davis has highlighted that Claude’s corrections are especially aimed at softening the most daring – and therefore dangerous – expressions of her mystical language and, more generally, at rendering Marie’s words consistent with the dictates of the Holy Church. In short, also in this case it is important to define the roles, the boundaries and above all the complex and multifarious relationship between the two authors, the motivations which urged both to write, the manifestation of their personalities, the diverse agencies which come into play in the text and in its composition, but also in the text as final product.

To conclude, one might ask whether the very concepts of ‘individual identity’ and authorship are apt to be applied to sources like the ‘obedient writings’ and also, more generally, to all early modern spiritual writings. The

answer should be no if one considers the notion of authorship according to its present meaning. It seems to me, however, that the heuristic importance of such notions as personal identity and authorship may be seen if we use them, so to speak, in a 'flexible' way, by exploring diverse levels of analysis and different points of view, combining and interlocking an *emic* perspective, that is, one which is internal to the sign-system of the protagonists, and an *etic* one, that is, one which exploits notions which belong to different cultural systems (Pike 1967). Through the lenses of the individual ego and authorship it may well be possible to perceive the various voices and strategies pursued, with greater or lesser degrees of awareness, by the protagonists/authors of these narratives, their intersections, conflicts, the power relationships in the texts and therefore, to some extent, the dominant time component of these lives.

¹ 'Since I have been ordered and given ample freedom to write down the kind of prayers and the graces which have been bestowed upon me by the Lord, I would also like to be permitted to tell in detail and clearly the great sins of my mean life'. Translations of Italian and Spanish works not available in English are editorial.

² Lollini (1995), Poutrin (1995), Herpoel (1999), Prosperi (1996), Prosperi (1999), Bilinkoff (2005), Schutte (2005), Weber (2005), Malena (2007), Bottoni (2009), Bottoni (2010a).

³ On ego-documents see Schulze (1996), von Greyerz and Medick (2001), Dekker ed. (2002).

⁴ Stumpo (1995), Prosperi (1996), Prosperi (1999), Bottoni (2009). A different opinion is expressed by Lejeune (2003).

⁵ On Protestant spiritual autobiography see Benedict (2005); on female spiritual autobiographies in German pietism see Kormann (2004).

⁶ 'Another good way to know persons is to insistently question them on their life and write down, according to the circumstances and occasions, all they say. Thus, subsequently they will not be able to disclaim the things they have said. In case these persons insist on saying nonsense, either because they have been deceived or because they are willing to fool others, in this way they would be unmasked'.

⁷ 'A little book, handwritten and composed ... by a devout religious woman well practised in the things she speaks of, as her work clearly witnesses, although out of humility and to shun arrogance she has not made her name known and although she even says that she underwent this toil to obey her father confessor, who asked her to write down her spiritual exercises, which she kept performing in order to gain the prize of the supreme calling'.

⁸ 'Encouraged and commanded by my confessor and spiritual father, I am forced to relate all Your [God's] mercies which you piteously bestowed on me in spite of all my ingratitude and infinite negligence, thus giving me true and effective desire to amend myself with an impulse and feeling toward prayer and eager tears, in order to obtain from you many graces'.

⁹ On the otherwise unknown Angela Mellini and her writings, see Ciammitti (1979), Petrucci (1979), Pozzi and Leonardi (1988), Bottoni (2010a).

¹⁰ 'Your reverence orders me to write and you know that I cannot write and I can but make many defects and blunders, but I do not care. I am satisfied if I make my Jesus content. I am happy and do not trust myself, but I entrust all to my Jesus and Mary'.

¹¹ 'Long since I started feeling an inclination to do it, but I could not dare'.

¹² 'Divine visions and illuminations ... heroic struggles against the devils ... fastings and vigils, ... penitence and mortifications, ... graces and divine favours'.

¹³ 'All I have written up till now was only God to guide my pen, since in these moments I was with my mind inside the loving heart of my Jesus and he, very clearly, dictated all I wrote'.

¹⁴ 'While sleeping, by feeling that my hand was guided, not knowing what I was jotting, that is, ecstatic'.

¹⁵ 'I say and I say and I say nothing'.

¹⁶ 'The more is said, nothing is said, nothing can be said. All we know is nothing. No one can deeply penetrate what love is'.

¹⁷ 'This name of ecstasy, by me abhorred' ... 'To obey your reverence that ordered me, I will say frankly the name of rapture, although I have always feared and abhorred this name'.

¹⁸ 'In those little papers which your reverence saw before leaving, where I spoke of those outbursts of love for God, since your reverence thus wills, I will say they were raptures'.

¹⁹ 'There is more than one Author; there are two, and both were necessary in order to complete the work. This great servant of God has worked by herself, and her son added the last touch; but, in such a way, that he appears to speak only as an echo which answers to what she says by his own words'.

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