

Fall 2005

FLARR Pages #46: Teaching Teresa: Some Considerations and Suggestions, Part II

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Recommended Citation

Turner, Thomas C., "FLARR Pages #46: Teaching Teresa: Some Considerations and Suggestions, Part II" (2005). *FLARR Pages*. 69.
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FLARR PAGE #46

The Journal of the Foreign Language
Association of the Red River
Volume #2; Fall, 2005

File Under
•St. Teresa
de Avila
•Reform in
Spain
•Mystics in
Spain

“Teaching Teresa: Some Considerations and Suggestions, Part II,” Thomas C. Turner, UMM

The Crucial Vision (continued):

This particular text achieved lasting fame when it became the subject of a sculpture by the Italian artist Gian Lorenzo Bernini, “Santa Teresa en Estasi,” first seen in 1651 in the Cornaro Chapel of Santa María della Vittoria in Rome. An outstanding book on this masterpiece is Robert T. Petersson’s *The Art of Ecstasy: Teresa, Bernini, and Crashaw* (New York: Athenium, 1974). The book is always assigned as a special report by a student who has an art history background, if possible. Petersson’s book has a detailed background description, both geographical and cultural, of Spain in St. Teresa’s time, a helpful recounting of her early life, an explanation of her views about prayer and ecstasy. The critique of Bernini’s beautiful work is, of course, captivating (see also the photograph of the north wall of Avila, opposite p. 3, for a feeling of how the environment of “enclosure” can be such a strong element in Teresa’s character).

It is important for students to understand that St. Teresa did not claim to “summon” Christ, but rather made specific recommendations to prepare. It is Christ, she claims, who takes the last step and allows union with the soul. The angel does the piercing.

This passage has been the focus of much criticism and conjecture.* In college and university classes it is of great importance to supply as many points of view as possible so as to expand the students’ ability to feel and think. The following categories of discussion are suggested as those which might be of most interest to undergraduates: the view of the catholic church, the perspectives of several approaches that critics might take within the field of literary criticism, and some rational or scientific approaches.

Of the many possible explanations for St. Teresa’s vision, students should at least consider

the possibility that everything she saw and experienced was true and accurately described. This is, of course, the position of the church, which has named her a Doctor of the Church for her teachings on mystical pathways. The most complete way for students to consider this view is to have them visit a Carmelite Convent or Monastery to talk with believers first hand (such a trip is describe in a later sidebar).

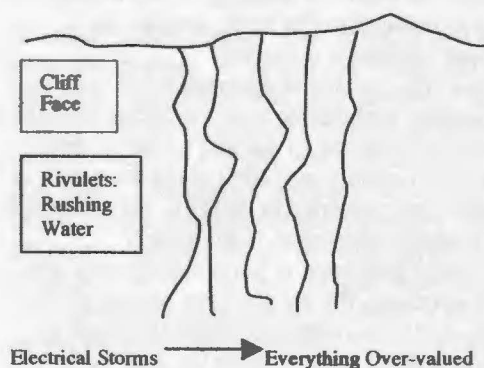
Of the literary theories the approach of structuralism, with its insistence on the interdependent and underlying relationships between texts, is helpful. Medwick points to similarities with other mystical accounts (58) and, more generally, many similarities of the conceit “joy/pain” can be found in the chivalric texts (e.g. the initially unrequited love of Amadis for Oriana). Teresa probably read such texts as a child. The “dama cruel” of Italian sonnets is a differing version; she is so beautiful, yet so vicious. In short, the language constructions were probably familiar to St. Teresa. So... perhaps she saw a metaphor?

Those critics prone to deconstruction, who are particularly looking for inconsistencies or multiplicities of meaning in the text would probably start with Teresa’s confusion about the angel, or cherub (later amended to seraph). So...what did she actually experience, if anything?

To critics interested in psycho-analyzing, and there are many, the unconscious aspects of the mind, including repressed sexuality, might be seen to affect Teresa’s vision (as well as the straight-out diagnosis of hysteria and/or other maladies). So... her vision is an unconscious dream?

For a good discussion of postmodernism and mysticism, from a more philosophical view, see Chaper 2 of John Horgan’s *Rational Mysticism: Dispatches from the Border Between Science and Spirituality* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003). Language in itself, is, of course, insufficient to express the inexpressible, and usually leads to a quagmire, and quagmires, by the way, that are particular to a specific culture. So... can anyone even talk about God?

From a scientific view, specifically a neuroscientific view, frontal lobe epilepsy may provide an explanation for mystic-like experiences. In "The Secrets of the Mind," a 2001 Nova Program on the brain, V. S. Ramachandran, a neurosurgeon, explores the case of John Sharon who suffers from temporal lobe epilepsy, a series of electrical storms where a group of neurons start firing randomly, out of sync with the rest of the brain. Sharon suffers volleys of five minute seizures and violent convulsions. After his seizures he engages in philosophical discussions and sometimes feels omnipotent. He is much more emotionally sensitive to the pains and joys of existence, especially of others. He feels both extreme pain and extreme enlightenment. Dr. Ramachandran proposes that the temporal lobe connections to the amigdala, where emotions evolve from stimuli, are strengthened. The pathways from the temporal lobes to the amigdala are heightened much like rivulets on cliff faces are deepened by deluges of water. There, in an area of the brain which determines what value is to be placed on things, everything is temporarily over-valued. Everything is salient, even a grain of sand. Such an over-valuation could be interpreted as a union with God, where everything finally makes sense. So...perhaps St. Teresa experienced a complication of temporal lobe epilepsy.



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Visiting Carmelites: A Literary Field Trip

In order to make St. Teresa's life come alive, students are invited to attend a literary field trip to southern Minnesota to visit both a Franciscan convent and a Carmelite Hermitage.

At the Franciscan convent students spend the night in a "cell," without the benefit of cell-phones and televisions. They were asked to read a selection from the Vatican II documents on the contemplative life. They also reviewed readings from St. Teresa's writing, especially her rules for conduct in a convent. Students generally enjoy this solitude.

In the morning they hear the general history of the Franciscan Order, an order based on service, and tour the museum of artifacts at Assisi Heights in Rochester, Minnesota. Franciscan nuns founded St. Mary's hospital there in 1889 in association with the Mayo clinic.

In the afternoon students visit the Hermitage of St. Mary of Carmel, located off a gravel road high on a wooded hill near Huston, Minnesota. The order took up lodging in their present location after a dance hall was built near their previous location in Wisconsin. There is a central chapel and seven or eight "cabins" heated by steam heat from a central boiler. The five to six sandal-clod Carmelites review the evolution of their current Carmelite Rule and express their admiration for St. Teresa's wisdom and "determined" personality.

The nuns at the Hermitage have many personal stories about the founding of the convent, which stands adjacent to a field populated by a buffalo herd. These stories include perceived miracles, some having to do with these buffalo and the building of the convent. The nuns have been gracious enough to share their personal stories and, most importantly, they are a particularly talented group of women who have given up very successful careers, well-paid highly creative careers, to practice at the hermitage. Some stories demonstrate that these nuns were not always faithful practitioners, but had earlier in life sometimes fallen from the faith. It is the personal stories of how faith was regained and what faith means to them that is most intriguing and which forms such a bond with students. What is most impressive is the feeling that they exhibit regarding their relationship with Christ and his mother Mary. These nuns feel truly blessed and loved, married to Christ, most happy with their lives which seem to students to be very restricted. The attitudes here give many students pause for thought and have caused some to reevaluate previously held opinions. Others have left unconvinced, but impressed. The nuns provide effective arguments and examples for their point of view.

Students find these approaches to St. Teresa to be most intriguing and stimulating.

*For a rather advanced application of literary theory to St. Teresa's writing see Carole Slade, *St Teresa of Avila: Author of a Heroic Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). See also George Eliot's discussion of St. Teresa in the prelude to *Middlemarch*.