

Kristeva's *Thérèse*

Mysticism and Modernism

Carol Mastrangelo Bové

Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie
française et de langue française, Vol XXI, No 1 (2013) pp 105-115

Vol XXI, No 1 (2013)
ISSN 1936-6280 (print)
ISSN 2155-1162 (online)
DOI 10.5195/jffp.2013.5*+
www.jffp.org

4



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



This journal is operated by the University Library System of the University of Pittsburgh
as part of its D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program, and is co-sponsored by the
University of Pittsburgh Press

Kristeva's Thérèse

Mysticism and Modernism

Carol Mastrangelo Bové

University of Pittsburgh

Julia Kristeva's *Thérèse mon amour: Sainte Thérèse d'Avila* (2008) combines novel, play, psychoanalytic cultural theory, and case history in a hybrid, seemingly postmodern vein.¹ In the context of her earlier work, this book contributes to an understanding of religion's impact -- especially Catholic mysticism -- on Western categories of women. I address in particular *Thérèse's* mysticism and modernist use of a feminine figure to subvert practices threatening the vitality of the psyche and of social relations. In a modernist mode, *Thérèse* engages with the problem of representing shifting psychological formations, giving the psyche a singular, dissident character, with James Joyce as a model. As in Kristeva's earlier writing, her psychoanalytic approach to Catholicism's influence continues to raise questions concerning apparent stereotypes, especially that of the masochistic woman.

This huge, complex study, unavailable in English, remains largely unexplored. Relatively few readers in the United States are acquainted with the work on the Spanish saint in French. Columbia University Press, which publishes most of Kristeva's writing in English, will not bring the translated volume out until Spring 2014.

Thérèse develops out of Kristeva's earlier writing on Catholicism and its roots in Judaism. In light of the relations she establishes between sexuality and Catholicism in her writing as early as her 1970's studies of Giotto and Bellini, Teresa is not an isolated case but an important instance in the history of psychic formations underlying Western writing and its exploration of representation. Saint Barbara's name, for instance, is central to Kristeva's thinking in her book on the foreigner, *Strangers to Ourselves* (1988). The hagiography of this saint plays an important role in her novels *The Old Man and the Wolves* (1991) and *Possessions* (1996), as Kathleen O'Grady makes clear in her analysis of the references to "Barbara" in these works.²

The idea of Catholicism as fantasy or illusion, as Freud would say, that enables certain individuals to go beyond their abjection and satisfy the psychic need to unite with a loving father, both in the sixteenth century and today, links *Thérèse* to Kristeva's analysis of Judaism in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980) and to *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith* (1985). In a more detailed format, *In the Beginning Was Love*, like *Powers of Horror*, combines an analysis of Catholicism and case histories of patients.

Kristeva's study of abjection in Judaism in *Powers of Horror* examines how early Jewish practices associating women with sensuality and the unclean are an important factor in the development of Western thinking on gender, authority, and the rational order, including Teresa of Avila's as I will demonstrate. Love constitutes a violation of the male God's power and the social contract he enforces. Such desire is, briefly stated, at the heart of Kristeva's theory and of modernist texts like *Sainte Thérèse*, whose writing strategies and especially the foregrounding of a female figure often oppose the harmful psychological formations underlying individuals and the social order and deriving from rationalism.

I use "modernism" in a way similar to Kristeva's own use of "modernité." Early on in her work, she identified how many modernist texts — Proust's, Céline's, and the Russian Futurists, for instance -- cope with crises of identity, rationality, and representation. She has also theorized the ways in which women are fundamentally dissident figures in modernism and stated that philosophy has always "placed her on the side of singularity."³ In this volume, James Joyce is the dominant high modernist figure and Teresa of Avila his precursor.

Sylvia Leclercq, the narrator/psychoanalyst of the volume, sees herself as the translator of Teresa's life to the degree that she analyzes the form and content of the saint's autobiography, both the original Castilian *Vida* and the French translation. Modeling themselves on the saint, Kristeva and her narrator interweave Teresa's story and thinking with their own. Sylvia writes, ". . . I receive your illuminations, . . . Teresa my love, through my filters, I greet them within my own reflection, sheltering them in my body, penetrating them with my own desires."⁴ The narrator's psychoanalytic practice and writing make clear that Kristeva projects herself onto Sylvia who in turn identifies with Teresa.

A seemingly utopian Sylvia sees the mystical as a model for working on contemporary problems, which rationalism and its legacy in contemporary societies are unable to resolve, for example, international terrorism and mental illness. Mysticism enables an empathy with the at times painful desires of other people. Sylvia implies that there is a connection between psychic and social structures not unlike that revealed by many writers building upon the psychoanalytic thought of Freud himself in whose late works Kristeva sees a version of mysticism, for instance, Paul Ricoeur and

Jürgen Habermas, and members of the new Kristeva circle, Kelly Oliver and Noëlle McAfee.⁵ For Sylvia, “the feminine,” subverts the “masculinist” tradition of rationalism, monotheism, and patriarchy to the extent that it brings the body (beyond its physical force), the emotions, and the unknowable into language. The two poles become fused in the psychic formations underlying the mind and human relations. Posing problems concerning gender and language that are no less troubling than those Freud introduced, Kristeva connects this fusion, translatable in language, to the ways in which the latter remakes the unconscious into a phenomenon to be shared by revealing it in his writing. To take one example of such problems, to speak of a replaying of identifications with male and female figures or with an androgynous figure functioning as both authority and source of transgressive pleasure may be reductive. That is to say, some critics might find it an oversimplification to differentiate “the feminine” and “the masculine” in this way. A related problem would be to describe the feminine as bodily enjoyment forbidden by the law, a formulation that may constitute a stereotype.

The first half of the volume focuses on Teresa’s brilliance in recreating her psychosomatic and semiotic experience with God in her writing. The sixteenth century Teresa writes a form of mysticism replete with physical images transgressing the Catholic Church’s policies in her time. These are images growing out of the twelfth century’s understanding of the Church as the incarnation of Christ’s body. Teresa describes God as a milk-laden breast and her text as a silkworm producing a beautiful, soft substance, both warm and moist. She speaks of the intense pleasure of her interaction with the deity as a kind of watering. Undercutting the Church’s authority and disapproval of such images, Teresa performs a masochistic act to the degree that she knowingly incurs the Church’s anger and possible punishment.

The second portion of the book presents Teresa’s clarity in calmly practicing her faith, writing about it in a way that is accessible and intellectually sound, and connecting with contemporary readers including those whose help she needs to found a new Carmelite order, the Discalced or Barefoot Carmelites. The mystic engages in a practice that is political in the broad sense of building a network of supporters to bring about the changes she envisions, including a time for conversation in the convent. The controversial innovations expose her to attacks by the Inquisition and church leaders who enforce the status quo.

Teresa’s mysticism demands that one listen to the voice of love with its shadow of hate both in and outside of the self. From the beginning, before her stating that it is since 9/11 that she has understood the need to commit herself to her patients and colleagues and to her book on Teresa, Sylvia sees the connections between Teresa’s story of Catholic mysticism and that of Islam, a link made evident in the headscarf meeting.⁶ Along with Judaism and Catholicism, Islam is a religion built on a discourse of love/hate. Early

on, she includes an episode in which a young Muslim woman at a meeting on the new law against the wearing of the headscarf speaks about it as a civil right. There will be later references to 9/11, to the explosions on the Madrid trains in 2004, and to those on the London metro in 2005, which may have been the work of Islamic fundamentalists. Sylvia sees her current research on Saint Teresa as part of thinking through how wrongheaded fundamentalism is, closed and damaging to the emotional and physical well-being of individuals and groups. She will listen to Teresa's mysticism in an attempt to open her own writing to the saint's theological psychology. According to Teresa, the body and affect are vital and nourish an ethics promoting the collaborative, imaginative, and dialectical ways of thinking, which, according to Sylvia and Kristeva, are frequently lacking in the twenty-first-century.

Sylvia speaks and writes her psychology in part in an imaginative and visceral form inspired by James Joyce and Claudio Monteverdi. She includes Joycean poetic prose in homage to Teresa midway through and at the end of the book's first chapter. Echoing the joy, spiritual fervor, beauty, and substance of her own *Stabat mater*, Kristeva is at her best in this prose, which I have translated: "Your sexual tension, unspeakable matrix and vagina, is satisfied only in the shimmering of the words you write."⁷ Here, as in the earlier essay on childbirth, Kristeva's cultural theory enlists poetic prose including the complex image of language as light in motion, a "shimmering," representing the body's pleasure in putting words on the page, to convey Teresa's creation of literary art out of her mystical and very physical relations with Christ.

Along with these passages, Sylvia obsessively sings a tune from the Italian composer who lived soon after Teresa. A sexual and militaristic melody with lyrics, like a stampeding cavalcade, from "Gira il nemico, insidioso Amore," ("That enemy, insidious love, circles around") repeatedly intrudes in the conclusion of chapter V, "From Ecstasy to Action." While the music seems an annoying refrain to a reader who may not take care to consider the context, the Monteverdi score implies that Sylvia, following Teresa, moves from love to action via a form of frenzy that endangers the psyche's existence.

Sylvia will also listen to the voices of love and hate in her patients Paul and Elyse and in her colleague Marianne. For the psychoanalyst, the therapy in which she engages with suffering clients enables her to give attention to individuals, to ground her ideas in the world, that is, in the material and historical conditions in which individuals find themselves. In this way, like Teresa, she undertakes a second kind of political practice related to that of her writing. Her psychoanalytic practice offers an alternative to the emptiness of contemporary life and its nihilistic tendencies including fundamentalism and an obsession with power and spectacle. Therapeutic work at the same time puts Sylvia at risk, exposing her to

transference not only from her patients onto herself but also from her own projections onto them. She becomes vulnerable to their ensuing behavior and opens her psyche up to instability and mental illness.

Kristeva comments on the saint's rare talent in recreating her fleeting moments of ecstasy in writing and in probing their meaning. Teresa implicitly transforms the psychic and the social as in this passage from her *Life*:

You can't breathe, your physical strength is gone, so that you can't even move your hands without a lot of effort . . . Speaking becomes impossible . . . Pleasure is immense and you feel it in the sensitive part of your body . . . it's really hard for the soul to become aware because it is then without emotion . . . the will maintains the joust . . . a complete suspension of your powers without any play of the imagination . . . these powers do not, however, return so completely to themselves without remaining for a few hours in a kind of delirium, God bringing them back from time to time to himself.⁸

Kristeva makes clear in the context she provides for the passage that Teresa's ability 1) to understand mystical experience as the emergence of a radically different person within herself and 2) to convey her understanding in her writing would appear to be a substantial contribution to cultural theory and, I add, to the connections between mysticism and modernism.

In an article on the book, largely unexamined to this date even in France, Marie-Odile Métral sees Teresa's relationship to and interaction with a tender, passionate, forgiving Christ, more human than divine, at the center of her mystical experience and theory. To the extent that Christ enables an imaginative incorporation of the body's life in language, beyond the idea of physical strength, he is more feminine than masculine.⁹ Teresa's unorthodox and complex depiction of Christ as a figure who is both a male partner and feminized helps reshape Catholic mysticism. Her writing opens Western categories of the spiritual to bodily experience and, by incorporating women into the Godhead, validates further the active participation of women in the Church. The empirical implications of Teresa's form of mysticism enable her to put her knowledge of the mystical into practice, transforming the Carmelite order, the Catholic Church, and Spanish society beyond and through her writing.

This psychoanalytic reading of Teresa's engagement in reform incorporates the historical and material conditions that some critics find lacking in Kristeva's theories.¹⁰ In *Thérèse* and in an interview broadcast in June 2008 after the volume's publication, Kristeva emphasizes the complex and specific conditions of the saint's private and public life. She mentions, both in this book and in the interview, Teresa's Jewish grandfather's forced

conversion to Catholicism, her father's struggle to demonstrate his Catholicism, and her mother's knowledge of Catholic doctrine and chivalric novels, on the one hand, and the religious conflicts between Catholics, dissident *illuminés/alhombrados*, Jews, women, humanist/Erasmists and Reform Protestants on the other.¹¹ These events, and in particular, the saint's witty, yet tension-filled interactions with powerful Jesuits like François Borgia and with other Carmelites including Maria de Ocampo concerning her new order, the Discalced or Barefoot Carmelites, and its controversial practices mark her writing and give it a particular, historical character, as Kristeva demonstrates. The recreation of Teresa's remarks to Borgia and of her debates with Ocampo tell of the founding of the new order and of the transformations she brings about: a shortening of the time for prayer, allowing conversation hours with cake, dance, and song as well as outings, visits, and time with friends.¹² Kristeva adds these concrete details to theoretical considerations of discipline and temptation, giving the social history and revealing the material, politically charged details of the saint's work, which include seventeen new convents in all.

In this volume and throughout her writing, as I see it, Kristeva develops psychoanalytic theory and practice both in its universalizing and historicizing tendencies. That is, despite her emphasis on widespread psychological formations, she recognizes the particular historical, material conditions impinging on the individual. She shows, for instance, how contemporary ideas of women grow out of the masochistic and at the same time empowering elements in Catholicism's adoration of Mary and female saints in its specificity over the centuries.¹³ The study of Thérèse's tendency toward masochism reveals how her at times excessive attempts to have herself suffer physical and mental pain derive from a sense of guilt over sexual activity in her youth. Probing further back into her psyche and paternal family history, Kristeva also derives Teresa's masochistic behavior from her identifications with her grandfather's and father's Jewish ethnicity.

Kristeva links the secret and hidden qualities of Teresa's mysticism, especially its subversive and guilt-ridden character, contained in the derivation of the word from the Greek meaning "to conceal," to similar qualities in the Jewish practices of her grandfather who had been forced to submit to Catholicism and would have had to practice his faith in a clandestine manner. Sylvia convincingly speculates, based in part on Michel de Certeau's work, that Juan Sanchez, Teresa's paternal grandfather, would have experienced guilt over both his forced conversion and his concealment of Jewish worship. Sylvia implies that traces of this guilt would emerge in the next generations in Teresa's father's conflicted psyche, struggling to demonstrate a Catholic identity in anti-Semitic Spain, and in her own developing unorthodox mysticism vis-à-vis the Inquisition and other enemies in the Church.

A central section of the book reexamines the problem of masochism introduced earlier. Lacking emotional support from those around her, Teresa identifies with Christ's suffering, transforming that identification into a more satisfying experience, which she can recreate in her writing and political practice. In a brief volume on *This Incredible Need to Believe*, originally published in Italian translation in 2006, two years before *Thérèse*, Kristeva summarizes her interpretation of the mystic's writing.¹⁴ Half interview and half essay, the book contains an important reformulation of masochism as a transformative gendered component of mysticism. Answering the final question in the interview portion in which Carmine Donzelli links suffering to Teresa's brand of feminine genius and mysticism, Kristeva describes the saint's transference onto Christ, which displays stages of sadomasochism and genitality. In the end, Teresa is able to displace these stages into social practices, which could be said to emerge from masochism, for example, her standing up to the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and willingly accepting the resulting pain of the confrontation. In this way, the reexamination of masochism focuses here on Teresa's pride as a woman, the strength of her writing, especially the powerful imagery of water, and her reform of the Carmelite order including the founding of the seventeen new convents. Kristeva's examination of Teresa as a powerful agent of her own destiny documents how the saint's engagement in transforming her religious order relies in part on particular elements of her life and environment including, for instance, her battles with the Inquisition. Thus, Kristeva rereads masochism into Teresa's Catholic representations of femininity. *Thérèse* enables us to see the potential usefulness of what is often considered a perversion, that is, masochism as a positive force for confronting contemporary societies' harmful effects on the psyche.¹⁵ This rereading emerges in Kristeva's analysis of Teresa's writing and of her work with the nuns under her leadership.

Such an interpretation also becomes apparent in the linkages Kristeva establishes between Teresa and Sylvia in their respective writing and collaboration with others. Kristeva has Sylvia derive strength from Teresa's life to continue her work on the saint and with her patients and colleagues and implies that such a life is a resource for us all. Early in the book Sylvia ironically refers to 1) her having emerged unscathed from masochism in her relationship with a young man during the student revolt of 1968 and 2) her sexual encounter with Bruno, her editor, whose kiss creates a powerful sense that her body has liquefied. With these references, Kristeva draws connections to Teresa's mysticism, implicit in Sylvia's description of her youthful self-punitive behavior strategically placed in the midst of her discussion of her decision to work on religion and on her clinical practice following September 11th.¹⁶ The allusions become explicit in the kiss episode: she states that her reading of the Church mother draws on the kiss's "excessive desire."¹⁷

Sainte Thérèse is a modernist text to the degree that it foregrounds both Teresa of Avila and Sylvia Leclercq as women who attempt to subvert practices harmful to the individual psyche and to social relations. Sylvia will do so especially in the two parts of her life that are most important to her: 1) the therapy she provides Paul and Elise, and 2) her research on Teresa. While she offers no explicit reason for stating that it is primarily since 9/11 that these projects have commanded her attention, it becomes clear in the novel's context that the attacks on the World Trade Towers constitute part of rationalism's legacy to the extent that they represent the fundamentalist drive to assert its dogma in a systematic way. For Kristeva, such a drive grows out of Descartes' view of the mind as it develops during the Enlightenment and attempts to impose its monotheistic, patriarchal hegemony on the world. In this way, Kristeva rereads Sylvia's engagement with both Teresa's Catholic mysticism and her work at the clinic as ethical practices opposed to the legacy of rationalism. Kristeva interprets Catholic mysticism's masochistic view of women, and Teresa's literary version of it as a form of thinking that celebrates the body and the emotions, attributes which a Cartesian point of view must keep at bay. The volume reveals important connections between Sylvia's turn to mysticism and the ways in which she interacts with her patients and colleagues. Kristeva's novel is thus able to transform masochism into a powerful force for shaping ethical behavior, as in Sylvia's projects and in her own, in writing this book, for instance. Such is my interpretation of the following passage, which appears in the opening section:

I have one reservation, however: your uncontrollable love for Christ-like wounds and the humiliation you inflict on yourself serves only to block the tendency that interests me, allow me to insist. Moreover, if you had lived two centuries later, a reading of the Marquis de Sade would have been able to purge your imaginary of your most wild and morbid phantasies, which you do not dare to name, but which you actually embody to the point of risking death by epilepsy.¹⁸

Here Kristeva has Sylvia express her care to acknowledge a dangerous, fundamental drive in Teresa's relation to Christ, which may resemble parallel drives in Sylvia and in Kristeva herself.

Kristeva has Sylvia describe Teresa's masochism in terms of a psychology that is both universal and individual. Like that of others, her melancholy derives from separation from the mother, an inability to achieve full satisfaction in relation to any other person in her life, and the sense of shame connected to sexual behavior in her youth, for example. What distinguishes her from others, however, is more compelling. Her use of water imagery to convey a tactile relation to Christ as spiritual and sexual

partner marks her writing as an extraordinary human experience and a valuable aesthetic object. Sylvia writes:

Finally, water puts out the fire of deadly desire, since the pleasure of quenched thirst is “relief,” protecting the worshiper from “the desire to possess God”—from sexual and therefore mortal passion: “an arousal that kills”—in order to bring one to a “*jouissance*” described as a release from tension. Love, which this last form of water transforms, destroys the experimenting worshiper, leaves her without defenses or initiative, offered up and passive, without an “I.” Here, Teresa refers to herself in the third person by a “she” rid of “desires” and “demons,” the ecstasy outside of oneself “is a kidnapping.” But, since nothing is simple in this labyrinthine fiction of multiple detours and returns, desires continue to cause pain—gentle pain, since it comes from Him, though one can’t be too sure, since “the demon’s devices” are unpredictable. The thirst for God itself, because of its violence, is a “desire” threatened by “delirium.” Such was the delirium of that hermit who threw himself in the water at the bottom of the well to see God without suspecting that the demon had lured him there (*Ch. 19:13*).¹⁹

This tactile relation is both ecstatic and painful, in part because she must punish herself in order to feel that she deserves pleasure. The relation is painful, too, to the extent that she loses her sense of self for a time before she is able to transform the loss of self into thought. The fact that Teresa denies knowledge of water imagery in the chivalric novels she knows so well also seems to be a component of that loss of self and/or a form of self-punishment. Finally, the bouts of epilepsy, while undeniably genetic to some extent, give physical form to a lack of identity, that is, they are a symptom of her psychic malaise.

In conclusion, *Teresa, My Love*, a substantial contribution to literary studies, provides evidence of the influence of Catholic mysticism in modernist texts both as aesthetic objects and as models for ethical behavior beyond the literary. Given the growing visibility of her thought across national borders and disciplines, Kristeva’s impact in this volume is likely to make itself felt in other important debates, for instance, on women and parenting and women and Islam at a time when it has become the most widely practiced religion in France.

¹ Julia Kristeva, *Thérèse mon amour: Thérèse d'Avila* Paris (Fayard, 2008). All page numbers to *Thérèse* are to this edition. The English translations of passages are mine.

² See Kathleen O'Grady's "The Tower and the Chalice," in *Feminist Theology* 10 (2002): 40-60.

³ See my *Language and Politics in Julia Kristeva: Literature, Art, Therapy* (New York: SUNY Press, 2006); see also Kristeva's "A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 293, 296.

⁴ Kristeva, *Thérèse mon amour*, 78. All translations of *Thérèse* here are my own and references are to the French original.

⁵ See Paul Ricoeur, "The Question of Proof in Freud's Psychoanalytic Writings," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Works* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), originally published in 1977, 197-98; see also Kelly Oliver's "Introduction" to *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing* (New York & London: Routledge, 1993), 17; and Noëlle McAfee, *Julia Kristeva* (New York & London: Routledge, 2004), 124.

⁶ Kristeva, *Thérèse mon amour*, 19.

⁷ Kristeva, *Thérèse mon amour*, 94.

⁸ My translation of the French version of Teresa's *Life* (*Vie*, 18:10-13), which Kristeva quotes on page 104 of *Thérèse*.

⁹ See Marie-Odile Métral's review of *Thérèse, mon amour* in *Esprit*, 8-9 (August, 2008), 271.

¹⁰ See my discussion of Gayatri Spivak's critique of Kristeva, 2006.

¹¹ See *Thérèse mon amour*, 28; see also Kto's interview with Kristeva, June 26, 2008. <http://www.kristeva.fr/video.html>.

¹² Kristeva, *Thérèse mon amour*, 307; 311.

¹³ See my discussion of the problem of stereotyping and masochism including Jacqueline Rose's take on this problem, 2006.

¹⁴ Julia Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), originally published in Italian translation in 2006 and in French in 2007.

¹⁵ I am indebted to Maria Margaroni for her helpful comments on masochism in a draft of this essay.

¹⁶ Kristeva, *Thérèse mon amour*, 37-38.

¹⁷ Kristeva, *Thérèse mon amour*, 49.

¹⁸ Kristeva, *Thérèse mon amour*, 82-83.

¹⁹ Kristeva, *Thérèse mon amour*, 125.