

Personal history of the nun Teresa of Jesus*

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Essay

SUMMARY

This book is classified according to its subject matter "Mystic life and psychopathology" and to its methodological approach in "Psychohistory" or "Personal history". Nobody knew until the 20th century that the Saint nun Teresa of Jesus came from a Jewish family. As a little and young girl she was a victim of supernatural and inquisitorial terror and of a serious depressive disorder associated with hysterical comorbidity of psychomotor type.

At the age of 40, this nun became the most important representative of the Spanish mysticism: a mysticism of passion illustrated with hallucinatory fantasies.

Her Christian existential development was influenced by these factors: the disparity between her parents, her cyclothymic temperament, the self repression of her Hebrew lineage, and a strong erotic tendency.

Key Words: Saint Teresa, psychohistory, mysticism, psychopathology.

RESUMEN

Este libro se cataloga por su temática en "La vida mística y la psicopatología" y por su enfoque metodológico en "La psicohistoria" o "La historia personal". Nadie supo hasta el siglo XX que la santa monja Teresa de Jesús procedía de una familia judía. Niña y joven, fue víctima del terror sobrenatural e inquisitorial y de un grave trastorno depresivo combinado con comorbilidad histérica de tipo psicomotor.

A los 40 años la monja se convirtió en la representante número uno del misticismo español: un misticismo de pasión ilustrado con fantasías alucinadas.

Su desarrollo existencial cristiano estuvo sometido a la influencia de estos factores: la disparidad entre sus padres, el temperamento ciclotímico, la autorrepresión de su linaje hebreo y una fuerte tendencia erótica.

Palabras clave: Santa Teresa, psicohistoria, misticismo, psicopatología.

I. THE COVER

The book cover represents a great artistic and symbolic aspect developed by the editorial team. It shows the only nun Teresa of Jesus' original portrait, which is still preserved today. It was painted by Italian Discalced Carmelite Brother Juan de la Misericordia, disciple of famous Spanish painter Alonso Sánchez de Coello. In that time Mother Teresa was in Seville and was 61 years old, six years before her death. She was not very excited with this portrait judging by her ironic reproach: "May God forgive you, Brother Juan. You've already painted me, but ugly and bleary-eyed".

II. CLASSIFICATION OF THE MONOGRAPH AND PERSONAL BACKGROUND

This monographic work dedicated to Saint Teresa of Jesus, according to the master of psychohistory, Mr. Gregorio Marañón ("the most important woman of her time"), and regarding its subject matter is classified within the area of

knowledge of mysticism and psychopathology; more precisely expressed: in the *phenomenology of mystic life and psychopathology* sector.

The mystic consciousness distinguishes itself by its organization concerning a mental attitude of reverence for mystery (*mysticon*, in Greek, means mystery). In accordance with the theme of mystery –always spiritual of course– there is a strong division of mysticism into a religious and a secular side, and in turn religious mysticism is subdivided in theistic and deistic. Obviously, Saint Teresa's mysticism was the Spanish archetype of theistic mysticism, thus it was the sacred mysticism devoted to the image of God and overloaded with Hispanic passion.

As for its methodological approach, this monograph belongs to the dominion of *psychohistory*, understood as a branch of history devoted to the comprehensive study of the character, but not as he/she emerges in society but as in person and why he/she is as he/she is. The methodological approach of psychohistory is, therefore, the understanding of the character through the establishment of sense connections linking the story of his/her life. With this approach, I

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consider that the most adequate name for this branch of history is *personal history*, a term I have been preferably using in my books.

In both territories, through the knowledge area of mysticism and psychopathology as well as the methodological approach of personal history, I have several personal bibliographical backgrounds I am delighted to briefly state hereby in order to prove my longstanding interest regarding both aspects.

Here are my works in the field of phenomenology of mystic life, in chronological order:

1. "Estampas de estigmatizados místicos" (Hallmarks of Mystic Stigmatized). *Anales de la Real Academia Nacional de Medicina* (Annals of the National Royal Academy of Medicine), 1984; 150: 355-373.
2. "La nuit dans la vie et l'œuvre de Saint Jean de la Croix". *Actualités psychiatriques* (Paris), 1988;3:21-26.
3. Estigmas, levitaciones y éxtasis (Stigmas, Levitations and Ecstasy). Temas de Hoy. Madrid, 1983; 306 pages.
4. "Inteligencia, Libertad y Santidad" ("Intelligence, Liberty and Holiness"). Dolentium Hominum (Vatican), 1999;19,3:118-129.

I also have published some works related to psychohistory or personal history:

1. *El enigma Goya. La personalidad de Goya y su pintura tenebrosa* (Goya's Enigma. Goya's personality and his gloomy painting). Fondo de Cultura Económica. Mexico/Madrid, 1999, 290 pages (2nd. Edition, 2003).
2. *Historia personal de los Austrias españoles* (Personal History of the Spanish Austrias). Fondo de Cultura Económica. Mexico/Madrid, 2000. 286 pages. (3rd. Edition 2012).
3. *Historia personal de don Santiago Ramón y Cajal* (Personal History of Mr. Santiago Ramón y Cajal). In: Schüller (editor): Santiago Ramón y Cajal. Instituto de España. Madrid, 2007, p 25-63.
4. *Historia personal abreviada de Santiago Ramón y Cajal* (Brief Personal History of Santiago Ramón y Cajal). In: Garrido et al. (coordinators): *El legado filosófico español e hispanoamericano del siglo XX* (The Spanish and Spanish American Philosophical Heritage of the 20th Century). Cátedra. Madrid, 2009, p 198-203.

III. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE BOOK

This monograph includes eight parts or eight books (as the ancient Greeks observed): an introduction, a general index, an index of names, a bibliography list and eight illustrations. In all 240 pages.

Each part or book comprises an oscillating number of chapters, between five or six, with a total of forty-two chapters and its group is in line with the existentialist paradigm. Now, I am going to describe briefly each part.

The book starts with "The Turbulent Religious Environment of Santa Teresa," describing the different types of religious environments that nun Teresa of Jesus was related to, as well as a part devoted to the Spanish Inquisition.

It is worth emphasizing some information about the creation of the Spanish Inquisition. In 1478, when the so-called *New Spanish Inquisition* was introduced by papal bull of Pope Sixtus IV, the Sacred Office courts managed by bishops or by the Pope had been operating about three hundred years in several European countries. The Spanish Inquisition differentiated itself from the medieval Inquisition in that the former had a double functional nature, constituting not only a religious but also a political institution. Further we will see how Saint Teresa was often placed in the eye of the inquisitorial storm. This first part concludes with a chapter about witches, represented on the one hand as an invention of religious fanatics and on the other as the imaginary identity induced over them after the effect of drugs smeared on the mucous membranes.

The second part, "The Teresa de Ahumada's Jewish-convert Family", starts with a punishment inflicted by the Inquisition of Toledo to Saint Teresa's grandfather —Juan Sánchez de Toledo— after committing Crypto-Judaism. As a result of this public humiliation the family moved to Ávila, where, after some years later, Saint Teresa's father and siblings started litigation for protection and then compensate their social credit with the ejecutoria de hidalguía (recognition of the social status of a person). Such litigation that suffered several alternatives, throughout three years, deeply traumatized Teresa when she was a little girl —between four and seven years of age—, with waves of terror to hell and the Inquisition.

The deep disparity between the ways of being of her parents was reflected on her in the construction of antagonistic psychic instances: on the one hand an ironic ideal ego —what she liked to do— influenced by her mother, in a strong contrast with the inflexible super-ego —what she could not do— and the rigorous ego ideal —what she was allowed to do—, each formation given by her father. The tense dialectics registered between both maternal and paternal antagonistic psychic fronts conclude within her teenage years with the imposition of the paternal image over the maternal, but not without having made the first step towards mental dissociation. Such dissociative trend was definitively consolidated with the setting up of the psychic self-repression mechanism in order to exclude from the field of awareness her Jewish family background.

The third part, "Teresa's Childhood and Adolescence", starts highlighting how our protagonist, at the beginning of her school-going age, reacted to the strong family distress caused by judicial litigation, thus substituting playful interests for family concerns. Therefore, she presented a false early maturity that hid her childhood forever. Then, at the age of six or seven, after fleeing from home in pursuit of the religious martyrdom and when, as if being a young adult,

she started feeling invaded by guilt and defenseless feelings related to her joining to the Jewish family lineage, lived at that time as an obstacle to be the best possible Christian and as a risk to fall into the horrifying net of the Sacred Office.

Against this unbearable terror and guilt constellation, the girl – a young adult – carried out a defensive strategy divided into an external and an internal aspect: externally her defensive resource was her blind subjection to the confessor's or spiritual director's criterion, personnel selected by her among the high clergy or among the consultants of the Inquisition; while internally her defense consists in excluding her Jewish or Jewish-convert family bonds from the field of awareness, using the intrapsychic self-repression mechanism, psychological defense of the children's Ego or weak Ego.

Since then, Teresa de Ahumada, as she liked to call herself for a long time, lived not only ignorant of the nature of her lineage but as if there were no Jewish-converts inhabiting the Iberian Peninsula. However, the suppressed subject in the unconscious, as it was overloaded with emotional pressure, continued issuing significant signs of its attraction for Jewish culture.

A problem that cannot be fully neutralized by the repressive mechanism constitutes a complex for depth psychology. In the case of Saint of Ávila it was a Judaism complex. Her secretiveness towards this topic was such that none of her contemporaries could even suspect that she was from a Jewish or Jewish-convert family, information that remained hidden until the middle of the 20th century.

The tranquility that she had thanks to the self repression mechanism paid the high price for reinforcing her dissociated or fragmented mental functioning, dissociation that opened the door to the irruption of hysterical phenomena.

The fourth part, "The Young Melancholic Nun", starts with the young Teresa de Ahumada's entrance to La Encarnación convent. The vivid Christian devotion of the new nun was rapidly frustrated by the frivolous and festive environment of the convent, after substituting the rigorous Primitive Rule for the comfortable Mitigated Rule. This serious frustration activated her cyclothymic genes until sinking her in a deep depressive disorder, aggravated with strong fibromyalgic pains and complicated with hysterical motor symptomatology. In summary, a clinical picture that kept her in a disabled status during almost two decades. A long dark lapse of her life in which she was mostly in bed or in the infirmary.

Today, her depressive disorder, generated with the cyclothymic temperament aspect, is classified as a bipolar disorder type II, that is as a disease attributed to the bipolar spectrum. On the other hand, her depressive clinical picture was tetradimensional or complete, since it involved the four dimensions known as the depressed mood, anergy or lack of action impulse, lack of communication with others and disharmony of sleep and feeding patterns. The target

symptom of her depressive disorder was the feeling of guilt. Several passages of her *Libro de la vida* (*Book of Life*) include a fully detailed list of the symptoms, extended to the four dimensions.

I refer the interested reader to my book: "Las cuatro dimensiones del enfermo depresivo" (The Four Dimensions of the Depressive Sick Person). Instituto de España. Madrid, 2009.

The fine insight of the nun when connecting pain and tiredness causes admiration, in anticipation of almost five centuries to the modern scientific thesis of associating fibromyalgic pains and chronic fatigue.

The depressive syndrome has a special trend to be complicated with hysterical symptomatology in young women, which occurred to young nun Teresa, facilitated by the hysterical or dissociative disposition generated by the antagonism between her parents and consolidated with the handling of the self repressive psychic defense. The hysterical layer of her melancholic complaint was distributed between the incidence of recurring fainting and the loss of motor ability, to the degree of not being able to stand or walk.

Thus, in the beginning, Saint Teresa's hysteria relied on a psychomotor symptomatology – years later her mysticism was also illustrated with dissociative or hysterical fantasies. It is important to specify, since this issue is very sensitive and controversial: nun Teresa of Ávila had a hysterical pathology, but strictly speaking she was not a hysterical woman, in the sense that she had a personality absorbed by the necessity to attract attention or win the respect of others, having a seduction behavior or inspiring compassion. Then it is clear that nun Teresa of Jesus was neither a seducer nor beggar of esteem.

Saying that she had a hysterical pathology but that she was not a hysterical person is a very coherent judgment if it is considered that between hysterical pathology and the hysterical way of being there is little affinity. Therefore, most of the times the sensorimotor or hysterical psychic symptomatology is fruitful in the area of a non-hysterical personality not even histrionic.

The fifth part, "The Old Nun Teresa of Jesus: Mystic and Visionary", starts with the transmutation of the invalid depressive sick nun within a theist mystic model, bestowed with strong visionary ecstasies and assiduous experiences of communication with God, when she was turning forty years of age. She attributed this kind of "spiritual conversion and healing" to the intercession of Saint Joseph under Jesus' protection. A similar personal metamorphosis was caused from her identification with an idealized image of suffering Jesus, that she considered him as her husband, the Man-God.

Her ecstasies were exclusively reflected internally through an outburst of religious-themed hallucinatory emotions and experiences, with a corporal attitude confined to immobility. They were real ecstatic transports lived in devotion and austerity, free of external and spectacular characteristics, in form of dramatic attitudes and contortions that

are common of ecstatic or pseudo-ecstatic sequences made by the illuminated nuns for contemplating others.

The acute self-description of the personal mystic experiences offered in her books allows identifying, in the light of the phenomenology, her common spectrum in the form of desiderative or threatening hallucinatory fantasies lived with an evident conviction of reality, overloaded by a deep emotional upheaval and encouraged by the union with God experience. Thus, I am inclined to believe that the Saint Teresa's mystic world was an authentic mysticism, with an emotional Spanish style, illustrated with the massive presence of dissociated or hysterical imaginative experiences lived with a sense of reality.

A hallucinatory reality that was distributed, according to her vital mood, between the threatening appearance of demons and the communication with God overloaded with happiness not only in herself but because this involved the dispelling of her collection of fears of hell, the Inquisition or her confessors.

The only miraculous fact that Saint Teresa confessed that she did was the ascension into heaven of the soul of a certain loved one. However, she did not participated in the most outstanding mystic or pseudo-mystic phenomena scattered among prodigy, miracle and fraud, such as prolonged fasting, levitation and skin stigmas.

The sixth part, "The Very Old Mother Teresa of Jesus; Reformist and Founder", narrates how Mother Teresa –at 48 years old – started a new biographical course as Christian reformist devoted to founding convents organized according to the severe Primitive Rule. Such dedication to an unusual activity is set within an abrupt cyclothymic rise of vital tone.

The attempt to resurrect the austere Primitive Rule caused alarm among the Discalced Carmelites ruled by the rested Mitigated Rule. On this conflict there was an outbreak between the Calced and the Discalced Carmelites. The clash concluded with the papal recognition of the Discalced Carmelites as a separate province, an acclaimed victory of nun Teresa of Jesus, mostly negotiated through her personal and epistolary relationship with King Philip II.

Throughout her life confessors –with some important exceptions – were a nightmare for her, which almost exceeded the terror caused by the devil. In her old age, at 60 years old, something unusual took place: nun Teresa de Jesus' mind was captivated by the meeting with Father Jerónimo Gracián. Her erotic dimension, until then confined to a sublimated or symbolic mode within the spiritual sphere as "wife of Jesus", was globalized while being spread not only to her biography, in the form of her fascination for Father Gracián, but as a recurring motif of her books and poems.

Her most eloquent literary eroticism was represented by couple love, central theme of *Conceptos del amor de Dios* (*Concepts of the Love of God*), written in 1566 under the influence of *El cantar de los cantares* (Song of Songs), of King Salomon (10th century BC).

The nun's love for Father Gracián was conveyed in expressions transmitted by mail as "my Paul" or "my Elisha", Jewish characters' nicknames, or describing him as the deposit of her love or as an angel. The absences of Father Gracián due to more frequent trips to Seville caused her recurrent jealousy against the convent's Mother Superior.

Her refusal for appreciating people in accordance with their lineage, almost as if it was a disguise, lead her to re-serve a chapel of the Toledo's convent for the tomb of a rich man who was not a knight, against the norm. She then mentioned that God told her "how poorly these lineages would do to the case under the judgment of God". In her privacy Mother Teresa never assimilated why Jewish-convert identity could be an obstacle to become the best possible Christian nun, a fact that allowed her to express, without any regrets, her cultural Jewishphilia.

The seventh part, "The Writer and Poetess Mother Teresa", informs about the Saint Teresa's literary activities included in ten books and a collection of thirty poems. She wrote most of her books at the request of the confessor on call, which was not an impediment for her to publish not even one while she was alive. Her literary style was subject to simplicity and spontaneity. She wrote as she talked. Her main literary merit was having bequeathed her psychic self-analysis for posterity. As proof of her hidden link with Jewish culture, quotes of basic facts and characters of the Jewish tradition are piled up in her books. The most praised and quoted were David, Moses and Salomon.

The subject-matter of her collection of poems includes mystic, hagiographic, erotic and festive or children verses. Among the erotic poems stand out *Yo toda me entregué y dí (I Committed Myself Fully)*, organized around this stanza:

"I committed myself fully,
In such a way I have been transformed,
That my Beloved is for me
And I am for my Beloved".

Among her unskillful and understanding confessors to whom, on more than one occasion, she confessed to have feared more than the devil, Domingo Báñez, a Dominican priest and consultant of the Inquisition, was distinguished because of his disloyalty and his ignoble lies, an unmasked attitude for the first time in this monographic work.

After talking about Saint Teresa's life I would like to interpret her identity as a type of reincarnation of the primitive Christians at that time called Judeo-Christians until Saint Paul's preaching open to gentiles. The Teresian conscience was a synthesis of her sincere Christian fervor and her sparked enthusiasm for Jewish cultural tradition.

The last part, "Intervention of the Spanish Inquisition in the life of nun Teresa of Jesus". The Sacred Office was introduced precociously in the life of the nun of Ávila under the form of a family terror shadow that hovered over her childhood and never abandoned her. Her character was modeled

under the influence of a grandfather punished for being a clandestine Jew and of a humiliated Jewish-convert family.

The inquisitorial shadow of family terror then took a threatening importance against the nun's water line; thus, the accusation began to spread by episodes to her basic personal activities: she was accused for being illuminated as a mystic, for being Erasmist as a writer, for being insubordinate or rebellious as a convent founder, for being a witch as a mistress of novices and nuns or for being dishonest as a Father Gracián's confidante.

The inquisitorial pursuit reached its climax in Seville during the last years of her life. It was during this period that the nun Teresa of Jesus was more frightened and confused. Her fate was subject to incessant rumors. Among the friars it was said that she would end burned by the Inquisition.

If nun Teresa of Jesus was saved from dying in the pyre, it was due to her identification with the potential aggressor in the form of a total subordination to the confessor or spiritual director selected among the high clergy and the consultants of the Inquisition, a strategy supported with an immaculate religious behavior and the strength of her resilient personality.

It is very spread that –awarded posthumously– she was beatified, canonized and appointed the first doctor of the Church. What has scarcely been gone around is that the appointment of co-patroness of Spain was refused to her twice.

IV. SHORT ESSAY

Girl; tormented by the terror of hell or the Inquisition. Adolescent; with a slight touch of mundane frivolity. Young adult, nun seized by a serious depressive upheaval, accompanied by hysterical psychomotor symptomatology. Old; a paradigmatic theist mystic and writer of ten books and a series of poems. Very old; convent founder according to the Primitive Rule and creator of a new religious order (death at the age of 67).

The five stages mentioned of Saint Teresa's life are outlined by a sense connection revealed in this book.

Teresa de Ahumada, as she liked to call herself in the first stage of her life, was from childhood a resigned and innocent victim after having born in the bosom of a Jewish-convert family living within a Christian social context. Her contemporaries did not know her Jewish origin, information that was not of public knowledge until the middle of last century. A defensive psychic resource as effective as the intrapsychic self-repression allowed her to live putting aside the Judaic nature of her lineage, even as if there were no Jewish-converts inhabiting the Iberian Peninsula.

Although she diverged radically from the faith of the religion of Moses since it hindered the fervent Christian faith and it was a powerful motive to fall prey into the hands of the Sacred Office, she never gave up completely the fact of

feeling Hebrew. She showed this identifying feature in her elective affinity to keep an empathetic relationship with Jewish merchants and in her pleased attraction for including in her writings characters and facts of the Jewish biblical culture. This ambivalent attitude towards the ethno-religious family status is hereby defined as the "complex of Judaism".

Saint Teresa was also a victim of the undisciplined and festive atmosphere prevailing in the La Encarnación convent, where she professed as a nun and where she lived most of her life. The deep vocational frustration borne by nun Teresa of Jesus in such an environment activated her cyclothymic genes and then sank her in a deep depressive disorder dominated with fibromyalgic pains and combined with a hysterical motor disability that kept her in bed or hospitalized approximately twenty years.

On the eve of turning 40 years old, Mother Teresa of Jesus took a giant leap forward: the leap of a victim from terror, frustration and pathology to an archetypical Spanish mystic theist, bestowed with visionary sacred ecstasies and assiduous experiences that she felt she was in communication with God. Then she entered into the happiest stage of her life. She even felt the strength to start writing books, almost all of them under the influence of her confessors, although she was not allowed to publish a single book.

The key of the personal history of nun Teresa of Jesus lies in the metamorphosis from being an innocent young victim of the Jewish-convert family status and the melancholic disorder to becoming a real Spanish mystic, author of ten books and religious reformist who was supported by God. Her Spanish mystic status is proved by her emotional upheaval that opposes the Meister Eckhart's German mysticism, extolled by the detachment of things and by serenity, a term interpreted by Heidegger as *Gelassenheit*, which means calmness or placidity.

No, the Teresian head of the Spanish mysticism was never calm or placid but free, a point to which we shall return later. Likewise, its exuberant mysticism had abundant illustrations in the form of hallucinatory sacred fantasies, experiences analyzed in this book from such a precise and deep self-description offered by her.

From nun Teresa of Jesus' juvenile period her reactions involved a cyclothymic temperament through oscillations of vital tone that were spontaneous or induced between the excited hyperactivity and the pessimistic withdrawal. As mentioned before, her cyclothymic temperament was not only the personal factor that caused her depressive collapse, but the individual syntonic basis that led her to be associated with the erotic field.

For a long time Teresian eroticism was sublimated in the spiritual field, thus she assumed the role of "wife of Jesus". The globalization of the eroticism in the last third of her life was an extraordinary event, since it was spread in the form of biographical experiences and of a wide list of literary elements in prose and verse. The late avalanche of

biographical erotic experiences sprouted in her from her magnetized dazzle caused by the relation relationship with Father Jerónimo Gracián. Among her literary erotic resources we may emphasize the couple passion of love as the argument of her work *Conceptos del amor de Dios* (*Concepts of the Love of God*), a book wrote on her own initiative at the age of 51 under the influence of *El cantar de los cantares* (*Song of Songs*), of King Salomon (10th century BC).

The Holy Faith Court considered her as suspect of enlightenment, Erasmism, dishonesty or witchcraft. If nun Teresa of Jesus was not locked up in an inquisitorial dungeon –although her passing imprisonment in Seville cannot be ruled out– it was because of the alliance of her admirable resilient mood with the protection given by her selection of confessor or spiritual director among the high clergy and the consultants of the Inquisition. This kind of “identification with the persecutor”, that is to say with the ecclesial characters –reason of her terror since childhood–, granted her a very effective protection against major inquisitorial evils.

I do not want to conclude this brief essay, based on my book, without mentioning that the vital inflection experienced by nun Teresa of Jesus was so intense and categorical when she was on the eve of 40 years of age, that the term metamorphosis –even if we refer to the Jewish writer to discuss “*The*

Post Office Girl”– falls short and demands the complementary extension with the conquest of personal freedom that, since then, allowed her to become master of her own and of her actions. Maybe our Discalced Carmelite nun was the first Spanish woman who conquered internal freedom by herself, having a serious sense of moral accountability, thus from being a creature mistreated by life she became a creature who built her life.

Under the psychohistorical microscope represented by psychic understanding, Mother Teresa of Jesus’ image enlarges as a leader of personal freedom, an award that could not even be snatched by the literature genius: Mr. Francisco de Quevedo, who, on the other hand, prevented her to be posthumously appointed co-patroness of Spain accompanying Apostle Santiago.

Finally, I must confess to the intransigents and fanatics, without excluding the Agelasts*, my testimony for being a defendant of the worst sin an author may suffer from, to quote Chesterton: “the unpardonable sin of not wanting to be forgiven”.

* The word “Agelast” is a French neologism invented by François Rabelais, avant-garde French writer of picaresque novel. Greek word that means “the one who does not laugh lacks sense of humor”.

Declaration of conflict interest: None