

## VITA SPIRITUALIS

HALLETT, NICKY, *Lives of Spirit: English Carmelite Self-Writing of the Early Modern Period*. 2007, pp. 299. Ashgate Publishing Limited, Gower House, Croft Road, Aldershot, Hampshire GU11 3HR, England (www.ashgate.com). ISBN 9-780-7546-0675-8. £55.00.

This book comprises an edited (and abbreviated) collection of accounts of the lives of Carmelite nuns in the English convents in the Netherlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, taken from the annals that were compiled to bear witness to the tribulations these women overcame to become nuns and their daily lives of obedience and humility, as well as to the occasional miraculous occurrence. The sub-title ‘self-writing’ is in some ways misleading, since they are largely written in the third person, with occasional quotations from autobiographical accounts; they are, however, drawn largely from personal recollections – often of childhoods in England marked by early devotion.

The editor, Dr. Nicky Hallett, is aware of the problematic preconceptions that can be caused by terminology: she writes in the first footnote to her lengthy introduction that “Throughout this book, “Life”, “Lives” or “self-writing” are used in preference to “autobiography” or “biography” since these last two terms are generally associated with generic preconceptions that do not always apply to personal spiritual testimony’ [p.1]. The capitalised ‘Life’ has overtones of hagiography, and some of the entries in the annals are included with a clear intention to be a testimony to the sanctity of the nuns, as is the case with the appendix to the Life of Mother Mary Xaveria which recounts how her body was found incorrupt about two years after her death, while paying at least lip service to the authority of the church hierarchy:

The body is kept in a little roome joyning ye quire of ye nuns, and not in ye quire itself, because they would not do any thing wch may seem to have ye show of publick veneration till ye Superiors of ye church allow of it, yet as they tel me, if ye voice of ye people may be said to be the voice of God, she has long since been canonized [p. 167].

Some of Hallett’s concerns about ideas of ‘autobiography’ and associated assumptions about self-realization of the individual are found also in the Introduction to a collection of autobiographical writings by seventeenth-century Englishwomen, *Her Own Life*,<sup>1</sup> which suggests that, “The development of auto-

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<sup>1</sup> Elspeth Graham, Hilary Hinds, Elaine Hobby & Helen Wilcox, (eds.), *Her Own Life: Autobiographical Writings by Seventeenth-Century Englishwomen*, (London: Routledge, 1989).

biography in the seventeenth century and the subsequent rise of the novel have often been associated with the origins in that same period of bourgeois individualism, which made possible and promoted a focus of individual experience' [p. 1]. Many of the accounts in *Her Own Life* are 'conversion narratives' or Protestant declarations of faith and so, like the Lives of the contemporary Carmelite nuns, are 'public documents, with a social purpose' [p. 3]. For the Carmelite nuns, however, there was a tension, as Hallett suggests, between 'self-writing' and 'a contemplative tradition that aspired to self-forgetfulness' [p. 8].

In her Introduction, Hallett seems to be straining to place these writings within the discourse of feminist interpretation and appropriation of early modern history, but one must ask whether she needs to. She seems more confident when she abandons the imbrication of quotations and lets her own voice speak, as she allows the nuns to speak in their own voices. The nuns themselves rarely mention any issues specific to their gender: the topos of the poor, weak, or uneducated female found in the medieval writers Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich (neither of whom was weak or uneducated) is not present. Rather, the necessity for choir nuns of learning Latin is mentioned, as is the necessary business acumen of the prioresses. One of the lives included is that of a man, Edmund Bedingfield, who was confessor at the Lierre Carmel and related to a number of the nuns.

The only specific reference to gendered spirituality is the concern about female mysticism, which was viewed with suspicion: the preface to the Life of Mary Xaveria of the Angels addresses the concern about 'publishing any thing which appears singular', especially 'with relation to weamen', since some regard them as weak and so more open to the 'force of imagination and fancy'. The remedy to such possible discrediting is accurate accounts backed with 'sufficient testimonies' [p. 137]. Yet visions often 'occasioned little surprise', as Hallett points out [p. 61] with reference to the experience of Margaret of Saint-Francis, a lay sister who expressed no surprise at seeing Sister Anne a while after her death 'coming up the dead cellar staires' and asking for a particular devotion for her deliverance out of Purgatory [p. 62].

Nevertheless, the experience of these nuns bears resemblance to that of female religious throughout the history of the Church. Hallett considers these writings as evidence of women's experience of enclosure, obedience and spiritual illumination; as such they take on an almost ahistorical quality and similar expressions can be found in the writing of earlier female religious. Much of what she writes about the nuns and their choice of enclosure could apply equally to medieval anchoresses, especially the idea that enclosure could be liberating: 'the nature of enclosure protected the religious from outside intrusion' [p. 15]. The language of spatiality that Hallett employs – inner/outer, private/public – has also been used recently in studies of medieval nuns, as has the language of the body; as Hallett points out, the papers 'provide rich details of beliefs about the body' [p. 24].

The convents in the Netherlands were a real as well as metaphorical haven and refuge for exiles from Protestant England, viewed as dangerously

heretic. Some account of the history of these convents and their foundation might have been helpful – the information arrives piecemeal in separate introductory pieces to relevant Lives. Because of Hallett's decision to present the Lives in the order in which they occur in the original papers from the Antwerp and Lierre Carmels it is sometimes difficult to get a sense of a continuous history. Nevertheless, Hallett's argument for her editorial decision is valid and to be applauded:

This decision has the key advantage of minimizing editorial interventions to allow voices to speak for themselves. It also preserves the sense of community, which is so evident in the original papers, the elaborate interconnectedness of the daily lives of women living together within shared histories and spaces [p. 30].

Many readers may prefer to use the helpful index to choose passages to read relevant to their own interests, and the bibliography will point them to material that will supply the necessary historical context.

One disadvantage of Hallett's editorial decision may be the eccentric spelling; she usually supplies a translation where necessary but some words are left without explanation (is *resouled* resolved? *upsarue* observe?), and I found out only via the index that a *tourier* is a key-holder. The retention of contemporary letter forms – *u* for *v* – adds to the confusion, as does the transcription of what was presumably a form of the letter thorn (*þ* pronounced *th*) as *y* (as in *Ye Olde Tea Shoppe*). Hallett does, however, provide the reader with full information about diseases, cures, food and other details of the nuns' daily lives.

The diseases and, in particular, the last illnesses are of great importance in these Lives – which are, indeed, as much about dying and death as about living. Neither the original readers of the papers nor the present reader of Hallett's collection is spared the gruesome details of lengthy illnesses where the body itself is decaying before death, as in this account of the death of Anne Teresa of Jesus:

Her last sicknis, which was only 7 days duerince [endurance], she being much spent and worne a way with a vioent humour in her head & forehead, wch was all of a scrufe & some 2 months before her death became an intyer scab, & all downe her temples runing a vast quantety of theitk [thick] green and yellow matter [p. 227].

In the absence of persecution, such deaths take on the force of martyrdom and, like medieval accounts of virgin martyrs such as Katherine, emphasise the physicality of the torture. As with the virgin martyrs, the sign of sanctity and grace was the ability to endure such suffering without complaint or even murmur. Agonising deaths are described without sentiment, except the expression of relief when death finally comes. The death of Anne of the Ascension from smallpox was associated with a sweet smell [p. 51]; while the body of Margaret of Saint-Teresa, who died in old age when she had 'growne very croked' was transformed after death so that her corpse 'did testifey to all yt saw it ye angelicall purity of her soule' [pp. 176-7].

These lives are like those of the medieval virgins in other ways: like them they often showed signs of deep devotion in childhood and sometimes had to overcome parental opposition to enter the convent. Those granted visions see angels with the eyes of the soul, not the body, and the language of the *Song of Songs* – so familiar to students of medieval spirituality – is used to describe the delights of Paradise:

As I have been transported into Purgatory and Hell, so I have allso seemed to be in a place of Paradise of pleasures and delights. I know not how to express what this place was like, but I think I may say with ye spouse in ye Canticles, I have found him whom my soul loveth [p. 157].

These Lives testify to a community that was textual as well as physical, continuing beyond the life span of individual sisters: the common features of these lives and the recurring themes of divine intervention and human frailty mean the collection speaks as much about communality as it does about individual lives. Many of the nuns were inspired to join the Carmelites after reading Teresa's book: the vocation itself is constructed through a piece of self-writing, but in that vocation the self is renounced. This book is a useful resource, not only for the history of the Carmelites, or that of early-modern religious or female religious, but for an understanding of how the Life of the Spirit was expressed in the lives – and deaths – of women. And one man.

CATE GUNN

#### MARIOLOGIA

IR. AUGUSTA DE CASTRO COTTA, CDP, *Encontro com a mãe Maria: Flos Carmeli, Nossa Senhora do Carmo*, Juiz de Fora 2008.

Il presente volumetto si configura come sussidio che contiene una proposta di celebrazione di una Novena alla Madonna del Carmine in lingua portoghese. Pur nelle dimensioni non rilevanti, l'autrice, una suora carmelitana brasiliana molto attiva nel campo della liturgia e della pastorale, nonché sensibile alle tematiche socio-antropologiche, ha saputo condensare ed armonizzare dati storici e culturali che hanno sostenuto da sempre questa pia pratica così cara all'Ordine Carmelitano.

Il testo è articolato in quattro parti di diversa estensione: I. La Novena preceduta da un'Introduzione nella quale è compendiato il cammino storico del culto alla Madonna del Carmine; II. Alcune orazioni mariane proprie della famiglia carmelitana; III. Le litanie; IV. Un'antologia di canti mariani.

Per quanto concerne lo svolgimento della Novena viene presentato uno schema fisso per ogni giorno nel quale ci si sofferma su una dimensione di vita riferita al legame tra Maria ed il Carmelo (1. Presenza di Maria nel Carmelo, luogo della scoperta di Dio; 2. Maria, Dimora di Dio e la vita dei Car-