

Teresa de Cartagena: Agent of Her Own Salvation

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Teresa de Cartagena: Agent of Her Own Salvation*

Teresa de Cartagena, una de las pocas escritoras del siglo XV cuyo nombre conocemos, era de origen converso y vivió la mayor parte de su vida en un convento de Burgos, donde escribió sus dos libros, Arboleda de los enfermos y Admiratio operum Dei. En este artículo se muestra que el forzado aislamiento producto de su sordera la obligó a ser su propio agente de salvación mediante un régimen de actividad intelectual, física y espiritual – del que sus dos libros son fruto – que la alejaba de los vicios a los que la soledad y la ociosidad podían llevarla. Sin un guía espiritual que la orientara, solo a través de sus lecturas y su trabajo espiritual, y utilizando las tribulaciones de la vida diaria, se convierte en el agente de su propia salvación. Al mismo tiempo, sus textos le permitirían ayudar a otros a salvarse.

Between approximately 1453-59, when she became deaf, and 1475-76, when she wrote *Arboleda de los enfermos*, Teresa de Cartagena became her own spiritual guide, reconciling herself to the circumstances of her earthly life, limited by her deafness and her *converso* heritage.¹ As Seidenspinner-Núñez and Kim have put it, “the transforming event in Teresa’s life – and occasion for writing *Arboleda* – was her affliction with deafness” (123). Already in 1976 Alan Deyermond wrote that he believed deafness was “the secret of her creativity” (“Convento” 28). He proposed that Teresa’s family background and education, although necessary preconditions to her writing, did not in themselves explain her taking up the pen.² Based on the work of George Pickering and Edmund Wilson, he suggested that there may have been a direct relationship between her malady and her writing: “I do not suppose that, without her deafness, Teresa would have been incapable of writing books, but I believe that without it, she would not in fact have written them” (“Convento” 28-29). Indeed, in *Arboleda de los enfermos* Teresa writes: “Grand tienpo ha ... que la niebla de tristeza tenporal e humana cubrió los términos de mi beuir e con vn espeso toruellino de angustias

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pasyones me lleuó a vna ynsula que se llama ‘Oprobium hominum et abiecio plebis’³ donde tantos años ha que yo biuo, si vida llamar se puede” (37). In search of consolation that might diminish the sorrow caused by her deafness, Teresa turned to books – beginning with the Psalms, particularly those of David – and found more than she was looking for: a *remedy* for her grief in increased spiritual health.⁴

In this article I argue that forced solitude and withdrawal from a *vita activa* compelled Teresa to become the agent of her own salvation. She accomplished this by 1) occupying herself intellectually, spiritually and physically, thus combating the potential vices associated with loneliness and idleness; 2) becoming her own counsellor and mediator between her earthly being and God, thereby directly improving her spiritual health, and 3) producing “good works,” especially *Arboleda*, which, intended to help others, enhanced the health of her soul and re-established her in the *vita activa*. Somewhat ironically, Teresa’s spiritual journey led her to value this (afflicted) earthly life as the way to her salvation, for she came to see that her deafness allowed her to hear God’s voice (instead of mundane, earthly sounds), which prompted her to work actively toward her own salvation.

Teresa belonged to one of fifteenth-century Spain’s most prominent political, literary and religious families, which, coupled with her upbringing and dedication to a religious life, meant that “her family expected her to hold office at the new [Cistercian] monastery and proactively promoted her candidacy” (Siedenspinner-Núñez and Kim 136). Access to the family libraries and her own admission to having studied “en el studio de Salamanca” (103) point to her preparedness to take on abbatial responsibilities.⁵ Her active life of study, preparation and participation in family and conventual life was brought to an end by deafness; she was now barred from active participation “en este siglo” (141). New monastic duties would be impossible to conduct while suffering from an affliction that made interpersonal relations difficult at best. Thus, Teresa’s isolation prevented her from the Christian *vita activa*, which seems to have been the life she expected to have according to the *Bulario* documents studied by Seidenspinner-Núñez and Kim, and her own account. Teresa’s expression of grief that illness “amortigua las fuerças exteriores e haze al onbre casy ynpotente en las obras de exerçio mundano” (83), and that if a person when healthy “tenía fuerça para grandes cosas,” burdened by illness “hallarse á ynpotente para las pequeñas” (83) corroborates Seidenspinner-Núñez and Kim’s assertion that Teresa was being groomed for a life of action and responsibility. Deaf, Teresa had to find a way to fill her life and give it significance. Her loneliness and her intellect demanded that she reflect (and, one might add, write) on her own circumstances: “[el] entendimiento ... costreñido de propia neçesydad,

recoje en sy mesmo la deliberación de la voluntad con todos ynteriores mouimientos" (111).

Arboleda shows Teresa was acutely aware of her suffering. She also felt humiliated, rejected and looked down upon because of her ailment. She felt anguish in the company of others. When she was with other people she could not but "sentir la desyqual pena que syento al apartarse la razón con el muy razonable tormento que la aflige" (39). She preferred her own company to that of others: "Quando estoy sola, soy aconpañada de mi mesma e de ese pobre sentido que tengo, pero quando en conpañía de otrie me veo, yo soy desanparada del todo, ca nin goço del consorcio o fablas de aquellos, nin de mi mesma me puedo aprouechar" (39). Thus, she preferred to shun the company of others for two reasons, because she was deaf and because the conversations were mundane. Paradoxically, though perhaps not, Teresa was tormented by loneliness – a consequence of her deafness – and she feared that, together with idleness, loneliness would lead her to acquire sinful ways. She stated that "por no dar lugar a estos dos daños, los quales son soledat e vçiosydat, e pues la soledat no puedo apartar de mí, quiero fuir la vçiosydat porque non pueda trabar casamiento con la soledat, ca sería un pelygroso matrimonio" (39).

FIGHTING SOLITUDE AND IDLENESS

To prevent the negative effects of solitude, Teresa focused on the spiritual opportunities it made possible: forced detachment from the worldly led directly to available time and the disposition necessary to work on her spiritual health. To avoid idleness Teresa occupied herself intellectually through study and meditation using reason to understand her circumstances. In time she wrote *Arboleda*, a work in which she explored the tripartite relationship infirmity-patience-virtue, which occupied her physically and indirectly chronicled her own spiritual journey.⁶ At first, destructive solitude, "esta tan esquiva e durable soledat [que] apartar de mí no puedo" (39), caused Teresa "ynteriores conbates y espirituales peligros con muchedumbre de vanos e variables pensamientos" (112). Being in solitude her mind could wander and her thoughts suffer as she struggled with vain desires. What is more, another kind of solitude plagued her: "la soledat penosa de las conversaciones del siglo" (38), where the company of others kept her in a state of painful solitude that did not allow for the progress of her soul. Solitude also led to deep feelings of aloneness and alienation. She felt "despedida de loores humanos" (40), neglected even by loved ones. To illustrate her feelings of alienation she wrote: "Los plaçeres que en en él [mundo] son del todo nos haborresçen, la salut nos desampara, los amigos nos oluidan, los parientes se enojan, e avn la propia madre se enoja con la hija enferma, e el padre aborresçe al hijo que con continuas dolencias le ocupare la posada" (63). Hence, Teresa wanted to make herself agreeable to God ("a Este sólo deseando

aplazer en todos mis auctos" [39]), and love only Him who had blessed her with infirmity: "Este sólo es aquel que no se enoja con nuestras pasyones. Este es que sana nuestras enfermedades ... Pues a Este busquemos con feruoroso deseo los que de anbre de salut corporal morimos en esta tierra estrangera" (63). To do this Teresa had to find how to overcome the adverse effects of *soledad*.

To fight solitude Teresa recast it as a helpful aspect of her "new life." She did this in two ways: by re-labelling solitude as "kind" and by recognizing that it provided the necessary time to work toward salvation. She compared the negative effects of deafness on earthly life to its beneficial effects on the spiritual life: "Quando miro esta mi pasión en los temporales negoçios, véola muy penosa y de grandísima angustia, mas quando aparto el pensamiento de las cosas ya dichas, recojéndole a mi propio seno, e veo la soledad que me haze sentir, apartándome de las negociaciones mundanas, llámola soledad amable" (40). Teresa reiterates the benefit of deafness and its concomitant solitude when she explains that God asked her to be quiet in two ways: by making her deaf and by demanding that she not speak ("me manda callar" [42]). She interprets this to mean that she is not to occupy herself in "ninguna fabla mundana, mas que tenga sylençio entero para que mejor pueda entender lo que con el ruydo de las ocupaciones seglares entender no pudiera" (42). Yet silence and solitude are not enough to hear God if one is still desirous of or thinking about worldly things: "forçado es que se aparte e del todo parta de nuestra voluntad si queremos escuchar sin embargo el ruydo lo que a nuestra Salut es conplidero" (43). With her will desirous of hearing God, Teresa was able to recast her solitude into "soledad amable," the medium that turned her *pasyones* into *resureçiones*. For Deborah Ellis, Teresa "interprets her isolation as spiritual company, transforming isolation from people into inclusion among the saved" (45). Teresa perceived herself as saved because she understood her affliction to be a blessing, the "dulçes bendiçiones" (91) that permitted the ears of her soul, her *entendimiento*, to listen to God, and therefore to be consoled by Him. In true solitude Teresa could now "hear" the voice of God, particularly through the Psalms. She turned the solitude brought about by infirmity into something positive and useful. Infirmity protected her from the worldly – "las dolenciās embargan e detienen [el cuerpo], non consyntiendo ocuparle en cosas mundanas o vanas" (91), and solitude allowed her to be introspective and focus on her spiritual life.

Hand in hand with solitude came the other aspect of her new circumstances: she was now idle, no longer vying for abbatial office or trying to further her family's influence. In addition, reading *Arboleda*, we may gather that Teresa was criticized for being idle or that she understood that others associated affliction with idleness and sloth. She sets the record straight:

Pues la açidia jamás la consyente [la enfermedad]. E quien dize de el enfermo estar oçioso, este no sabe qué cosa es dolencia ca sy lo supiese, la mesma espiriencia le daríe a conosçer cómo el enfermo syenpre está ocupado en trabajos meritorios e ocultos, apartados syn dubda de todo loor humano. (80)

Illness keeps a person busy by its very nature, therefore Teresa advised the suffering to take advantage of their affliction: “que no seamos oçiosos en nuestras dolencias, mas que trabajemos por ganar aquella espiritual paçiencia que en los cinco marcos se contiene” (100).⁷ As tradition had it, Teresa’s remedy for affliction and idleness was work, but the value of work requires the participation of the will: “Çiertamente son dos cosas asy syngulares [yndustria e graçia] que a quien Dios darlas quiere, agora sea varón o sea henbra, marauillosas cosas entenderá e obrará con ellas sy *quisiere exercitarse* e no las encomendar a oçioçidad y nigliencia” (119; my emphasis). As Rodríguez Rivas wrote, *Arboleda* communicates “las preocupaciones y pensamientos de la autora como *ejercicio de voluntad* para librarse de sus males y *ocupar* con la paciencia su esperanza en la vida futura” (“La *Arboleda*” 129; my emphasis). One must exercise the will in order to produce the work which will lead to spiritual gain. Interestingly, for the infirm, Teresa modifies the idea of work or effort to include inactivity: “yo creo que el enfermo afana más estando en la cama que vn labrador que desde la mañana a la noche no desanpara de su mano el alçada” (80). The daily toil of coping with infirmity, of living with illness and isolation – “el tormento desta cotidiana plaga” (137) – is also work.

Teresa followed her own advice and, using reason and willpower, chose to exercise her mind and avoid idleness in the pursuit of spiritual perfection, since reason “nos es dado para le conosçer [a Dios]” (135). In this way Teresa maintained a life of action now oriented toward knowing and understanding herself and bettering her spiritual health: “conosçer a Dios e a mí misma e negar mi voluntad e conformarme con la voluntad suya, e tomar la cruz de la pasión que padesco en la manos del entendimiento interior e yr en pos del Salvador por pasos de aflicción espiritual” (138). Assisted by her physical malady and the good use of reason Teresa improved her spiritual health: “Pues atiende con discreción la cura maravillosa que la dolencia corporal obra en tu ánima, y hallarás por verdat que ella quebranta la soberbia y engendra vmilldat ... aparta la yra y trahe a mansedumbre, non consyente en su casa ninguna oçciosidat” (75). Illness does not necessarily allow for idleness; it may be recast as a *place* in which to develop spiritually. Therefore, just as she recast solitude as a positive spiritual circumstance, Teresa recast idleness as a path, not to vice but to virtue.

Teresa’s progress toward salvation by avoiding idleness consisted therefore of two phases: initially, reading, meditating and understanding the purpose of her deafness; eventually, writing. To begin with, Teresa used reason and exer-

cised the will to keep herself occupied in order to understand her circumstances, particularly her afflictions, and how these could be used to reach salvation. This stage involved spiritual and intellectual activity: observations (e.g., of how others treated her differently because of her affliction), reading, meditation and prayer. She was looking for “espirituales consolaciones” (38) and a place where she might rest her body and where her soul might receive “ayre de salud” (38). Her success at finding a better *place* in which to live, a place where reason had taken her, led to the second stage in her fight against idleness: after twenty years of living with her affliction she also occupied herself physically by the act of writing, i.e., recording her meditations and conclusions for her own consolation and for the benefit of others. Thus, intellectual activity, spiritual growth and writing helped Teresa fight idleness: “E por la mi voluntad, éste [fin – i.e., hacer la guerra a la ociosidad] sea que aquel soberano Señor, que más las voluntades que las obras acata, quiera hazer aplacible e açebto delante los ojos de su grand clemencia lo que enojos e digno de reprehensyón a las gentes paresce” (39).

That Teresa was intellectually engaged in the process of her own salvation is reflected in her own understanding of the writing activity. Teresa referred to her treatise (*Arboleda*) as a “mal hordenada proçesyón de razones” (64).⁸ Whether we agree about the order or disorder of her ideas, the citation reflects she was clearly aware of the thought processes, the intellectual activity, involved in producing a treatise. Nor was she afraid to be creative, e.g. referring to the first *marco* that the infirm receive from God, she added regarding it’s naming “el nombre que mi simpleza ynventó o le puso” (72).

Another example of Teresa’s use of her intellect in the fight against idleness is her exegesis of the Psalms, particularly of 45.10 and 32.9, which shows how earnest she was about “inclinando quanto más puedo la oreja de mi entendimiento” (45). She heard God’s spiritual voice (through the Psalms) and interpreted what He said to her. She also interpreted other texts, such as the Old and New Testaments: “Ca escrito es ... como si dixese...” (71; cf. 98 reinterpreting Job), and particularly Job’s words (6.12): “como si abiertamente dixese...” (98, 104). Teresa’s interpretation of her readings and her circumstances were the intellectual exercises that kept her busy. Teresa’s own use of her mind is made clear not only by her acts of reading, writing and exegesis, but by some of the language she used, e.g. “pare mientes” (44); “veamos la diferencia” (72); “quiero preguntar ... y mi synpleza me responde” (116); “entender nos conviene” (62); “Yo con mi sinpleza, atrévome a dezir” (117); “yo creo” (118, 122); “çiertamente creo” (119, 124, 128); “çiertamente se puede dezir” (124); “conviene que bien miremos” (122); “parésçeme que” (123); and “c’asy paresçe manifesto que” (124). Teresa expresses herself and opines. And she reasons and explains, e.g. “Esto es por tres razones: la primera ... la segunda ... la terçera” (124); and “En lo

qual paresçe que claramente nos da a entender" (125) when she goes on to interpret Psalm 8, verses 1 and 9. Another intellectual faculty Teresa uses to compose her text is memory: "E avn no me consiente mi deuoción poner en oluido, antes me manda traer a la memoria, vna palabra que..." (62). Reading and writing, the use of her memory, reasoning and exegesis are activities in which Teresa engaged in order to understand her own life as a person who suffered not only infirmity but the isolation and troubling emotions such infirmity brought with it. Teresa used reason to improve herself spiritually, to work her way through the maze of her own tribulations, circumstances she knew she shared with other infirm people: "Con éstos [los enfermos] me razono" (61).

Teresa took action to improve her spiritual health: she prayed, she persevered and she fought idleness so that death would not find her "sleeping" (50). Keeping her mind busy was an essential part of her spiritual occupations. Teresa called out to God asking Him to save her from her afflictions, and He replied by consoling her and by giving meaning to her tribulations. Eventually, "mi entendimiento, pungido de aquestos temores [de pedir alguna cosa contra la razón de su espiritual salud], dexó de pedir aquello que la natural ynclinación pide, e solamente pidió aquello que syntió que al Salvador plazía" (133). Teresa modified her desires and her will, actively participating in the improvement of her spiritual health. She prayed that through her "públicos males," "penales pasyones" and her "aflicción, confusión e tormento" (133) she might increase her religious fervor and know and understand His mercy "en estas e otras semejantes peticiones *perseuerando* mi çiego entendimiento" (133; my emphasis). Teresa made an effort, and consciously persevered in this effort so that she might follow and glorify God. As an infirm person, even more than the healthy, Teresa must avoid sinful acts "porque el doliente está asy preso, ca lo temporal o corporal nin puede aprouechar a sy nin a los otros. Pues estar oçioso en lo spiritual, ¿qué desmayada negligencia os paresçe que sería?" (49). In sickness, if one's body is incapable of taking advantage of earthly pleasures, the indolence of the soul is even greater negligence, particularly because death is ever present. However, although Teresa sees the infirm as closer to death's door, she reminds the healthy that death can strike suddenly.

Teresa's meditations about the purpose of pain and suffering lead her to view bodily suffering as the medicine that cures the soul, i.e., illness provides spiritual well-being because physical suffering and illness help to limit acts of sinfulness such as pride, avarice, envy, gluttony, etc. ("a todas estas cosas con mano armada resiste la dolencia" [76]).⁹ Teresa testified to the truth of this benefit: "no por el continuo trabajo que me causan [las dolencias] les quiero negar el bien tan conplido que el Señor de todos los bienes en ellas quizo enxerir" (76). But this restraint is not enough to enter the kingdom of heaven. Affliction must be accompanied by (spiritual) effort to attain salvation. Teresa

explained that some people “segunt su negligencia y descuydamiento, antes escogerán holgando yrse al ynfierno que *trabajando yr al paraíso*” (73; my emphasis), implying that effort is also necessary in order to be saved. God has bestowed on them “amor singular,” which renders them “más obligados a le amar y seruir que no los otros” (74). Thus affliction requires from the sufferer a greater commitment to love Him than from those not afflicted by illness. God’s contribution of suffering (to hasten the soul on the road to salvation) must be accompanied by work on the part of the infirm, who must use well of their affliction: they must harness its benefits with the will to love and serve God, turning into strength what others see as a weakness (see further, hear better, etc.). They must do three things: endure their suffering, understand it as a benefit and extract spiritual profit from it (“tolerando los males y ... conosciendo los bienes e reportando de aquéllos el logro espiritual” [96]). In addition, those who suffer must have “vna espeçial reverencia y temor, la qual se puede formar contemplanço el su beneficio e syngular elección que le plaze hazer comunicando las sus disciplinas y *haciendo a nos, más que otros, dignos de ser corregidos de la su mano*” (74; my emphasis). For the suffering the road to heaven is a team effort. God privileges them with their afflictions (“los que para sy escoje” [137]), and they must therefore love God more and work harder toward spiritual improvement than other souls because they have been hand picked by God as worthy ones. The infirm must, aided by prudence (the cornerstone of a healthy spiritual life), “saber conosçer en los trabajos cuál es el mejor partido y aquél escoger” (108), i.e., be able to discern which is the greatest benefit they can obtain from their ills and choose accordingly. The verb *escojer* yet again points us to action, to the soul’s need to decide what is in its best interest. God alone will not save us. In the decision-making process, Teresa uses *entendimiento*, which, “retraydo de las cosas de fuera y ençerrado dentro de las puertas de la secreta cogitaçión, se exerçe con más vigor en su propio ofiçio” (138), its *ofiçio* being the advancement of the soul toward salvation. Teresa is the thinker that finds, through meditation, reading and writing, the way in which to understand and know herself and God in pursuit of a tolerable earthly life and eternal life for her soul. Teresa argues that her illness in fact speeds her (and others) along the way to “espiritual alegría” (61).

Illness can overwhelm the afflicted but, interpreted as a gift from God, can illuminate reason. Thus the infirm must exercise will to enlist reason to work toward spiritual improvement and salvation in spite of the natural reactions to illness. Teresa states that corporal suffering “en vn grand volumen de quexas haze gastar al enfermo todo su tienpo” (77) and that s/he naturally initially responds to suffering with feelings of sadness and injustice. However, “los que de dolencias y pasiones corporales somos fornidos, reçebimos del Señor soberano çinco marcos de metal muy preçioso ... los que la razón nos obliga a retri-

buir al Señor" (70). Teresa interpreted the sufferer's afflictions as gifts from God, as she reinterpreted the parable of the talents. And she further noted that tribulations "habren el entendimiento y pungen el corazón" (72), as she later warns the infirm: "¡O enfermo, no te engañe el dolor corporal ni aflicción vmana priue la luz de tu entendimiento!" (75). In the end, the torments and the mortification caused by illness do not seize or overwhelm the mind, on the contrary, they make the mind more powerful for it can still consider, imagine, ponder, cogitate and have even "malos pensamientos" (84, 86). Thus illness both restricts and frees the mind and the infirm must choose how to use reason for their spiritual improvement. They must, calling on prudence to provide the medicine, "matar los pensamientos y deseos malos e ynpuñaciones humanas dentro en la voluntad con la espada desta ya dicha mortificación" (87). Illness itself may help the infirm not to sin by action, but it does not control desire. Therefore the afflicted must exercise their will in order to obtain the benefits of infirmity: "Mas la mortificación de los deseos y pensamientos es fecha en la voluntad, lo qual es en nuestro libre albedrío" (85). Will and effort produce the good works that make salvation possible: "aquello sólo que es dentro de nuestro poderío, *obrando o dexando de obrar*, nos haze dinos de mérito" (84; my emphasis).

Having recognized the potential negative effects of idleness (such a resentment, sadness, boredom, inactivity), particularly for the infirm, Teresa constructed an understanding of affliction as the means by which the afflicted are kept busy in several ways. She explained that the afflicted person is occupied with her/his affliction so that s/he is prevented from being preoccupied with worldly matters: "el tienpo que somos obligados e ocupados en dolencias no solamente estamos desnudos de las cosas mundanas no pudiendo entender en ellas, mas avn estamos en estado de gracia y verdadera penitencia" (91). The *trabajos* (pains) that must be endured by the ill are turned by Teresa into *trabajo* (work). Furthermore, the infirm are kept busy by working on their spiritual advancement which, to be effective, must be governed by Patience: "si no rige y manda en el convento de los dolientes, todas nuestras dolencias e nuestro trabajo, quedarían sin fruto" (63). Therefore, Teresa was happy to put her *juicio* to work in the service of the good abbess Patience, and put it to work writing "este synple e breue tractado" (63), "ca segund yo lo he menester, e bien es de trabajar por tenerla [Paciencia] contenta" (64). The notion of work is further brought out in the language that Teresa used to describe *Arboleda* in the *Admiración*: "el tractado que yo hize ... tracta ... solamente desta ya dicha devota e saludable sabiduría, la qual es saber conosçer e reduzir a la memoria los beneficios de Dios e saber conosçer e escudriñar e buscar en estos mis públicos males las ascondidas misericordias del Señor" (129). *El tractado que yo hize* recalls Teresa's intellectual and physical actions of writing; the use of numerous verbs,

saber conosçer e reduzir and *saber conosçer e escudriñar e buscar*, indicate that the soul must take action, must work to acquire understanding.

In *Arboleda* Teresa wrote that God should find us “velantes en obras virtuosas” when death calls and that “la fe sin obras es muerta y no aprouecha al que la tiene” (42). She highlights the value of good works. In *Admiración* Teresa returns to this idea: “el espíritu biue por la virtud e por *el exerçio de obras virtuosas*,” “ca pobre vida haze aquel que biue lleno de vicios e vazío de virtudes” (136; my emphasis). Note the term *exerçio* and her concern regarding vices. *Exerçio* implies work, a term Teresa was comfortable using. In *Arboleda* she wrote “trabajar me conviene” (96), where the use of the word *trabajo* is also noteworthy if you consider Covarrubias’s definition according to which work is “el cuidado y diligencia que ponemos en obrar alguna cosa” and that “todos los que no están ociosos dezimos que trabajan o trevejan, haciendo cosas de provecho y muy útiles para sí, y para la república.”¹⁰ Teresa – like Covarrubias – places work in opposition to idleness, thus she writes (works) because she wishes to “fuir la vçiosidad” (39). She shows herself as a person who is working with a specific purpose in mind, to fight idleness by writing a treatise: “hazer guerra a la ocçiosydat ocupándome en esta pequeña obra” (39). This suggests that she was not only aware that idleness nurtures vices but that this was particularly “true” for women (and, we might add, the infirm).¹¹ Fighting idleness through writing, Teresa presents this activity as work, as a means that will prevent her from falling into sin. Furthermore, in *Admiración* she refers to *Arboleda* as a “bolumen de papeles borrados” (114), i.e., *borradores*, about which López Estrada writes: “Se trata de un curioso uso de la expresión en el sentido de que los folios del manuscrito estaban aún en grado de corrección, mal escritos, y esto representa el reconocimiento del esfuerzo en la realización personal de la obra” (27). López Estrada also recognized that Teresa viewed her treatise as work which required effort.¹²

BECOMING HER OWN COUNSELLOR

Teresa’s actions show she took her spiritual destiny into her own hands. She was self-taught (“es neçesario de recorrer a los libros, los cuales de arboledas saludables tienen en sy marauillosos enxertos” [38]), self-counselled and thus agent of her own consolation and salvation: “poblaré mi soledad de arboleda graciosa, so la sombra de la qual pueda descansar mi persona y reciba mi espíritu ayre de salud ... Me entiendo aprovechar ... no solo al propósyto de mi pasión, mas al avmentación de mi deuoción y consolación” (38).¹³ She clearly expressed that her writing would help defray the effects of her deafness; in addition, it would contribute to her spiritual improvement.

That Teresa became her own counsellor can be gathered by examining the spiritual journey she records in *Arboleda*. Teresa used reason in coming to ac-

cept and understand her physical malady. She understood the key role an individual must play in his or her salvation, and because she came to her conclusions aided only by books, it can be affirmed that she was the only spiritual counsellor she had. *Arboleda* shows us a woman who looks first inside, then outside herself. We are able to discern a difficult journey of introspection: “¿quién amará al que a sí mismo aborrece? ¿O quién sufrirá los males ajenos quando su mesmo dueño sufrir no los quiere?” (95). The infirm need to accept themselves as they are; they must help themselves if they want help and love from others. To this end – the ability to accept ones infirmity – patience is required, so Teresa suggests to the infirm: “buelue la mano a tu cabeça, que se entiende a tu discreción; ca si desta aprovecharte quisieres, la paçiençia no está lexos de ti” (95). *Cabeça* and *discreción* point directly to Teresa’s view that the mind must be used in order to further spiritual improvement and acceptance of one’s circumstances. Teresa’s contrast of *entendimiento* and ignorance (56-57) shows the value she placed on self-awareness and good judgment, thus supporting her argument that the onus of salvation rests with the individual and how s/he uses God’s “blessings.”

By directly addressing God, Teresa circumvented the traditional roles associated with the confessor and became her own spiritual counsellor. By preparing her own path of salvation, by creating her own *menu*,¹⁴ Teresa guided herself toward spiritual perfection: “De seys viandas me paresçe que deuemos y podemos vsar seguramente todos los que dolencias padecemos. Las quales son éstas: tribulada tristeza, paciencia durable, contrición amarga, confesión verdadera y frecuentada, oración devota, perseueración en las obras virtuosas” (62). She took action recreating her infirm self as mediator between her earthly being prey to tribulations, and God. This she had to do because she was unable to find a teacher or mentor who could guide her through life burdened by deafness: “jamás pude yo ver persona que endereçase mis pies por la carrera de paz, nin me mostrase camino por donde pudiese llêgar a poblado de plazer” (37). Without a spiritual mentor Teresa turned directly to God: “plogo a la misericordia del muy Altísimo alumbrarme con la luçerna de su piadosa graçia” (37). She addressed God directly seeking peace for this life and interceding on behalf of her own soul in the hope of salvation in the next. Through prayer she could combat her sadness and her loneliness (and, we might add, her frustrations): “Asy que la tristeza e tribulación son dos espuelas que nos hazen correr a la devota oración” (61). Since Teresa did not have a confessor or a mentor who might have helped her through difficult spiritual times, nor, as we might gather from reading *Arboleda*, did she receive understanding, compassion or help from those with whom she shared her life, she capitalized on her feelings of abandonment and solitude to develop greater intimacy with God.

Teresa constantly sought the spiritual obligations that befitted her (and others) in pursuit of better spiritual health. Acceptance of infirmity was key: “De buen grado me gloriaré en las enfermedades mías porque more en mí la virtud de Cristo” (58). The afflicted must profess at the hands of the abbess Patience and *live in observance of virtues* for the benefit of the soul, i.e., take action, take the well-being of his/her soul in his/her own hands, what Rodríguez Rivas calls “un duro ejercicio de voluntad” (“La Arboleda” 123-24) that consists first of accepting and submitting to suffering, and second, to diligently work to yield spiritual benefits: “sy en las manos desta buena abadesa [la Paciencia] no fazemos profesión los dolientes y aflitos, no podríamos abenir en la oseruancia de virtudes que nuestro provecho espiritual se requiere” (64). One must thus work “con toda diligencia y cuydado por saber reportar de los trabajos bienes espirituales” (69). Effort is required if illness is to provide spiritual gain. Like Teresa, the infirm must take action and responsibility for their spiritual life.

ASSIGNING VALUE TO HER AFLICTION, HER EARTHLY LIFE AND HER WRITING

In an effort to understand human suffering, and particularly her own affliction, Teresa explains that God inflicts (involuntary) suffering on those whom He loves most to force them to take the road to salvation: “más los ama quien los haze padecer que no ellos mesmos” (73). Illness is the “saluo conducto” that God gives “a corrección y hemienda de nuestras vidas” (67). And because some souls will not willingly choose this road, God, by means of illness and suffering, guides the infirm along the road that leads to life everlasting: “hiere con su mano y los haze padecer avnque les pese, dándoles trabajos en que por fuerza se ayan de ocupar y poner los pies en el estreñido camino ya dicho que lleva al omne a la vida eternal” (72). To highlight the view that the afflicted are “chosen people,” Teresa reminds her readers that God chooses to bless only a few with the hardships of lasting suffering: “c’avnque muchos somos los ocçiosos en negligencias en este estrecho camino de paraíso ... los menos, son llagados de dolencias durables” (73).

By ascribing purpose to infirmity, Teresa was able to assign positive value to her earthly life, value that she was able to augment by offering her experiences to others in *Arboleda*, where Teresa presented patience as an ascetic state of perfection that makes spiritual joy possible (Rodríguez Rivas, “La Arboleda” 123). Patience itself is made possible by affliction. Therefore in *Arboleda* Teresa charted her relationship to God as it was made possible because of her deafness, thus valuing her physical malady and her experiences, giving them significance in her own eyes. This permitted her to convey to others the Glory of God that is accessible through infirmity as revealed to her through her own experiences. By valuing her own life and experience, and by communicating this to others

through the act of writing, she gave her *earthly* life – “esta vida presente” (141) – meaning and purpose. To quote Seidenspinner-Núñez, Teresa used literature “to structure, define, dramatize, and give meaning to her own life” (*Writings* 128). This she did by writing and producing a text that could help other sufferers of earthly tribulations. By sharing her path to spiritual joy she could be worthy in the eyes of others as well as her own. Teresa was open about her desire to share, and not only with the infirm, what suffering had taught her. She presented herself “deseosa de manifestar a los que saberlo quisieren, aquello que en mí manifesto parece, ha fin que como yo lo conosco, lo conoscan todos” (39), and later “deseo que conoscan todos la gran misericordia del Señor manifestada en mí” (57), and again

el grand deseo que tengo de que esta virtud de paçiençia sea bien conçoçida e honrada de todos, y no me satisfaze conçoçerla por nonbre nin avn me contenta la ynterpretación de aquél. Ca de quien ella es y en lo que consiste, yo deseo aver plenaria ynformación o más entero conçoçimiento. (96)

In addition, by prescribing her method of self-consolation to others, in particular to those who, like her, suffer illnesses and tribulations – “desterrados fijos en este valle de lágrimas e miseria” (140) – the act of writing made Teresa the agent of the possible salvation of others. Indeed, the copyist who transcribed her text, Pero Lopes de Trigo, read her treatise as one of auto-consolation, and as one that sought to help others similarly afflicted: “E fizo aquesta obra a loor de Dios e espirital consolación suya e de todos aquellos que enfermedades padescen, porque despedidos de la salud corporal, leuanten su deseo en Dios que es verdadera Salut” (37). Teresa reiterates her desire to help others several times, e.g. when she suggests her story may “por cierto” benefit others: “Grand prouecho deuen [hazer] estas palabras por las quales oyrán placiendo a Dios de asy quitar todos los ynpidimientos y estorbos” (43); or when she expresses her wish to offer, and to be invited to partake in, the benefits as well as the difficulties of being physically incapacitated in some way: “Y a esta tal alegría [que la virtud de Cristo more en el alma] yo conbido a los enfermos y deseo ser conbidada, porque como somos yguals en las pasiones seamos en las resureçiones” (59). Teresa developed a program of action – work that would lead to spiritual health – that gave her life (and the life of any afflicted person) meaning and purpose.

In spite of the spiritual counsel she found in books and in her own meditations, Teresa confessed her real wish to participate in the affairs of the world: “Lo que quiero es enboluerme en las ocupaciones mundanas e lo que no quiero es la soledat o apartamiento de todo ello” (50). Although she did not like the loneliness infirmity brought with it, she recognized the spiritual profit to be

obtained from deafness, and she labelled her infirmity a blessing: “Mucho mejor es la yntinción de mi pasyón que no la mía ... Tienpo es ya que la dexe obrar enteramente aquel fin virtuoso lleno de prouecho espiritual porque el Señor me la dió” (50–51). Infirmity limited her life but at the same time protected her from the world, since God sends illness and suffering in order to “nos detener consygo en hablas porque no salgamos a los peligros deste mundo” (93). Infirmity knows better, but, *que yo la dexe obrar* shows Teresa was the one that made the decision to let infirmity work its spiritual benefits. Her *decision making* permits God’s grace to work in her. Reference to her “indomitable porfía” and her “vanos deseos” (51), and the “dureza de mi rebeldía” (53) not only suggests a strong character, but the strong willpower it took to go from being “dragged” by force into solitude by her infirmity, to being desirous of the spiritual guide her infirmity provided her. Thus Teresa came to value her deafness and her earthly life afflicted by deafness and suffering as a means to salvation. Simultaneously, this reconnected her with the world and gave her potential influence as “abbess of the infirm.”

As mentioned above, for Teresa, one of the main purposes of language is to offer praises to God. This is why in *Arboleda* she wrote: “Dios me sea testigo a cuyo onor y gloria lo quiero dezir” (72). In *Admiración* she returns to the idea of telling as it related to God (which incidentally also went to justify her act of writing): “Pues faga cada vno dentre de su ánima e pensamiento çelda secreta donde pueda contemplar los benefiços de Dios, e como por ellos se syntirá ynclinado a le desear, seruir e alabar e *recontar* a las gentes la magnolia o grandeza de sus benefiços e copiosas merçedes” (129; my emphasis). Teresa suggests that the contemplation of gifts received from God will inevitably lead, among other things, to the telling of the greatness of such graces. These, like Teresa’s deafness, are worthy of “*ser conocidos e recontados e alabados de toda criatura*” (129; my emphasis), an idea she supports (138) by quoting Isaiah 12.5 (“Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth”), and which she revisits again: “manifestarlas [sus benefiços e misericordias e graçias] a las gentes recontándolo a gloria e a manifiçençia del su santo Nonbre, lo qual yo ... hize” (137), and again, “recontando a las gentes la ygualza de la su justiça” (138) before closing her second treatise. Valuing infirmity and suggesting this knowledge valuable enough to merit sharing it, directly went to establishing the worth and quality of her own “blessings” and thus the value of her earthly life and her works, particularly of *Arboleda*. A text that others could read and benefit from meant Teresa could be an instrument in the spiritual improvement of others’ lives and that her writing constituted an *obra virtuosa*. Teresa clearly subscribes to the idea, reaffirmed by the Council of Trent the following century, that salvation requires work and effort; God’s grace and “blessings” alone will not lead to eternal life. She deemed good works to be an

essential aspect of (spiritual) life: “en las cosas espirituales ... con buena yntención seguir las obras devotas fasta llegar a donde la fuerça de cada vno bastare” (103). She thus cast her treatise as an act of devotion: “c’asy yo en esta espiritual obra, siguiendo mi devoçión, no llegando con ella fasta donde debe y quería en lo de la paçiençia, mas hasta donde puedo en alguna pequeña parte satisfacer mi deseo” (103). In addition, by giving meaning to her text that went beyond her own needs, Teresa found a place in the world that allowed her to coexist peacefully with those who did not understand her, offering them a treatise that might help them understand the plight of the infirm and improve their own spiritual lives: “Her aim was to teach others a moral lesson that she had painfully learned and to forge for herself a weapon against adversity” (Deyermond, “Convento” 24).

That Teresa improved the quality of her own life is revealed in phrases like “quanto más crecieren nuestras pasyones, tanto más mejor nuestro beuir” (67). Her earthly life could be improved in spite of, and because of, suffering *pasiones*, although she definitely saw the need to accompany them with action, because alone they do not lead to virtue: “No que sean nuestras aflyçiones obra perfecta ni virtuosa, mas éstas tolerando sabia y discretamente es virtud syn la qual no podemos venir a estado de perfeçión” (69). To reach salvation, illness needs to be assisted, particularly by patience, which requires cultivation and therefore the intervention of the individual. Thus, in *Arboleda* Teresa documented her journey, which, urged on by deafness, propelled her to seek out the meaning of her own separate life and to represent herself as having found, by her own agency and work, the reasons for earthly suffering and, particularly, bodily pain. This understanding gave Teresa’s own life significance in her own eyes. If the objective of her text was to give “coherence and meaning” (Smith 46) to the past and the self, then we have an autobiography, since *Arboleda* “becomes both the process and the product of assigning meaning to a series of experiences, after they have taken place, by means of emphasis, juxtaposition, commentary, omission” (Smith 45). Although Teresa set out to write a treatise, and not an autobiography, “la propia experiencia de la autora [es] el pilar sobre el que se sustenta el escrito” (Rodríguez Rivas, “Autobiografía” 368). She several times reminds us that experience allows her to say what she does and the reader is able to see her life obliquely: “she intricately weaves together her life and her texts and represents her self obliquely rather than explicitly” (Seidenspinner-Núñez, *Writings* 117). Teresa indirectly interpreted her life, and this exercise enabled her to come to terms with it as it was. She was able to give her earthly life meaning because she focused on the life to come: “Suframós el tormento por respecto del fin” (62). When one is afflicted by disease, one must focus on its promise of greater virtue and perfection.

In making her life tolerable and eventually acceptable, she had to fight the effects of idleness and solitude. Rational control of the senses and the will, and work (spiritual and intellectual effort, as well as the action of writing itself) are the remedies that Teresa found to combat idleness and solitude and thereby achieve salvation. She could not remove herself from her solitude, but she could fight loneliness by writing to “all of humanity as her audience, not solely a limited public” (Cammarata 46), whether her intended audience was ill or not. And through action and particularly effort (in opposition to idleness) her goal was to please and serve God, and protect herself from offending Him. Teresa came up with a concrete plan of action for herself (and others) that consisted of praising her blessings (i.e., her infirmities) received from God to extract from them the benefit of spiritual health, exercising virtue and producing good works. She wrote to claim a *place* for the infirm and to speak to the healthy so that they might understand the infirm.

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NOTES

- 1 Seidenspinner-Núñez and Kim have recently determined, based on the use by Teresa of the term *juventut* and on the *Bulario de la Universidad de Salamanca* documents, that she “would have succumbed to deafness between her late twenties and late forties – much later than traditionally assumed” (137) (see also Seidenspinner-Núñez (*Writings* 37–38 n33 and 34). Seidenspinner-Núñez and Kim also suggest, based on historical facts and the petition recorded in the *Bulario de la Universidad de Salamanca* documents, that isolation or ostracism due to her *converso* heritage was the primary reason for the request that Teresa be allowed to transfer from the Franciscan Convent of Santa Clara in Burgos to the Cistercian Monastery of Santa María La Real de Las Huelgas, also in Burgos. This was to “protect Teresa from the rising anti-*converso* animus generated by the Toledo Rebellion” (Seidenspinner-Núñez and Kim 131) of 1449, the same date of the *Bulario* petitions. Citing Albert A. Sicroff, Seidenspinner-Núñez and Kim (129) state that the Franciscan Order was the first to show intolerance toward Jews and new converts, which would explain her family’s wish to see her settled in a convent that was tolerant of New Christians and which also offered the possibility of advancement to monastic office (Seidenspinner-Núñez and Kim 128–35). As a result of the criticism provoked by her writing *Arboleda*, Teresa also penned *Admiración operum Dey*, a response to those prudent men who had accused her of plagiarism and marvelled at the fact that a woman, a deaf one at that, had written a treatise. In *Admiración* Teresa defends her act of

- writing thereby becoming the first woman to defend women's right to write in Castilian. By her own account she had been criticized by "prudentes varones" (113), not for the content of the *Arboleda*, but because its author was a woman, i.e., because of the "defecto de la abtora o conponedora della" (113). Teresa was doubly defective, since she was a woman, a "misbegotten man ... denied the possibility of achieving full intellectual, ethical and moral stature" (Smith 27-28) due to her ontological status, and she was deaf. As the first work written by a Peninsular woman in defence of a woman's right to be learned and to write, Teresa's *Admiración* has received greater attention than *Arboleda*. See, for example, Surtz ("Llamado"), Seidenspinner-Núñez ("Él solo"), Ochoa de Eribe, Calvo, and Castro Ponce. Teresa de Cartagena is one of only a handful of Peninsular medieval women writers whose texts or names we know. See, among others, Deyermond's "Autoras" for an overview of the Spanish medieval context. See also Rivera Garretas, López Estrada, and Surtz.
- 2 Teresa belonged to the Cartagena / Santa María family, the most influential family in fifteenth-century Spain. This was the family of the converso Pablo de Santa María, who converted to Christianity in 1390 and was Teresa's grandfather. This was already suspected by Amador de los Ríos (172) in the nineteenth century, and confirmed by Cantera Burgos (537), who unearthed, while studying the Cartagena family, the will of D. Alonso de Cartagena, Teresa's uncle, who names her in this document. For a good summary of the Santa María family history see Seidenspinner-Núñez's Introduction to *Writings* (4-8).
 - 3 Psalm 22.6: "But I am a worm, and not human; *scorned by others, and despised by the people.*" The italics are mine and correspond to the portion of the verse quoted by Teresa.
 - 4 The use of terms that relate to health and medicine are notable: cura/dolencia, enfermedad/salud, enfermos/sanos, vanos remedios/espirituales remedios, "la grand doctora ... llamada paçiençia" (95), etc., eventually casting God as "Salut verdadera" (109). For Teresa "illness and suffering are both actual physical states she has experienced and metaphors for spiritual afflictions" (Surtz, "Image" 297).
 - 5 Seidenspinner-Núñez and Kim's article (133-36) explores the possible role Teresa was to occupy at Las Huelgas according to the *Bulario* documents and medieval practices.
 - 6 This relationship was explored by other XV century Castilian writers such as Fray Martín de Córdoba in his *Compendio de la fortuna* (ca. 1440-1453). See particularly chapter XI, which "Muestra que non es bien examinado en virtudes el que non es provado en paciencia, ca es fundamento de toda virtud" (52).
 - 7 Marcos (or silver coins) are the "dolencias y pasyones corporales" (71) that are to be understood by the infirm as gifts from God as in the parable of the talents (Matt. 25.14-30).
 - 8 According to Ronald Surtz, the *Arboleda de los enfermos* "conveys a first impression of a rambling essay that proceeds mostly through the association of ideas" ("Image" 297). For María Mar Cortés Timoner, Teresa's writing shows "la intención de organizar, de manera coherente y organizada, un material propio" (14).

- 9 To authorize her reasoning, she twice cites Saint Bernard: "La dolencia llaga el cuerpo y cura el alma" (75, 80). The idea of illness as medicine is also recalled by Fray Martín de Córdoba's in his *Compendio de la fortuna*: "la enfermedad del cuerpo melezina es para el ánima" (60). The paradox of disease as medicine was also explored in the treatise *Espejo de religiosos* and can be traced to Gregory the Great (Cortés 66-70).
- 10 Teresa also uses the word *trabajo* in the meaning of "dificultad o necesidad y aflicción del cuerpo o alma" (Covarrubias).
- 11 According to Fray Martín de Córdoba's *Jardín de las nobles doncellas* (written in support of Isabel's candidacy to the throne), women have three negative qualities: they are "intemperadas," "parleras e porfiosas," and "variables, sin constancia" (91). It is the first one that is of interest here because woman's lack of temperance leads her to "[seguir] los apetitos carnales, como es comer e dormir e folgar, e otros que son peores" (91), where *folgar* is, according to Corominas "estar ocioso, no tener en qué trabajar."
- 12 Corominas documents that, according to Nebrija, the meaning of *borrar* derived probably from *borra* ('hez de la tinta') or from using a 'pañó de borra' ('lana grosera') to erase what had been written with chalk. This reinforces the idea that writing requires effort.
- 13 Teresa kept herself busy by reading as is shown by the following citations: "los libros son llenos" (81); "e ... leydo" (84); "me paresçe que lo he leydo en vna estoria que avemos, próxima o çercana de las calendad de agosto, en el libro que se llama..." (127). Teresa's readings included Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Gregory the Great and Boethius, in addition to the Old and the New Testaments (Amador de los Ríos 178; Hutton 31; Seidenspinner-Núñez, *Writings* 116). It is noteworthy to point out that Clairvaux, speaking of a person of a weaker constitution, such as a woman, writes: "the solitude of silence offer[s] plentiful opportunities for evil" (qtd. in Duby 516). Teresa probably also read books of sermons (Hutton 29-31) since language, according to Teresa, was intended to be used to praise God and to preach. Teresa also recalls having listened to sermons before losing her hearing. The Psalms probably constituted her favourite reading, since it was there that she began and there that she found what she was looking for: "comyenço a buscar en su deuotísimo cançioner ... algunas buenas consolaciones. E fallé más de lo que buscaba" (38). Rodríguez Rivas correctly states that Teresa "relaciona sus padecimientos y vivencias con su interpretación del texto bíblico" ("La Arboleda" 122). This is particularly true for the Psalms since she identified with the feelings expressed in this text.
- 14 See Surtz's "Image" for a study of Teresa's alimentary images.

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