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An Essay and a Poem

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Revising Thérèse

The Carmelite nun, Thérèse Martin of Lisieux, Basse-Normandie, France—now called, in the Roman Catholic calendar, *Saint*—wrote a classic memoir about her life and spiritual path called *The Story of a Soul*. After her death of tuberculosis, in 1897, the journal was heavily edited by her sister, Pauline. There were, in fact, some seven thousand alterations of the text.

To a contemporary feminist scholar, seven thousand editorial changes to a dead girl's manuscript raise fundamental questions about integrity of authorship. When I first began to study Thérèse's manuscripts, I thought that by a careful textual analysis I could retrieve a mature and compelling voice, previously silenced by bourgeois sentiment and the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In effect, I intended to round up the usual suspects. Above all it was *Pauline*, I suspected, who had turned her younger sister into the weak, effusive, sentimental, pietistic "Little Flower" who has annoyed so many generations of Catholic tomboys.

As I finish this project, the suspicion grows on me that Thérèse's real words are irrecoverable—irrecoverable, we might say as the real words of Jesus. If I began by thinking that seven thousand changes were too many, I'm tempted to conclude that they were too few. If I want to recover Thérèse as a strong female voice, I can only use about five pages of her text. My hypothesis about silencing didn't hold up, and what I found instead filled me with consternation. To the contemporary mind, Thérèse's account of her childhood and monastic experience must constitute a record of troubling family enmeshment. It's a glibly narrated, practiced piece of elocution, spoken in the girlish treble of one who cannot comprehend the peril of her situation.

The Story of a Soul is, among other things, a story of masochistic pietism sanctioned and encouraged by cultural and conventual authority: much of it with a distinctively female slant. It gave me the willies. Not

because I cared all that much about the Little Flower and her issues—though at some mysterious level I do—but because this history of narcissistic self-immolation, erasure, sexual perfervidness if not perversity, dishonesty and cover-up recapitulate so many of our recent experiences of *church*. Here are the archetypal models of Christian womanhood held up for many of us in parochial school, models which have done us so much damage: and how are we to pull out of this history a vision which sustains and nurtures? *That* is the question which gave me nightmares.

What is wrong with a tradition that elevates to sanctity, promulgates and holds up so perverse an ideal of feminine behavior? What is wrong with a Jesus who is pleased by diligent lists of unimportant sacrifices like the wearing of rough wool, washing in cold water, bearing with the rattling of another sister's rosary beads, or the sharp tongue of a rude novice? Thérèse loved these daily immolations; they were the essence of what she called her "Little Way." And she craved, as well, humiliation and suffering, annihilation. She prayed for God to take away her free will. In her devotion to the Child Jesus, she begged to be his little ball, thrown aside, pierced, played with and left in the dirt. In some equation I've never understood, nineteenth-century piety believed that such groveling "saved souls." If I were a soul, I'd be ashamed to cause her so much trouble, or so little. If I were Jesus, I'd hate being characterized as such a jerk.

As I grappled with this silliness, I became interested in tracing the reactions of Thérèse's many excellent biographers. How did they deal with so much pathology? How did these intelligent people explain it, or explain it away?

Most hagiographers found no problem, which is worrisome. But Ida Görres, a painstaking German scholar of the 1950s, offers the first and still most infinitely detailed, critical analysis of Thérèse's life and texts. Görres was loyal to pre-Vatican II Catholicism, but she was an astute psychologist and an honest researcher. She took on the task of reconciling Thérèse's dubious spiritual agenda with the fact that Pope Pius XI, infallible as he was, had seen fit to canonize her.

But Görres, certainly a partisan, seems to have felt her gorge rising. She writes that, on first glance, Thérèse embodies merely ". . . the perfect

goodness of a ductile child who appears more than life-size only against the middle-class and puritanical horizons of a certain type of mentality. She cannot bear comparison with any other saint. To be sure, all the saints have done little things, but none of them exclusively little things.” Being even more cranky than Ida Görres, I’d have to ask *Does Jesus remotely care if we smile at a sister who splashes cold water on us, and, if so, do I want to spend eternity with such a being?*

Once we begin this series of *why’s* the whole ecclesiastical edifice begins to shudder like a village built on the edge of Mount Vesuvius. The idea that Jesus wants us to suffer goes back to the idea that God needed Jesus to suffer, which goes back to some dubious story in Genesis about Eve and the apple—whoops, it’s the women again, causing trouble for everyone—and suddenly one is wide awake at three in the morning, mad as hops.

In approaching this material, I faced a difficult set of koans. Not the least of them involved the rhetorical imperative of considering one’s audience. A community of religious women, mostly retired, had asked me to revise Thérèse for them, imposing few restrictions on the task except—for I had to inquire midway—that I really should try to avoid the word “incest.”

I’ll back up a moment and say a few introductory words about Thérèse of Lisieux—because I know that many people in the modern world have never heard of her, and can’t imagine the conundrum she presents to any woman raised devoutly in the Catholicism of the 1950s, or why this closed case should interest us today. Thérèse, who died at the age of twenty-four, was a professed nun in the strictly enclosed and penitential order of the Carmelites of the Strict Observance. She had entered at fifteen, by special permission, following her much older sisters, Pauline and Marie. Another sister, Celine, entered a few years later.

Thérèse was canonized only twelve years after her death—a speedy process accelerated by tremendous popular acclaim. The groundswell of populist devotion—in those days before the internet—surged up because people passed from hand to hand the bowdlerized journals I have referred to. As Edgar Allen Poe maintained, nothing is so poignant and fitting a subject for poetry as the death of a young and beautiful woman. The idealized portraits of Thérèse painted by her sister, Celine, accompanied the

simple message of her autobiography, which is not all that different from that of our contemporary, Mother Teresa: to do small things with great love, to endure, with a smile, the little trials of each day.

“Well, we can manage that,” ten million Catholics seemed to have roared with one voice in 1920, annoyed as they must have been by the splashing of cold water, the rattling of rosary beads and the clicking of somebody’s false teeth. Besides, this pretty girl had promised miracles when she got to heaven, “a shower of roses,” as she put it. No one was sure whether or not she meant this as a metaphor. Roses appeared, as roses will.

This is the idea which drives my analysis: we know little about the inner landscape of anyone’s life. We narrowly know our own. Biography tells us a lot about the biographer, and about the historical context in which he or she writes. But a human life remains forever a mystery, and holiness is a particularly hidden phenomenon. It may be, as a postmodernist would argue, culturally constructed. It may not be. If I say, as I think I have said, that Thérèse was canonized for reasons which seem to me obnoxious and dangerous, I simply reveal myself as an ornery postmenopausal woman of 2008. If I find—as I will go on to find—reasons to consider her *holy*, and to try to make sense of that word, craft or concept—I will write as a woman of my own time, about, in a veiled way, my own life. Holiness, around here, is not on the menu.

I see Thérèse against the currents of post-modern spirituality. What is post-modern about it is its hermeneutic of suspicion, its recognition that what might be considered saintly in the fourteenth century or in the nineteenth might well be construed as pathological in the twenty-first. Big whoop. We have the advantage of knowing something about family systems theory. More importantly, what is *spiritual* about postmodern spirituality? I think that what is spiritual is the recognition that however ridiculous the stories we have told about God over millennia, they are still *stories about God*. They say something about what is unknowable and unspeakable and when you put them all together, they shed some light. We tell stories about God, we tell stories about our mother, or about the inner lives of our partners or even, as I said earlier, with equal folly about ourselves.

Such story-telling brings us into the beating heart of paradox. *What is the truth in this untruth?* This is the question I ask of God, as of a poem. My inquiry, then, becomes, what is the truth in the particular untruth for which Thérèse perhaps gave her young life? Or to which she gave a life already squandered, making quite the silk purse out of the sow's ear of bourgeois French Catholicism and a fatal case of TB.

There are many strains we could follow to come home to Thérèse, the political, the theological, the cultural. I shall emphasize the thread of family, because it touches most centrally on all the others. Thérèse was the youngest of nine children, of whom only five, all girls, survived their childhoods: Pauline, Marie, Leonie, Celine and Thérèse. Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy: and indeed, the family came to function much like the fabled March sisters, with the oldest, Pauline and Marie, taking turns being parents in turn to inseparable little Celine and Thérèse. (What happened to Leonie? Odd girl out. Seldom mentioned. Worth a book of her own.)

It's a fact of Thérèse's destiny that others, particularly her mother and sisters, always got the last word about her inner life, sealing their interpretations with a holy kiss. Thérèse's mother's letters have been carefully preserved. And we can read in them how the relentless sugar-coating of Thérèse's every action began even before she was born, setting the youngest child up for a terrific burden to please, to act, and to show off. In pregnancy, the matriarch, Zelig Martin, reported several occasions of the babe in her womb singing and fighting off attacks of that ever-present devil. From conception on, Thérèse had no right to her own text, or perhaps we should say, to her own song. Her family scripted her to be a little saint before she even emerged into the light of this world.

When the child offered fierce, choking tantrums, the family script demanded these be interpreted as the devil's attempt to gain foothold. Huge dramas of sin and redemption, guilt and reconciliation, characterized Thérèse's nursery. She emerged from it anxious, self-obsessed, tearful and scrupulous. The family protected her, because of her perceived fragility, from any real-world challenge—by age eleven, she had never dressed herself or combed her own hair. Furthermore, Thérèse journals innocently, “every

day, to please papa, the little Queen had her hair curled, to the surprise of her companions and especially her teachers.” She had none of the grounding and foundation in real tasks every child needs, yet she was pushed onto a high-road of religious achievement which dictated she be successful at meaningless pious exercises or face horrific eternal punishment. From lonely despair, she could only be saved by rushing into the arms of *maman*, till she died, *papa*—till he became rather queer and hidden—or Pauline and Marie, till they entered the convent. Imagine Beth, without Marmee, Meg or Jo.

Thérèse was taught to fear everything outside the house, though she had plenty to worry her inside it. Thus, worldly corruption terrified her—going to a cousin’s house, where they danced quadrilles, or sitting on the lap of Uncle Isidore while he told the tale of *Bluebeard*, or sneaking a peak at the newspaper and following the career of the latest serial killer of prostitutes. Thérèse knew, at some level, more about evil than she had psychic stamina to handle: listen, don’t read *Bluebeard* to little girls. In fact, she had no resilience at all, and this emotional condition quickly translated into physical vulnerability.

Thérèse’s mother, Zélie Martin, was already ill with breast cancer when Thérèse was born, and so Thérèse was sent to the country to a wet nurse named Rose Taille. Thérèse apparently became very attached to Rose and, when the mother and surrogate mother met now and then in the marketplace, the toddler Thérèse caused Zélie great sorrow by turning away from her and screaming for the wet nurse. Thérèse suffered terribly when she was finally brought home. Sent away, returned: the first great dislocation. *Milk and the denial of milk*, the terrible hunger which so often creates the narcissistic personality. Zélie Martin died when Thérèse was four years old, under circumstances the modern reader would find Gothic. The dying woman hid herself away in a distant room to muffle her cries of pain; Thérèse was shut out in the hall, no one looking after the missing child; looming over her was what she later discovered to be her mother’s waiting coffin. “Though I’d never seen one before, I understood what it was. I was so little that, in spite of Mama’s small stature, I had to raise my head to take in its full height.”

Indeed.

If one were to attempt a prose analysis of Thérèse's journal, the words one would find recurring would be "little" and "heaven," along with many words which further encapsulate helplessness, diminishment, incapacity—erasures which she would later make a virtue of, even a theology—not that there is anything wrong with this, if you have an ego to start with. It worked for Martin Luther. But I think there is a part of Thérèse pinned forever to the floor in front of the abyss of her mother's coffin. And much that would define her later journey is an attempt to get away from it, or perhaps to get into it.

In a pious nineteenth-century family so much defined by loss, heaven becomes a live concept. I grew up in a family like this, and I think that many people my age remember what that was like. I want to make a jump forward in time here and comment on a fact that Thérèse's biographers have not sufficiently noticed. It's now, finally, acknowledged that Thérèse, in the last year of her agonizing struggle with tuberculosis, suffered from an almost complete spiritual desolation. Until Ida Görres wrote her biography, this part of Thérèse's diary was strictly censored, written out of the history. Today, you'll find scholars of ascetic philosophy arguing about whether she suffered a classic Dark Night of the Soul, type A or B, or a Night of the Senses, type C, suitable only for women. This line of inquiry annoys me. Thérèse herself has, for a change, the best summary. *I pray*, she writes, *but Jesus does not keep up his part of the conversation*. As I read her late journals, what torments her is not a loss of faith in God, which paradoxically she clings to. Rather, she had lost her belief in *heaven*. And it was on the heaven of nineteenth-century piety, where death would have no dominion, and we will see again our lost puppies and kittens, that Thérèse had bet all her money, a wager passionate as Pascal's.

After her mother's death, Thérèse's earthly task became a search for affection. Even on her deathbed, proud of her journal, she found joy in the fact that "everyone will love me for it!" (Highly unlikely, considering the truths she told about the other nuns.) She demanded attention, above all, from her sisters, Pauline and Marie. One citation here may establish both

her passionate attachment and her sense of incapacity. She addressed this section of her journal to Pauline, who had by then become her mother prioress at Carmel: “You and Marie, Mother, were you not the most tender and selfless of mothers. Ah! if He had not showered His beneficent rays upon His little flower, she would never have accustomed herself to earth, for she was too weak to stand up against the rains and the storms.”

This was likely the simple truth. When Pauline left the household to become a Carmelite, Thérèse had the first of what my grandmother would have called a nervous breakdown. Most biographers play down this series of incidents, repeated several years later when the second sister, Marie, left home for Carmel, but it's hard to overlook hallucinations, a near-fatal wasting disease, and strange physical contortions that one of the servants likened to demonic possession. Thérèse herself attributes this and other mysterious illnesses and manifestations to the workings of Satan, trying to keep her from her religious vocation. She was cured, wakened from her tormented fugue-state, by a “miracle”—much publicized around town—in which the statue of the Blessed Virgin at her bedside turned to her and smiled. The longed-for maternal approval.

Bourgeois culture had a horror of mental illness, especially because families tended to think it was inherited and would damage an individual's prospects for success. I think Thérèse's psychic fragility accounts for much of the panicky attention her sisters bestowed on her, both at home and in the convent. The Martin sisters would later confess to feeling humiliated amidst their critical fellow nuns by their father, Louis Martin's, mental illness. He was institutionalized for a time after Thérèse, his “little Queen,” entered Carmel. He had become violent and given to roaming around town waving a revolver.

Why are these Martin girls bolting away from home the minute they hit puberty? Even by nineteenth-century standards, I find this family odd and unhealthily introverted; they turned a ring of thorns to the outside world, as Ida Görres put it. Görres hopefully imagines *love* inside, but I think about a perfervid hothouse of festering affection alternating with austere emotional and physical hunger. One of the lost Martin babies, it's

worth noting, died of starvation at the house of a wet nurse in town. Alençon, where they lived then, was a *village* in the nineteenth century. Was nobody paying attention to a baby fostering down the street?

To Thérèse, the widowed father, Louis, was always *cher papa, poor papa*—but what dreams she had. She tells of a nightmare about devils in the garden, where she habitually walked with her father—the father who, after his wife’s death, made Thérèse his confidante and “little Queen.” But worse, there is the archetypal vision—Thérèse does not think she was asleep when it came to her—when she saw her father suddenly manifest in the garden, “stooped,” she tells us, “his *head* [italics hers] covered with a sort of apron of indistinct color [which] hid his face.” She says that “a feeling of supernatural fright invaded my soul,” and, indeed, the vision seems to have troubled her year after year as she tried to decode it: “Ah! why was it to me that God gave this light? Why did He show such a small child a thing she couldn’t understand, a thing which, if she had understood, would have made her die of grief?” Such poignant words.

Later Thérèse will conflate this image of her father’s veiled face with the hidden face of Jesus, taking her name in Carmel, “Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face.” She had koans of her own.

I have spent much of my academic life studying the English writer Virginia Woolf, whose time in the world overlaps Thérèse’s. I am struck by certain similarities. For both, there is the early loss of the mother, and desperate reattachment to new maternal figures who abandon or torment them sadistically. Both had strange, needy, controlling fathers. There are the same childhood episodes of prolonged hysteria. The same threatening visions, the anxiety about and attraction toward being looked at, the horror of mirrors. Virginia was an incest survivor. I find no indication in Thérèse’s text that she was physically violated—though one does find a curious premature sexualization in her interest in whores, fallen women and dashing serial rapists—but I do find an overheated—and, as we would now say—*inappropriate* father-daughter bond. This particular crucible of absent mother and overweening father tends to produce the brief and brilliant flare of a creative daughter. I have noted the pattern in the lives of, for

example, Woolf, Emily Dickinson, and Dorothy Day (who had a “devotion” to Thérèse). Much depends on the girl attaining a room—or cell—of her own. A place, as the old liturgy put it, of coolness, light and peace.

Clearly, the older Martin sisters were at pains to get the younger ones out of the house. But once inside the Carmel of Lisieux, the sisters recreate their familiar crucible. In a community of twenty-five, one-fifth of the nuns were at one time Martin girls, if we count the addition of a first cousin, Marie. I asked a friend of mine, who is a family therapist, about some patterns of behavior that sisters might manifest in a pathologically enmeshed family. She said that, when older sisters can't protect the youngest, they tend to lavishly reward her with praise and the family silver. Or, they tend to re-victimize such a sibling, as demonstrably, the whole Martin family victimized the middle child, Leonie. Translated to a new community, we would expect to see the family dynamics revived.

This is one way to interpret the games the Martin sisters played with their on-again, off-again prioress, Mother Marie de Gonzague, their designated abuser, who withheld morphine from Thérèse on her death bed (her sisters fed it to her in spoonfuls of Lourdes water). And clearly the older Martin sisters were determined to prove their baby to be a chosen soul. The alternative, according to the strict interpretive canons of the nineteenth century, was to let her be mentally ill. She had been, with considerable publicity around Lisieux, cured of her childhood hysteria by a vision of the Blessed Virgin, and Mother Marie de Gonzague, in particular, seemed both fascinated by and jealous of the reputation Thérèse brought to Carmel. She was determined to poke and prod it, to make it suffer.

Biography, as I said earlier, tends to reflect the issues of the writer and the patterns of the culture. So does memoir, which falls under the rubric of non-fiction; Oprah Winfrey only knows what a grisly area we get into when we try to sort out the truth-claims of nonfiction. Why did Thérèse write as she did? Why did her sisters construct her identity as they did? Why did the whole thing catch on in the popular imagination? It happened in the context of a Catholicism desperately trying to slither backward into the good old days of 1400 or so. In his “Syllabus of Errors,”

Pope Pius IX had condemned modernism, liberalism, socialism—don't even mention Communism—and I suppose, by extension, Virginia Woolf and her Bloomsbury coterie. He made the Immaculate Conception an article of faith. He tied up these particularly odd bits of doctrine with the declaration of himself as infallible.

In his novel, *Arthur and George*, the contemporary British author, Julian Barnes, situates his hero, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, as a dutiful Catholic in this transitional epoch. Conan Doyle inquires of his more skeptical friend, George, “What is the church threatened by?” “By science,” replies George. “By the spread of skeptical teaching. By the loss of the Papal States. By the loss of political influence. By the prospect of the twentieth century.” Given this embattled ecclesia, what could be more appealing than a fresh-faced Norman girl who practiced what she called her “Little Way”—of niceness, sentimental effusion, and self-sacrifice? Here was a woman who knew her place, an example to us all.

Let me go back, for a moment, to Ida Görres' biography, *The Hidden Face*. In so-doing, we might explore a different concept of religious obedience, one a bit closer to our own experience, but one which I still find inadequate to sustain the moral weight of women's experience in the twenty-first century.

Görres' great insight came through her discovery of Thérèse's “true face.” She writes that, as a university student in the Germany of the 1940s she was transfixed one day by a young man's pirated copy of a photograph of Thérèse, which had been published against the consent of the Lisieux Carmel and the French hierarchy. Ida Görres and her student friends were stunned by this image and the challenge it constituted—for them—to traditional images of piety. One young man called it “the face of a female Christ.” Can anyone imagine young people having a conversation like this today?

It was this “hidden face” which propelled Ida Görres into her biographical work. Nowadays, it's easy to find this suppressed, subversive image on line: an attractive face, a complex gaze. If it resembles a female Christ, it is the Christ of a Byzantine icon. Thérèse's childhood coincided with the advent of photography. Her sister, Celine, was a serious practitioner of the

art and Thérèse was her favorite subject. Other published photographs suggest an actressy temperament; there are several of Thérèse posing as a pre-Raphaelite Joan of Arc. But then, everybody loved the girl to show off, to act, to stand on the table and sing. She was the baby of the family, and of the convent. Spoiled and punished.

In one important way Görres' biography fails the modern reader trying to find a version of Thérèse she can live with: every time Görres comes up against a monumental absurdity, she humbly bows her head in the direction of Rome. The pope had canonized this girl and must know best—unless—this is Görres' preferred method of interpretation—she can pass off some folly as a weakness of the undisciplined French. Ida Görres was a German, writing during and just after World War II. She obviously thought the French were a pack of poodles.

Görres introduces her subject in the first chapter with what she characterizes as “uneasiness.” She progresses to “outright repugnance.” As a theological progressive, Görres associates the cult of Thérèse with fantastic trumpery, kitsch, trashy popularity, banality, narrow horizons and poverty of content, self-satisfied pietism, and insipidity. If I have merely called attention to Thérèse's narcissism, Görres observes that the “little way” consists in “fashioning an extraordinarily high opinion of oneself on the basis of insignificant achievements of human obligations which every other ethic passes over silently out of good taste, if not out of humility or modesty.” Declaring herself repeatedly a loyal daughter of the church, Görres complains that “It certainly seemed as if the Church were elevating into an absolute, a form of Christian devotion which had been increasingly regarded by many of us as the most dubious and fleeting kind of piety in the history of the Church.”

For Görres and her reforming student friends, Thérèse represented a bourgeois foolishness they had pledged to transform. But the canonization, the imprimatur, of the church compels her to genuflect. It does not compel me. But Ida Görres poses a subtle question, which does command my attention: “What is the meaning of [her] unique, fabulous manifestation of other-worldly, celestial power in the sphere of our lives? What was it testimony of, and for whom?”

If you think I'm writing this just to trash Thérèse, and to quote authoritative writers trashing Thérèse, let me just jump for a moment to something like an explanation for my rage and love: if a phony, sentimental, narcissistic, memoir-obsessed actressy deluded *French* person like Thérèse managed to tough it out, there is hope for me. I need all the roses I can stack up. And, ultimately, I take a deep breath and nod to religious tradition rather in the same spirit Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel obeyed the dietary laws of Deuteronomy, because I don't understand it.

I want to explore, in conclusion, the way she toughed it out.

As I began, in the summer of 2007, to write about Thérèse's desolation of spirit in the final year of her life, I was instructed by the revelations breaking just then about Mother Teresa. You may remember a week or so of vague scandal in the popular press about the revelation that Mother Teresa was not as happy and loving as she put on. Her smile was often forced; she had, like her beloved Thérèse of Lisieux, long ago lost any sense of communication with Jesus.

It sounded like being married. Why was anyone surprised?

As I said before, Thérèse's particular agony revolved around her doubts about heaven. Well, she had stupid ideas about heaven. But so did everybody in her culture who remained loyal to the church. About *Dark Night of the Soul*, I've come to believe that it represents a knock on the door of the brain. *Hello, you believe something stupid. Because you are about to be parted from your cherished illusion, you suffer.* Anybody who is loyal to a vocation or a love affair for more than five years goes through this process over and over. One of the most significant things Thérèse said in her journal was, "I can nourish myself on nothing but the truth."

Therefore, given the resources of her culture, she starved.

Thérèse's life constitutes a witness against the deceitfulness of her world, which remains in most respects the deceitfulness of our contemporary world. The lies began with her mother hiding herself in her room with breast cancer, with her father's perfervid, needy affection, with her sisters' infantilizing of her, with the overstuffed furnishings of a drawing room that sent her joyfully to embrace the austerity of her cell in the Carmel of Lisieux. Yet—"Everything is grace": another of Thérèse's great, simple explanations,

which, like Martin Luther, I cling to. In the dither of it all, she had just enough sense to head for the very simple. It is in this almost impossible task that I want to be her follower, in the search for a “condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything,” as the poet T.S. Eliot put it.

At her canonization, a famous French cleric called Thérèse, “an annihilated soul,” *une ame détruite*. Even a poodle can be a serious dog. In the end, she was burned away from inside by *call it love*. She called it love. If we think this immolated life has dubious claim, we must recall our experience of other victimized, disabled, marginalized, irrelevant people—or let me consider the victimized, disabled, marginalized, irrelevant members of my own inner committee. They (we) are often malevolent, bitter and violent. Though they may smile, we may smile. Then there are the rare ones, and we know them also, who can refine this abandonment into strength, into a redemptive compassion. The Dalai Lama, if I read him correctly, is on to this.

It's interesting to revisit certain unflappable Catholic thinkers who have “gotten” Thérèse: Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Flannery O'Connor, writers who have otherwise been attracted to scriptural contexts like “Love is as hard as death and as dark as hell,” or “The kingdom of heaven is taken by violence and the violent bear it away.”

I mentioned earlier that my study of Thérèse's journals and biographies had presented me with difficult koans, and that, ultimately, my reading of Ida Görres, the best of her interpreters, had not given me peace. Just lately, though, I have had to revise my understanding, and therefore, this essay. The new revision came about when I tracked down a biography that hadn't been available in my library system. I hadn't tried too hard to find it, because I mistrusted the writer, Kathryn Harrison, or at least I was wary of what I assumed would be her premise. Kathryn Harrison's debut book (*The Kiss*) was a memoir about father/daughter incest and I assumed she'd go that interpretive route. She didn't. Instead, Harrison spoke to my deepest disquiet: *if so much of religion is clearly pathological, then is religion merely pathology?*

Harrison clearly recognizes the instability of Thérèse's mental condition, but her analysis turns on this perceptive sentence, toward the end of

her book: “A skeptic would say that Thérèse gave the name *God* to her internal strategy for survival. But perhaps every mystic finds a way to the divine through a rent in his or her psyche, a wound that might, in a lesser soul, result in self-absorption, vanity, avarice, envy.”

To write in the genre of memoir is, at some level, to beg to be understood. I don't think people write memoirs who are *easily* understood or who feel their worlds to be full of girlish confidantes. Confidences, however delivered, offer a gift to the world. As Kathryn Harrison wrote of Thérèse, “She bares her soul, and to witness this is to realize how seldom humans do.”

I used to have a tee shirt that read, *Conform, Go Crazy or Become an Artist*. I'm not sure that these are the choices that face everyone, nor am I sure that becoming one excludes another, or that these are the only choices. But it is a mantra in terms of which I understand Thérèse, Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf. I will not, finally, interpret Thérèse's religious decisions as an aspect of pathology. There are certain cries that the universe answers with all available fire equipment.

Let me review her reasons for screaming “Fire!”

Torn from her mother, Thérèse adored Rose Taille, her wet nurse. Torn from Rose, she clings to the restored mother. In the shadow of her mother's coffin, she goes crazy until she has a vision of the Blessed Virgin: a mother who will never desert her. The vision steadies her, but when she confides it to others, it is quickly commodified and picked over by the nuns up the street at Carmel, especially by the extremely weird Mother Marie de Gonzague, who, from those early visits in the convent parlor, seems to have been trying to lure Thérèse into her sado-masochistic web. Mother Marie de Gonzague is the one who will make the girl work till she literally collapses with TB, and—remember—deny her morphine in her last suffering. Neurosis, Kathryn Harrison argues, does not exclude supernatural intervention. “Is anguish blind to the divine?” she asks. “Or might it sometimes be granted extra powers of perception?” This is a good question.

Thérèse's life in the convent continues, like the third movement of a symphony, to recapitulate the melodies we've heard before. On the one hand she continues to be spoiled—this was a very lax Carmel—by the

other nuns, especially Pauline and Marie, but also by the family outside. Louis Martin made daily visits, bringing champagne, cakes, candy and even, Thérèse records, a kind of piñata which broke open to reveal more sweets. Thérèse's aunt mitigated the rule about Carmelites wearing straw sandals to bring her niece fur-lined slippers. As the baby of the convent, Thérèse had full play for her histrionic gifts, delighting the nuns with her poems, sentimental paintings and the playlets she starred in.

Yet, she remains the incompetent "Baby," a nickname she always used for herself. She scandalized the nuns by her lack of talent at housework. Asked to sweep the novitiate stairs, she had no ideal how to handle a broom and was afraid of spiders. Longing yet again for a mother, she became prey to such a tormenting love for Mother Marie de Gonzague that she would haunt the corridors outside the prioress's door, imagining errands to take her into the presence. Mother Marie de Gonzague's tendency to encourage this sort of thing became legend. And outside, down the street, evolved the horror of papa's decline, eventually into violent behavior and incarceration in the asylum.

As noted earlier, when Thérèse became a professed nun she added to her name, according to the custom of Carmel, the appellations "of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face." One can search the internet these days and find, besides the "hidden face," lots of kinky Lisieux memorabilia—vacationers' photos of Thérèse's curly blonde hair, cut off at her religious profession, the little images Catholics call "holy cards" from Thérèse's own missal. These are the Catholic equivalent of baseball cards, and they used to be a kind of legal tender in convents and parochial school. One day, while I was surfing the web for Thérèse-trivia, I came upon a photograph of Louis Martin, and, on another site, Thérèse's own holy card of Jesus' "Holy Face." The resemblance is striking. In my presentation to the elderly nuns, I projected the two images side-by-side. There was a collective intake of breath in the darkened room, and silence, as these women processed an understanding much deeper than mine could be. Later, an old sister approached me on her walker and uttered the words, "You go, girl."

If one looks at Thérèse's poems—recently published—one discovers an

innocent eroticism in the girl's confusion of Jesus and *cher papa*. What did it matter, ultimately, as neither of them was answering the phone to her?

This is a young lady who, hand in hand with papa as a child, would gleefully crow—and be encouraged to crow—that she saw her initial “T” shining among the stars at night over Alençon. She died in the most horrible abandonment. There was not a capital “T”; there was not any light at all. Thérèse wrote: “When I want to rest my heart fatigued by the darkness that surrounds by the memory of the luminous country after which I aspire, my torment redoubles.” The darkness mocks her, she says, with the voice of sinners making fun of her dreams of light, of a “fatherland” in heaven. The voices promise only “a death which will give you not what you hope for but a night still more profound, the night of nothingness.”

Thérèse has been designated as, among other things, the patron saint of a good death.

When I wrote about my mother's death in 2001, I told how I came to develop what the old traditions would call a full-blown devotion to St. Thérèse. My mom was quite the actress, quite the narcissist—and there was a point in that passage with her which led me to understand, *so am I*. It was only half in jest that I prayed my mother across the bridge of her death with one of those novenas to St. Thérèse “never known to fail.” I wrote that Thérèse, in her own extremity, must have had the resources of a poodle in a snowstorm. It is hard to read through the sentimental, self-serving dreck of Thérèse's journal, without feeling, as one comes to the last thirty pages, that one has broken through to quite another country. Now we are in a place cold and austere, we are above the tree line. This may be an awful place, but it is *real*. Kathryn Harrison, on this terrain, significantly uncovers and quotes a citation from the French existentialist Jean Paul Sartre, which had been cited by a Dominican priest writing on Thérèse:

You see the void above our heads? That is God. You see this hole in the ground? That's what God is. You see this crack in the door? That's God, too. Silence is God. Absence is God. God is human loneliness.

Harrison goes on to witness that it is at this moment, for her at least, that

Thérèse becomes a saint, because she has at last become human: “. . . given birth to her naked self, plummeting to earth, wet and new and terrified.”

I find the achievement profoundly sad. Thérèse wanted annihilation, “to be unpetaled forever, to make God happy. Period.” Thus her translator, Father John Clarke, O.C.D., paraphrases her agenda.

But why should God want that? As Harrison notes, “Thérèse consistently evoked the idea of immersion in divine love with verbs that were destructive, murderous, vengeful . . . self must be *humiliated* . . . *exiled*, *broken*, *burned*, *despised*, *unpetaled*, *pierced*, *incinerated*, *rent*, *consumed*, *flooded*, *flung out*, *squandered*, *withered*.”

Stay tuned. When I write my *Little Way*, it is going to be a *Very Little Way*, and there will be lots of napping. If we follow saints all the way to their death beds, we find some intriguing places to *start*, not finish. Dying, Thomas Aquinas said that everything he had written was “grass.” I wish my theology professors had taken that more to heart, as I trundled through the *Summa*. Dying, St. Francis of Assisi, when asked what he'd do over again, said he'd be kinder to his body, which he called Brother Ass.

Sister Swan, Sister Poodle on an Ice Floe. Take care of that puppy. One of my pastor friends announces every Sunday, “This is the House of Mercy and welcome to it.” I think that's what Thérèse would tell us today, if she'd gone through Vatican II. If they'd had streptomycin in those days. If the poor child had had a chance to grow up.

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Watching the End of the World from Hovland, Minnesota
for Robin

“In all creation accounts . . . life was called into being through language,
thought, dreaming or singing, acts of interior consciousness . . .
It was all sacred.” —Linda Hogan, *Dwelling*.

-1-

Those who bring messages between worlds
climb over the sill now; pleats of their thorned
wings rattle with tales shed in the slither and haste,
carried so long. I wake to their soft imperative
keening. Out of the west, a surf rises. Rain.
You, too, croon in your love and promise me
years of sorrow from which you cannot protect me.
Lovers are that psychic.

Morels on goat prairie gloat in their secret light.
Spruce, speaking of green on green.
Beyond our pocket of woods and wind,
maybe the world has exploded. We will find out
one day, how the thing ended.

-2-

At the other end of God's word is God's silence.
There is a burned smell on the wind. The dog tells me,
her ears up, where you are. I look into the lake
and think of a fountain filled with blood. Over the hill,
you sing for a rift in granite, blooming forget-me-nots,
spilled by a prodigal mind. The dog's nose twitches.
She looks for the other dog over the hill at your feet.

-3-

It's north enough here for ravens: that raucous note,
like a blade through dinner, delivers its say,
the story we never listened to, sounding like *go*
or *stay*. Does it matter? Raven's contempt
for the weak is a matter of record. Old one-eyed
man at the door looks in at the sandwiches. Under
our grace, the food cools. You uncap the home-beer,
and we live simply together as if such patience
could hold off the wind.

-4-

It was all sacred: look, here comes a shadow
out of the west, behind it a quilt of light
and, again, like a line of black whales, that bar.
The gulls ride it, endure without even fishing,
the cycles of night and day, preferring neither,
till one by one they fly up and hover, bringing
the day's letter from that creation, its holy way.

-5-

Weather moves fast on this edge. The dogs
break training and lie on the quilt; it's too cold
to creep out of the envelope after a blanket,
even to shut the door. Life double-quick:
fans of light feather among spruce branches; breath
slows to the pace of wave action on fundament,
the place where, in music, no overtones stir up the note.

Here we can call and answer each other
with pure sound.

-6-

A German exchange student, hunting for verbs,
struggles out of the Temperance River.
You carry the dogs, who learn to surrender
like sacks, over the currents they will not swim.
I walk them a few pools, leaning against my legs,
through the hungry water.

Middle air under Temperance Falls is quick to kill,
feels like froth when you surface. As an infant
might take in the lake of the womb, we choke
if we're lucky and look surprised. The spirit, at death,
will lift through a hinge in the skull; these bird prints
of creation a newborn skull keeps open for options.
The body is not a closed system; we are veiling adrift
like sea jelly. Death, considered that way, is easy.

Each day, we make a decision to stay, close the hatch
of the fontanel, cease communication with outside.
Each year we dive to more dangerous caves
under the falls, look for new hand-holds,
making our bodies small.

-7-

Maybe it's time for our lives to change also! crows
scream as they slide through the air, in that way they have,
as though cut out of lead. Maybe they've screamed it
forever, back through the years before Buddha,
bright children, expecting to be the ones chosen,
surprised when a popular kid gets the nod instead. Silent
most of the summer, they catch urgent updrafts today,
as cicadas waken. Squirrels, too, anticipate drama,
tell each other. Even the dogs, nails trim, domiciled,
send up their wolf's wail.