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Suffering, Sufrimiento, Teresa de Cartagena, Otredad, Alterity

DISSIDENCES

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Suffering as Such: Reframing Teresa de Cartagena's Discourse of the Ultimate Other

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The traditional opposition between theory and practice will disappear before the metaphysical transcendence by which a relation with the absolutely Other, or truth, is established, and of which ethics is the royal road. Hitherto the relation between theory and practice was not conceivable Other than as a solidarity or a hierarchy activity rests on cognitions that illuminate it; knowledge requires from acts the mastery of matter, minds, and societies—a technique, a morality, a politics—that procures the peace necessary for its pure exercise. We shall go further, and, at the risk of appearing to confuse theory and practice, deal with both as modes of metaphysical transcendence.
Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*

Suffering is always private yet universal. Each of us uniquely bears his or her own pain but also undergoes the universal experience of suffering. Physical pain is one of many kinds of affliction that human beings can endure but it's not the only type. Affliction can have many

causes, including injustice, political situations, heartbreak, or sharing someone else's anguish. If one meditates on "suffering as such"—universal suffering without regard for its causes and justifications (Wolcher 93)—, one can find insight in Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy. Few Western philosophers have ventured to question the mystery of suffering, and Levinas is the philosopher of "suffering as such", who deneutralizes the traditional conception of this term [1]. Levinas's innovative study poses a philosophical difficulty since his interpretation goes far beyond human awareness. He pursues the universal meaning of suffering as a quest to recognize the existence of the "Other". The Jewish philosopher explores the essential meaning of suffering as such by analyzing interpersonal relations, which are interpreted in Totality and Infinity as the self's intersubjectivity to "L'Autrui", the "Other" or "Other person" (Levinas, Totality and Infinity 79). His purpose is to demonstrate the way in which any person, the I, has the moral responsibility to help the Other since the Other—according to this view—has an "absolute moral claim" on each one of us (Blum 147).

There are, of course, many differences between Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) and the late-medieval nun Teresa de Cartagena (1425-?) [2], but I suggest that her works can be illuminated through some of Levinas's ideas on ethical responsibility. No one has yet done a study relating these two distinctive writers, and this work is but a preliminary attempt. Nevertheless, a Levinasian framework has already instructively been used to help understand religious lives. Edith Wyschogrod has shown the wide-ranging convenience of using Levinas's philosophy to understand saints' accounts and practices. Following the lead of Wyschogrod, Ann Astell has recently studied Levinas's commentary on paternity and maternity alongside St. Thérèse of Lisieux's (1873-1897) autobiography. Following these

critics, in this study I will utilize Levinas' philosophy in an attempt to understand the many voices of Teresa de Cartagena, and I anticipate bringing out a powerful communication between their texts as accounts of spiritual responsibility. I will start by briefly describing the basic notions and procedures they use to formulate an ethical responsibility.

Levinas considers the Other as a being which we cannot completely apprehend even though we try because the Other is beyond the realm of our consciousness. When we face the Other, ethical responsibility begins, "prior to deliberation and to which [one] I was exposed and dedicated before being dedicated to [oneself] myself" (Levinas, Entre nous 170). Even though the Other is an entity that is physically distant from the I, they still form a connection that surpasses the I's intellectual grasp of reality. Therefore, this "Other (L'Autrui) transcends the categories 'being/non being' and 'known/unknown,' and its face marks the site of the I's encounter with an Otherness that is absolute" (Wolcher 95). The I of Levinas becomes ethical responsibility itself, a responsibility to "use the body that lacks a 'user' or a site in consciousness" (Wolcher 96).

In the fifteenth century, Teresa de Cartagena, a Castilian nun, composed the spiritual treatise Grove of the Infirm (Arboleda de los enfermos) to find an ethical responsibility [3]. Cartagena, just as Levinas, makes use of the torment and distress that she endures in different sociopolitical contexts. Both writers show evidence of understanding their personal experience and their recognition of the Other as a social consciousness, and both sublimated their suffering and developed comparable ethical discourses of suffering. Nonetheless, there are some distinctions between these two writers.

While Levinas presents a philosophical interpretation of suffering as such, the medieval writer offers in her texts a more psychological and spiritual perspective of it. Cartagena rationalizes her experience of suffering from two different points of view: the social Other, which represents all Other individuals who bear an affliction and the Ultimate Other, God, which encompasses all, including the social Other. In regards to the social Other, Encarnación Juárez points out that “the fifteenth-century nun presents a phenomenon that concerns us deeply in our contemporary intellectual discourse: the social creation of the Other based on corporal, gender, racial, or class differences” (Juárez 132). Cartagena’s works deal with a wide range of social matters and problems which show that she cares for other human beings. She interprets her personal experience as a religious ethical responsibility by “structuralizing an amplification on the theme of sufferin” (Deyermond 23). On the other hand, Levinas approaches suffering as an existential experience. This philosopher searches for a way to explain ethics as a responsibility for the Other that goes beyond being and that one cannot even fully understand. As Louis Wolcher notes, Levinas’s conception of responsibility surpassing being is even more radical than Plato’s *epekeina tēs ousias*, since “the good”, in the *Republic*, while beyond being, can still be seen by the mind (Wolcher 94). I will attempt to explain Levinas’s notion of “suffering as such”—briefly outlined here—by bringing into communication the texts, lives, and experiences of Cartagena and Levinas.

Personal Experience

Cartagena and Levinas’s conceptualization of suffering originates from their personal experiences. Although writing 500 years apart, the two hold much in common. Both intellectuals suffered injustice due to their marginal sociopolitical status as minorities.

Cartagena was born in Burgos, Spain, around 1425. She was from a very influential converso Jewish family of her time, the Santa María/Cartagena. Although she was not directly afflicted by racial discrimination or persecution, she lived under harsh political circumstances: Teresa's treatises were written in a time of recurring anti-Jewish and anti-converso riot [4]. Cartagena transferred from the Franciscan order to the Cistercian when the Toledan Rebellion of 1449 "introduced the first discriminatory statutes of limpieza de sangre against the converses" (Seidenspinner-Núñez and Kim 128). This animosity towards the New Christians continued in Toledo with another anti-converso riot in 1474 (Seidenspinner-Núñez and Kim 140). During this tumultuous period, it seems that the nun wrote the Grove of the Infirm where she indirectly suggests her objection to the sociopolitical situation of the time [5].

As we know, Levinas also lived through a violent experience. His family died during the Holocaust in Lithuania, except for his wife and daughter, who were kept hidden in a monastery until his return to France. In 1940, as a French citizen and soldier, Levinas himself became a prisoner of war in Germany. Although sheltered by the Third Geneva Convention, he was segregated into prison camps for Jewish prisoners. It is not my intention to recount Levinas's life and its well-known sociopolitical context, but it is significant to point out that, although separated by centuries, Cartagena and Levinas lived under comparable circumstances.

In the case of Teresa de Cartagena, she was discriminated against not only because she had Jewish blood, but also because she was a woman writer and a deaf person [6]. The nun was criticized and accused of plagiarism by male detractors for having written the Grove of the

Infirm. In response, Cartagena wrote her second treatise, Wonder at the Work of God (Admiración operum Dey), a defense of her gender and her right to take up the pen [7]. This work combines traditional characteristics of the letter form (albeit her writings were not classified as letters *per se* but demonstrated her knowledge of the medieval epistolary code) with elements from other rhetorical arts to express her perspective as a female writer [8]. The nun strategically uses her writing to overcome the pain and suffering caused by the misogynist society of the time. Wonder at the work of God was written at the request of Juana de Mendoza and was a literary apology defending the authenticity of the authorship of Cartagena's first work. In early modern Spanish culture—more specifically in the Castilian literary tradition—Cartagena's writings stand out not only because they are the first known works of this genre written by a woman, let alone by a converso, but also because her (feminine/feminist) discourse transgresses the male discursive boundaries of her time, thus constructing a new feminine space (Seidenspinner-Núñez 113).

While Cartagena subversively appropriated the male rhetorical discourse to claim women's intellectual rights, Levinas went explicitly against the mainstream philosophy of his time, in particular those who approached ethics, such as his teachers Heidegger and Husserl. Levinas's horrific Holocaust experience, coupled with Heidegger's affiliation with National Socialism during the war, clearly led to a profound crisis in Levinas's enthusiasm for Heidegger that left him deeply disappointed with his former teacher. If Heidegger's philosophy is concerned with Being—revising the use of the word “being” itself through a practical “destruction” of the history of Western philosophy—, Levinas is concerned with ethics, as we can see in Levinas's four masterpieces—Existence and Existents (1947), Time and the Other (1948), Totality and Infinity (1961), and Otherwise than Being or Beyond

Essence (1974). Levinas's writings are an extended, contemplative journey through life that begins with the ego-logical I which attempts to find the presence of the Other (Astell 25). If Cartagena methodically undermined and criticized the patriarchal discourses of her time—both the religious and the secular—Levinas fervently deconstructed the entire European philosophical tradition. Both did so in order to demonstrate new spiritual and metaphysical ways to cultivate human consciousness and intelligence. In the case of Teresa de Cartagena, her quest concludes in defining and identifying the Ultimate Other, who is represented by the presence of God, whereas Levinas deduces that it is impossible to completely define or identify the Other. The following section attempts to connect Levinas's philosophy to Cartagena's objectification of the Other to better understand the nun's process of rationalization.

Objectification of the self in suffering

Overcoming their own physical, psychological and even social afflictions, Cartagena and Levinas developed innovative discourses of suffering. Levinas's philosophy, for instance, intentionally establishes its discourse at the center of Jewish spirituality and mysticism (Astell 24). Cartagena's philosophy arises at the heart of Christian spirituality, which might seem hard to reconcile with Levinas's philosophy. Nevertheless, I find a similarity in the Spanish nun in her aim "to teach Others a moral lesson that she had painfully learned and to forge for herself a weapon against adversity" (Deyermond 24). I am not claiming that Cartagena may have Levinas's philosophical awareness, but she does pursue or use her experience of suffering for the same ethical purpose.

As far as we know, Cartagena was professed as a nun, first Franciscan and later Cistercian. At some point, Cartagena was “afflicted with grave ailments and, in particular, having lost completely her sense of hearing” (Seidenspinner-Núñez and Kim 123-24) apparently as a result of an illness. Her physical disability provokes a chain of different types of suffering. Her deafness, which is the subject-matter of the Grove of the Infirm, is the pretext of her writing and the source of her creativity (Deyermond 28). Cartagena perceives suffering—after twenty years of constant torment—as God’s gift, as a blessed opportunity to enrich one’s spirituality in contemplation. In Grove of the Infirm, she seeks to explain her new-found knowledge to help other sufferers. According to Alan Deyermond, the Castilian writer’s intellectual consciousness of the beneficial effects of her pain is “as acute as her emotional awareness of the affliction itself” (Deyermond 21). The instant she becomes conscious of her condition is, at the same time, a moment of objectification from the object that causes her suffering and a separation from herself.

Once aware of her objectification, Cartagena aims to teach others a moral lesson by sharing her painful experience. She describes how she was forgotten and isolated by her family, friends, and her fellow nuns because of her deafness. Nonetheless, Cartagena’s solitary life places her, in her words, in a “convent of the suffering”, which lets her contemplate life, existence, and, most of all, allows her to recognize the benefits of illness. She begins this process of understanding, like Levinas, with the ego-logical I:

[Levinas’s journey] begins with the ego-logical I; goes out to the Other, and gradually comes back to the self, which is, however, no longer identical with the ego, no longer the same, but rather a subject

who has been altered by contact with the Other for whom s/he bears responsibility. Having encountered the Infinity in the finite, the subject becomes a new creature. (Astell 25)

And, indeed, Cartagena and Levinas became more prolific after their painful experiences by focusing more on their spiritual journey marked by the Other. Levinas's philosophy is focused on the anxiety caused by the I's relationship with an absolute Other that is impossible to grasp. His hermeneutic, however, can help in understanding almost all relationships with every Other, including, certainly, Teresa de Cartagena and her works.

Cartagena and Levinas are well aware of their standpoint as sinners. According to Levinas, "The more I am just, the more I am responsible" (Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, 105—he is both responsible for and guilty of his suffering. This belief comes from a long Western tradition. Christians as well as Jews argue that the spirit of a truthful sinner is dearly loved and chosen by God so that He causes affliction to attract the sinner nearer to God Himself. As a result, the individual senses his or her own anxiety to help others in order to prepare for his or her salvation. Therefore, Cartagena shows that there is a link between the social Other and the Ultimate Other; in Levinas, the I comes face to face with the Other and social communication begins.

Cartagena recognizes a moment of self-objectification, and the object that caused the suffering—the traumatic situation—becomes a powerful tool which gives a verbal form to her suffering. As explained before, Cartagena is traumatized by her deafness, which disturbs her entire life. In the introduction to Grove of the Infirm, Cartagena explains that the emotional circumstances of her life during her twenty years of deafness caused her to be

completely isolated from her community: “for it is now twenty years since this bridle first constrained the jaws of my vanities” (Trans. Seidenspinner-Nuñez 9). She compares herself with an “island” called “Oprobrium hominum et abiecio plebes” [The Scorn of Mankind and Outcast of the People] [9]. Though residing in the convent separates her spatially from society, her impairment places her in a more difficult situation of abjection and human rejection, in an “exile and shadowy banishment” where she feels “more in a sepulcher than a dwelling” (Trans. Seidenspinner-Nuñez 23) severed from human pleasures. In Cartagena’s first work, she intends to instruct others by an ethical example which she has painfully learned through her own experience. Also, she wants to relieve herself of adversity. In order to do that, she structures the themes of the Grove of the infirm as an amplification on the subject of suffering. Some of the amplification techniques used on the textual level are: the etymologizing of paçiençia (paz [peace] + çiencia [science]) [10], the parable of the five talents, the Seven Deadly Sins, the six roots of Pride which are cured by dolenciãs, and more.

Cartagena’s goal is to arrive voluntarily at a state where “our temporal desires, fears, and cupidity diminish little by little until they are level with the impotence and weakness of our bodies” (Trans. Seidenspinner-Nuñez 66). Despite this spiritual elevation, the experience that seems to hurt the most is social alienation. Cartagena declares that the pain is difficult to express, as “experience can describe it better than tongue or pen” (Trans. Seidenspinner-Nuñez 68). But for the writer this long exile is also a place of transformation: “I saw that this island [allegory of isolation] . . . can be populated with groves of good counsel and spiritual consolation so that my painful isolation from worldly conversations is converted into the companionship and familiarity of good customs” (Trans. Seidenspinner-Nuñez 24). In this solitude, she finds consolation in books. With divine help and guidance, her

deserted island full of affliction is transformed into an arboleda [grove] abounding with solace for her soul. She discovers the ultimate meaning through her own experience of being isolated, discriminated against, and marginalized by friends, family, and even the sisters of her convent. In this way, the “entendimiento” [understanding] of God’s will meant redemption and transformation for Cartagena:

And because of my good intention, may our sovereign Lord, who judges intentions rather than works, find my writing, which seems vexing and reprehensible to some people, pleasing and acceptable to His merciful eyes. And with this desire and directing my purpose only to Him, I have cared less to attend to the polish of my words than to declare the reality of my truth; and it does not please me so much to be diligent in investigating or searching for graceful eloquence as to be desirous of revealing to those who want to know what is revealed in me, so that as I know it, all may know it. (Trans. Seidenspinner-Nuñez 25)

The moment Cartagena mentions that she wants to reveal the truth to Others, she enters the process of self-objectification. Her realization of suffering as such occurs when she starts examining herself from a third-person point of view. This self-distancing transforms her personal experience, the I, into the social Other. This shifting did not happen right away. She spent years of complete isolation attempting to discover her authentic condition, and she eventually encountered the moment of self-objectification. After this awareness, she blames herself for not being able to recognize the purifying power of suffering as such:

I say this for myself, for I accuse myself of this crime, and truth itself accuses me, and the long perseverance of my suffering indicates my guilt, and my delay without any progress—for I have

lingered in the streets of this world so many years—bears witness to the paralysis of my understanding and the weakness and infirmity of my discretion. (Trans. Seidenspinner-Nuñez 41)

The Castilian nun can now explain or objectify her problem. According to Wes Avram, “Understanding a phenomenon as ‘not understood’ thus reinforces the priority of understanding in human experience and situates the confusing or incomprehensible thing in dialectical relation to comprehensibility” (266). Cartagena discovers that it is the understanding of her mind, not her physical body that is sick and paralyzed. Upon identifying the true origin of the ailment, she reinterprets the state of her illness from being “without any progress” to having a productive function. She accepts her suffering as the moral responsibility to console Others—the social Other—who bear the same suffering as she does. From this point on, Teresa de Cartagena explores the practical ethics that she might draw from her illness by examining her own experience of suffering.

Cartagena’s discourse of self-revelation can be thoroughly explained by Levinas as a state of “pain-illnesses”:

But we can go on—and doubtless thus arrive at the essential facts of pure pain—to consider the “pain-illnesses” of beings who are psychologically deprived, retarded, impoverished in their social life and impaired in their relation to the Other person—that relation in which suffering, without losing anything of its savage malignancy, no longer eclipses the totality of the mental and moves into a new light, within new horizons. (Levinas, *Entre Nous* 93)

For Levinas, the individual experiencing “pain-illnesses” is controlled by his own pain. This disposition, the psychological collapse of the person who suffers from pain, disables him or

her from establishing a homogeneous correspondence with Others. For instance, Cartagena's "pain-illnesses" exile her from the happiness of society, leaving her in complete solitude. Nevertheless, when the nun recognizes "pain-illnesses", she is impelled towards a new productive goal that lifts her out of suffering as such and places her in a position to search for universal salvation.

Levinas solves the unpleasant moment of "pain-illnesses" in a way that reveals a new perspective:

[T]he just suffering in me for the unjustifiable suffering of the Other, opens suffering to the ethical perspective of the inter-human. In this perspective there is a radical difference between the suffering in the Other, where it is unforgivable to *me*, solicits me and calls me, and suffering in me, my own experience of suffering, whose constitutional or congenital uselessness can take on a meaning, the only one of which suffering is capable, in becoming a suffering for the suffering (inexorable though it may be) of someone else. (Levinas, Entre Nous 94)

When the sufferer recognizes what the suffering consists of, he or she becomes able to analyze the object that caused the trauma. In distancing one's own I and observing it independently—like one observes the Other—the individual is able to articulate the situation objectively and logically. It is here where the self obtains relief from his or her ailment. Marinos Diamantides points out that by distancing oneself from one's own experience of suffering, the individual witnesses his/her own unintelligible suffering (Diamantinos 70-94). "Suffering as such" remains unproductive and confusing unless action is taken to diminish the pain of other individuals—including ours—, which is the state of ethical responsibility.

Elaine Scarry argues that “the act of verbally expressing pain is a necessary prelude to the collective task of diminishing pain” (Scarry 9).

Grove of the Infirm suggests a more intricate system of suffering because of Cartagena’s personal situation. Her pain originates from her deafness, but social discrimination aggravates her suffering:

[O]ur afflictions and physical suffering not only scourge and wound our bodies, causing our heads, eyes, and arms to ache, but even more harshly cause our hearts to ache and afflict our spirit and inner feelings. It is not that our physical suffering alone completely causes these inner pains; rather, they are caused by this aforementioned talent of humiliation and contempt. For when the invalid sees himself so humiliated and despised by his neighbors, there is no doubt that his heart is stung with great affliction and feeling, so that, depending on the quality of the contempt and the person who receives it, someone can be more tormented by this type of anguish than by his many physical pains. (Trans. Seidenspinner-Núñez 69)

Humiliation can cause more damage to a person than actual physical pain. The state of humiliation can “ache and afflict our spirit and inner feelings” (Trans. Seidenspinner-Núñez 69). To escape the great affliction that social repulsion causes, we must renounce the values on which we had formerly based our security and self-esteem: “Therefore, to have voluntary humility we must be pleased with the contempt that others show us, for this contentment in received scorn is the basis of true voluntary humility” (Trans. Seidenspinner-Núñez 70). By abandoning cultural values that are no longer viable and by transforming one’s identity, the individual is able to construct a protective building of humility, an alternative place of comfort for the disabled body. Encarnación Juárez notes that “In effect,

Cartagena examines her other self in pain, which longs to enjoy again the lost pleasures; she creates through her writing the answer to her existential situation of corporeal pain, psychological anguish, and social isolation” (Júarez 133).

In a period characterized by a rigorously hierarchical society that lacks our modern notions of individuality, Cartagena cannot advocate social justice or individual rights as disability activists do today. She believes that the pain and abjection of those conditions that evade human control and comprehension need to be resolved at a spiritual and personal level. She seems to accept that her body, both physical and spiritual, is inferior to the normal one; however, the doctrine of bodily resurrection redeems it:

Oh great blessings proceeding from true God! How can we thank you if we do not know you? What was that small part of this blessing that I recognized? How shall I be worthy, or how shall I repay the Lord for the many blessings that accompany my misfortune? . . . I am certain that I have sinned and that my sins have multiplied more than the sands of the sea Nevertheless, I do not want to cease glorifying the Lord; and when all else in me fails, I will receive the healthful chalice of my arduous suffering invoking the name of the Lord And I will gladly glory in my sickness so that the virtue of Christ may dwell in me. (Trans. Seidenspinner-Núñez 42)

At the beginning of the quote, the writer expresses her responsibility to “repay the Lord”. Also, she justifies those who accept with patience God’s secret designs and have faith in a future reward. For Cartagena, God controls and is responsible for our suffering and is also the source of our health since pain can be explained only by His hidden and inherently good purposes. For Levinas, the notion of the Other is an existential one, where it is impossible to completely grasp the ultimate meaning of the Other. Unlike Levinas, the

Castilian nun does find a tangible answer by interpreting God as the Ultimate Other. She articulates constantly the connections between her suffering and her devotion to Christ's Passion as an emulation of Jesus Christ's sacrifice for human beings [11]. In this way, I would argue that Cartagena signals that she recognizes her duty to save Others, while at the same time, she positions her I as the Ultimate Other. This belief reveals that God allows the one who suffers to discipline oneself and/or practice responsiveness toward Others. Ultimately, God cannot be present in the flesh, but He leaves signs of His existence in the face of the Other. Thus the Ultimate Other represents the social Other itself.

In Totality and Infinity, Levinas establishes a phenomenological "ethics of the face". As we mentioned before, he argues that I am responsible for the Other, but that the responsibility is not presumed to be a symmetrical "relationship". The I is bound to the Other, but the I cannot assume that the Other is in the same way bound to me. He claims that this ethical instant is the starting point of reasoning and communication. Thus the theory establishes the Other at the heart of responsibility, communication, and even reasoning (Levinas, Totality and Infinity 78, and Astell 113). Furthermore, in his later work, Otherwise than Being, Levinas settles entirely on the moment of the "face-to-face" contact, and reflects on it as a "proximity" to the Other [12]. Here, the philosopher is concerned with seeing how we become bound, and thus he interprets the way that the *I* gives itself to the Other as a passive being becoming "hostage" (Levinas, Otherwise than Being 49-75). Astell clarifies that Levinas identifies the individual as a 'hostage' "who is nolens volens bound to the Other, obligated by the Other's need in the sense of a binding that is inescapably religious and metaphysical" (Astell 32-33).

Ethics, in Levinas's sense, does not mean what is typically referred to as morality, or a code of conduct about how one should act. In Totality and Infinity, Levinas defines ethics as a "questioning of the Same":

A calling into question of the Same—which cannot occur within the egoistic spontaneity of the Same—is brought about by the Other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity as ethics. Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the Other by the Same, of the Other by Me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the Same by the Other, that is, as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge. (Levinas, Totality and Infinity 33)

Levinas deploys the language of ontology to refuse ontology's totalizing grasp. Ontology as totality discloses to no outside. Thus, if Levinas is to protect the Other, the Other cannot turn into an object of experience or knowledge within the totality of an ontology. The I is the "living form" which employs the Other in order to accomplish its own desires and needs. The transcendence of the Other is not a danger, but rather a source of satisfaction and happiness of Self:

The I is, to be sure, happiness, presence at home with itself. But, as sufficiency in its non-sufficiency, it remains in the non-I; it is enjoyment of 'something else', never of itself. Autochthonous, that is, rooted in what it is not, it is nevertheless, within this enrootedness independent and separated. (Levinas, Totality and Infinity 152)

As the I encounters the Other, it realizes that it can never be self-sufficient because the I exists in relation to the Other.

Even though Cartagena experienced many hardships in her life, she courageously worked to encourage humanity as such to overcome physical suffering and wield spiritual force constructively. Levinas's writings purported to offer new methods to understand suffering and become more spiritually compassionate. Both writers searched for the meaning of universal suffering as such, and the answers they found involved coming to terms with their own personal suffering. Teresa de Cartagena does not speak explicitly about the Other in the way that Levinas elaborates his radical ethics of responsibility. Nonetheless, our reading of Cartagena's writings can be definitely enriched by Levinas's philosophy. Cartagena desires to construct herself through a movement that takes Levinas's I toward the "Absolute Other" toward the "Infinity", which for the deaf nun means God. In bringing these two voices into communication, we can read Teresa de Cartagena not only in a religious context, but also within a Western philosophical framework. My reading of Cartagena through Levinas's philosophy sheds light on two main aspects of her thought. On one hand, the pain and suffering the nun longs for demonstrates her sense of responsibility to God; she endures everything with Him and for Him by connecting and joining in Christ's Passion. On the other hand, Teresa de Cartagena understands that her affliction comes first from God, the Ultimate Other, who created her, forgave her, and provided her with an account of spiritual responsibility by empowering the writer's own experience of suffering.

Notes

[1] Western philosophical tradition understands suffering as the passage from A to B—“understood as a mode of thinking that clings to the passage as such” (Wolcher 93).

[2] Teresa de Cartagena’s biography was studied by Seidenspinner-Núñez and Kim, and thus it is now possible to work closely on her treatises: “Teresa was born around 1425 and around 1440 entered the Franciscan Monasterio de Santa Clara in Burgos. Her entry into a monastic house in the early 1440s is supported, although not pinpointed, by another source The new evidence provided by the Bulario documents establishes that her entry into monastic service was not due to a sudden and unexpected loss of hearing, but rather that her affliction with deafness must have occurred long after she entered the convent. In contrast, we may now surmise that Teresa’s profession formed part of an overall Cartagena strategy to advantageously place their children and promote family interests and position. For whatever reason—spiritual inclination, sickly disposition, personality, talent, or a combination of all these—from her childhood Teresa was probably earmarked for and guided toward monastic profession” (Seidenspinner-Núñez and Kim 138).

[3] Seidenspinner-Núñez and Kim point out the following dates: “Around 1455-56, she becomes deaf and for the next twenty years struggles with her affliction as recorded in Arboleda. The initial period of her deafness must have been a time of extreme loneliness and pain for Teresa, exacerbated by the death on July 22, 1456, of Alonso de Cartagena, her uncle, bishop, and protector, and her gradual withdrawal from her family. Around 1475-76, she writes Arboleda de los enfermos, a hybrid work—part consolatory treatise, part spiritual autobiography—where she examines her own affliction with deafness as an exemplum to expound the spiritual benefits of illness; in the second part of the treatise, she fashions a utopic convento de las dolencias that unites a community of fellow sufferers and is presided over by the abbess Patience. Some two years later, in the prologue to Admiración operum Dey, Teresa records the antagonistic reception of Arboleda by los prudentes varones—presumably the new bishop of Burgos who would have had jurisdiction and his entourage—who rejected a woman’s access to writing and disputed her authorship of Arboleda by accusing her of plagiarizing male sources” (Seidenspinner-Núñez and Kim 140).

[4] “[A]nd that at one point Hutton shows convincingly that Teresa’s awareness of the *conversos*’ position in society affects her choice of image: ‘Bien así por qualquier cobdiçia tenporal que contra nuestra ánima se levanta, es fecho grand ruido en la çiudad de nuestra conçençia; e si todo este maldito pueblo se levanta contra el ánima nuestra . . .’ (46.8-11). This was as he points out, written at a time when anti-Jewish and anti-converso riots were common . . .” (Deyermond 26).

[5] For more details on the sociopolitical situation and practices of monastic life, see Penelope D. Johnson.

[6] There are two articles mainly focusing on the topic of Teresa de Cartagena’s deafness. See Brueggmann, “Deaf, She Wrote: Mapping Deaf Women’s Autobiography”, and Juárez.

[7] According to Ronald Surtz: “For women . . . actually writing or dictating texts meant overcoming severe psychological barriers to written expression Indeed, writing was viewed as a more serious infraction than speaking because of its obvious public dimension . . . and because writing was considered a task appropriate only to the male gender” (Writing 5). Cartagena is the first Castilian writer who breaks her silence and defends her writing. She is also a predecessor of Saint Theresa of Avila and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. See also Surtz, “El llamado feminismo de Teresa de Cartagena”; María Mar Cortés Timoner, “La predicación en palabras de mujer: Teresa de Cartagena y Juana de la Cruz”; and Yonsoo Kim, “El discurso femenino trasatlántico: Sor Teresa de Cartagena y Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz”.

[8] For a study on the epistolary form, see Frieden, Epistolary in the Works of Teresa de Cartagena and Leonor López de Córdoba.

[9] Seidenspinner-Núñez explains that “The island derives its name—‘The Scorn of Mankind and Outcast of the People’—from Psalm 21:7: ‘But I am a worm, not a man: the scorn of mankind, and the outcast of the people’” (Trans. Seidenspinner-Núñez 23n3).

[10] According to Seidenspinner-Núñez, Cartagena explains that “For what is patience if not to suffer with prudence, as its very name—paçiençia—declares? These first letters that spell paz [peace] denote suffering [passion] or endurance [padescer] and the last seven letters that spell çiencia [wisdom] thus demonstrate to us that patience is nothing else but to suffer with prudence. We endure our hardships patiently if our prudence is such that we convert hardships that are bad and from a bad source into something good and beneficial for ourselves. And if the hardships are good and from a good source—like those that come from God’s hand—it is much more fitting that the sufferer be prudent and wise, so that we do not forfeit our reward for those hardships” (Trans. Seidenspinner-Núñez 48).

[11] For more details on Imitatio Christi see Caroline Walker Bynum, Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion.

[12] Robert Gibbs explains that “Proximity is a play with the words for approach, near, and neighbor in French, but there is a subtext that links this to the words for nearness and sacrifice in Hebrew” (114).

[13] See Davenport, “Levinas’s Agapeistic Metaphysics of Morals. Absolute Passivity and the Other as Eschatological Hierophany”, 339.

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