

Chapter 78

Appreciation of the ecstasy of Santa Teresa

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ABSTRACT

The Ecstasy of Santa Teresa or the Transverberation of Santa Teresa concerns a sculpture by Gian Lorenzo

Bernini, which represents the mystical experience of Saint Teresa of Ávila pierced by an arrow of divine love wielded by an angel, assuming itself as one of the greatest masterpieces of the baroque style.

This review aims to explore and synthesize the work of *Éxtase de Santa Teresa* and, at the same time, present a reflection from a clinical point of view, through a framework with the field of psychoanalysis. A bibliographic search was carried out to be able to reflect and, above all, raise questions, in a work as rich in symbolism as it is in beauty.

Keywords: Ecstasy, Psychoanalysis, Santa Teresa.

1 INTRODUCTION

Who was Santa Teresa?

Santa Teresa de Jesus was born in Ávila on March 28, 1515. Her parents had a comfortable economic situation due to land ownership and trade. She showed descent from Jewish converts on her father's side. She was a 16th-century Carmelite nun, mystic and Catholic saint. She became important for her works on the contemplative and spiritual life and her action during the Counter-Reformation. She was also the founder of the Order of Discalced Carmelites during the time of the Counter-Reformation. She founded 32 convents/monasteries and produced numerous literary works.

Despite the opposition imposed by her father, Santa Teresa 1535 entered the Carmelite convent of Encarnação de Ávila, in 1536 she took the habit and in 1537 she professed.

Years later, an illness appeared that accompanied her until 1542 (the year in which a spiritual crisis began that lasted until Lent 1554). In 1560 she resolved to undertake the reform of her Order and as such was met with strong opposition from the outset.

She died on October 4, 1582, a victim of illness in the Alba de Tormes convent. In the year 1622, she was canonized and in the year 1970, she was appointed Doctor of the Church by Pope Paul IV.

2 CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE WORK

The work entitled "Êxtase de Santa Teresa" is perhaps Bernini's most sensual creation¹ and its seemingly physical nature is now recognized in research textbooks (Bolland, 2015). Bernini's statue known as "Êxtase de Santa Teresa" is explained as a representation of the ecstasy she experienced when her heart was pierced.² In her autobiography (an episode she describes in her "Livro da Vida") St. Teresa refers to the situation of the piercing of her heart as a real impulse and a vision, while in her spiritual relationships, she calls this feat prayer. The piercing of the heart is assumed to be an affliction of the soul that leaves no physical impression. However, St. Teresa never mentions pain as part of ecstasy (Warma, 1984).

Because of Bernini's vast knowledge of the stories³ of Santa Teresa, he created an altarpiece that is as enigmatic as it is beautiful. It took Bernini and his collaborators five years to complete the work, but it was finally revealed in the summer of 1652. This sculpture concerns a central piece of the great funerary chapel that has the church's transept to its left (Nobus, 2015).

In this work, the two central sculptural figures, the fainting nun and the angel with the spear derive from an episode described by Teresa of Ávila. Santa Teresa is depicted in the agony of her most famous ecstatic vision - the so-called transverberation⁴- in which an angel (with a large spear with an iron point that seems to contain fire) appears and pierces his heart repeatedly with an arrow. The Saint appears reclining softly on a cloud, apparently protected from total collapse by that angel who clings to the fold of a curtain (this curtain may allude to the ardor of divine love). Santa Teresa seems quite disconnected from the external and sensual world. On her right side appears a beautiful seraph who represents divine love (Bolland, 2015; Lavin, 1980; Warma, 1984). As additional elements, there is a golden representation of rays of light behind and natural light above the group (traditionally associated with God) and a Holy Spirit painted on the vault of the chapel itself (which represents a third, so to speak, God) (Bolland, 2015).

Santa Teresa's pose is full of tension because it looks like she is moving forwards and backward simultaneously, her body is in spasm, and she doesn't have the strength to keep her head straight, so takes on additional weight. Also in his feet and hands, the body tension is felt, the left hand is hanging at the side of the body, but it is not relaxed. It is not possible to determine if her arm is falling to the side or if she is lifting it. Her right hand appears to be resting on her lap. At first glance, the left foot appears to be relaxed, but when viewed further, the foot is in a state of spasm which causes her toes to move upwards. The right foot, on the other hand, does not rest on the cloud, but pushes against it and encounters resistance, as if the cloud represented a solid and hard mass. Her legs are pulled into her body. The whole body does not

¹ Eminent Italian Baroque artist who worked mainly in the city of Rome. He distinguished himself as a sculptor and architect, although he was also a painter, draftsman, scenographer, and creator of pyrotechnic shows. He applied to his sculptures the use of elongated bodies, expressive gestures, and simpler but more emotional expressions.

² The Capella Cornaro in Sta. Maria della Vittoria contains the: "Wonderful group of Saint Teresa and the Angel who pierces the heart of the Saint with the arrow of divine love while she is in the transport of the sweetest ecstasy."

³ Teresa's writings are rich, highly personal, self-deprecating, and sometimes self-contradictory. Although important for the overall meaning of the chapel, they are assumed to be less useful for understanding the figurative language used by Bernini in his work.

⁴ Term generally used to indicate "golpe" ou "perfuração".

contract, neither the foot nor the arm can be moved. The angel's curtain, an element also present in this work, shows a movement backward, which indicates that he took the arrow from Saint Teresa's heart at least once and that he is about to repeat this action. The "flaming" folds of Santa Teresa's clothes obscure her body and seem to consume it (Warma, 1984). Furthermore, her eyes are half-closed under lead, the lids drooping and rolled back almost completely, so that the iris is only visible as a faint shadow on the upper edge of the white eye socket. This depression around the eye further strengthens the idea that the person depicted is a fragile woman who has been shaken by a major crisis. Her nostrils seem to quiver, and her mouth is open convulsively, not in a scream, but just a deep moan. The eyelids, nostrils, and mouth are well-cut to create a long shadow effect (Weibel, 1976). The angel's smile is explained by the fact that he observed a piece of Saint Teresa's breast (Lalande, 1769).

Given that the sculpture is located in a space that should have been a mortuary chapel, death is assumed as a general theme. According to Lavin⁵, when Bernini chooses to portray Saint Teresa in a state of levitation, he was representing the Eucharist. Lavin further emphasizes that Saint Teresa frequently experienced ecstasy at her religious services (Warma, 1984).

Who can best explain her ecstasy and visions is Santa Teresa. In this sense, and going back in time, Saint Teresa had associated death and the nuptials with ecstasy in her works, when she refers to ecstasy as a time when: "(..) the soul is entirely dead to the world (..) the union comes from heavenly love and is part of the ecstatic experience in which one rises to God and lives with him." According to Santa Teresa, a person during the state of ecstasy remains in the same position as before but is further removed from the normal human condition (becomes incapable of seeing things of the earthly world or perceiving earthly things), assuming it as a central fact. During this state, the person is likely unable to move and the body feels light. Even if the senses do not function normally, it is still possible to hear and read, even if vaguely. At the height of ecstasy, which is not always achieved, all senses are lost as a result of intimate union with God. At that time, the eyes are closed, although they can open occasionally (but they cannot see anything). The heartbeat has slowed considerably, the body temperature drops and the body is sometimes quite cold; bones can become disjointed, legs and arms become rigid, and fists clench. Sometimes the hands get very cold and the fingers are extended. In this way, as the strength of the soul increases, the strength of the body decreases (Warma, 1984).

In other words, for Santa Teresa, ecstasy translates into: "*(..) no sense of anything other than pleasure, without any knowledge of what is being enjoyed. The soul has realized that it is enjoying something good which contains all good things together, but it cannot understand that good thing. All the senses are filled with this joy, so that none of them are free to act in any way, either externally or internally. Earlier, as I said, the senses could give some indication of the great joy they feel. But now the soul enjoys incomparably more and has even less power to show it. For there is no more power in the body - and the*

⁵ Art historian of painting, sculpture, and architecture from Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque, and Modern Antiquity.

soul has none - by which this joy can be imparted." This ecstatic condition lasts for a very short period, just a few seconds (Warma, 1984).

All true ecstasy is an expression of the need to see God, to live in God, and to be transformed into God. Ecstasy serves as a kind of promising note for future bliss, assuming itself as an escape from the soul, an upward movement (Bolland, 2015). Ecstasy translates into a way of thinking about the sexuality of thought, being understood as an abstracted sexual union with God or as a postponed metaphor or allusive to orgasm. Ecstasy does not suspend, it is suspension, it has no temporality, and it is self as spatial. It has come to be associated with women, relationships with God, and an affirmative post-religious vitalism with pain and sacrifice. Some relate masochism and ecstasy, but masochism is human sexuality, while ecstasy is inhuman (MacCormack, 2011).

The opinion of historians, art critics, novelists, philosophers, and men or women of god echoed. On the one hand, some contemplated the work, on the other hand, some expressed anger and dismay at what they considered to be a brazen and sacrilegious depiction of Saint Teresa. In addition, there were still those who rejected Bernini's work, considering it a typical example of the deplorable excesses of baroque art, that is, corruption of aesthetic principles, animated by arrogance and executed with bad taste (Nobus, 2015).

Cornaro⁶ emphasizes that this piece represents a highly theatrical combination of sculpture, painting, and architecture that resulted in a timeless masterpiece, a perfection composed of sublime beauty. Already Charles de Brosse⁷ considered this work as an apotheosis of obscene vulgarity (Nobus, 2015).

Who also made himself heard regarding this work was Lacan⁸. Lacan claimed that in the statue, Saint Teresa was feeling joy. It should be noted that in the French language the term "jouissance" can be associated with a sexual phenomenon. However, it is not possible to assume that Lacan was sure that Santa Teresa was having an orgasm, regardless of what Bernini might have had in mind. But what Lacan recognized, without any doubt, was that in Saint Teresa's facial expression jouissance was present, jouissance that was "beyond the phallus", a supplementary jouissance instead of complementing the phallus, that is, a jouissance that is assumed as asexual but which can also be dominated as "enjoyment of the other." Still according to Lacan, in this work, ecstasy would not be assumed as pre-discursive, nor meta-discursive, but indicative of an alternative discursivity, which is found outside speech and language and which, therefore, can be more evocative than any other. something that words themselves can articulate (Lacan, 1975). In addition, the psychoanalyst Jung hypothesized that the images of Saint Teresa were the primary expression of her internal experiences, and the French psychologist and neurologist Charcot diagnosed the saint as "undeniably hysterical" (Bourgeois, 2010).

⁶ Alvise Cornaro, also known as Luigi, was a Venetian nobleman and patron saint of the arts who was remembered for his *Discorsi* books about the secrets of living long and well with measure and sobriety.

⁷ Count of Tournay, Baron of Montfalcon and Lord Vezins and Preveessin. He was a famous French writer of the 18th century.

⁸ French psychoanalyst who moved towards psychiatry.

There are still those who argue that Bernini's statue offers the transversality of Santa Teresa to eroticized observation. However, if there is eroticism in this work, it is not only due to how the inner state of the saint was visualized by the sculptor but also due to the emphatically theatrical setting that forces the spectator to a certain spatial position, from which he/she is can only escape if it leaves the scene. In other words, whether Santa Teresa's experience is considered through her text or sculpture, it is the position of the observer that will determine her interpretation of what happened (Nobus, 2015). In this sense, life imitates art, so the spectator's relationship with the work and the chapel of which it is part is assumed to be complex (Bolland, 2015).

Looking at Saint Teresa in ecstasy involves looking at the expression on her face, and among the visually captivating elements of the statue, her face is the one that most departs from Saint Teresa's account of her vision in which she didn't mark her facial expression and in which the trace of the statue is unquestionably the element that most distinguish it from all previous representations of the vision of the saint (Nobus, 2015).

In this work, Bernini imagines the absence of Saint Teresa's soul, suggesting that she is alienated from her senses (Bolland, 2015). By transforming Santa Teresa from a homely, elderly nun to a classic beauty ablaze with raw sensual energy, it could be argued that Bernini embraced translational freedoms and focused more on the carnal (Bourgeois, 2010, Call, 1997).

The work may represent Bernini's understanding of the drama of holistic passion (Bourgeois, 2010).

In conclusion, Bernini, through virtuous artistic skills, kept St. Teresa and her ecstasy alive in her for centuries. (Bourgeois, 2010, Warma, 1984).

3 CONCLUSION

Sublimely, Bernini exposes faith, art, and sensuality, perhaps this last envelope of delivery, this time to faith.

Here, in this piece, we feel the beauty of totality, impermeability to the world, exposed in a magnificently hidden way to anyone who doesn't want to see it, since the most important thing is not to look, but to notice. Noticing beyond the marble, seeing beyond the window of the visible, that's how Bernini went beyond the prison with which the Catholic Church sifted morals or morality.

With this work, one travels through time and space, entering the domain of affections, emotions, and the deepest desires, entering the ecstasy of the senses and feeling, of beauty and life, this being the paradox of sacrifice.

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