

64 Modalities of Resilience in the Rereading of Mystical or Religious Experience (in Italian) ONLINE

09:00 - 10:40 Wednesday, 1st September, 2021

Alessandra Pozzo

Mystics are given an immediate experience of the divinity that is felt to be real. However, they are faced with the problem of the inadequacy of words to express what this represents, because there is nothing in common speech, or any common way to refer to what they are experiencing. Mystical experience oscillates, in fact, between the need for it to be formulated and the constraint inherent to its very nature, that of being unsayable. This conflict has multiple aspects. First, is it a defect in the rationality of an experience that presents itself in the form of intuition? Or are the expressive means at the mystic's disposal merely inadequate? Or, again, is the mystical experience basically meant to remain formless?

The first question could be answered by suggesting that there is a rational operation specific to the intuitive act, although it is different from the one we associate with conceptual activity and logical-deductive processes. Intuition makes itself sensible to our perception and so we can partially make it sensible to our account of it. This perceptive act, which raises awareness, is already a rational approach. The second question, concerning the evaluation of the expressive means at the disposal of the mystic, implies a measured response according to the culture in which its rereading is developed. The everyday lexicon is still insufficient for the spiritual authors of the Christian West. Their work of rereading and transmission consists in the manipulation of a limited number of figures in order to adjust them to the aspects of the experience of God. In the eyes of religious institutions, symbolic creativity has a bad reputation, commensurate with the experience of the mystic who claims to possess it. Just as that same symbolic creativity confers a greater conceptual autonomy upon the speculations of dogmatic theology, so the mystic is confined to an apparent poverty of expressive means with which to communicate the intuition of God, which is grasped without mediation.

The workshop *Modalities of resilience in the rereading of mystical or religious experience* analyzes the means used by Western culture and, in particular, by some of the mystics it has produced over the last century. The workshop will focus on the various literary, semiotic, or manipulative strategies, plus the rhetorical, anthropological and philosophical aspects that the mystic uses to take a new turn towards new perspectives in a movement of resilience.

58 Resilience of the Sacred and the Metaphysical Need

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Abstract

1. In its many manifestations, the sacred (sacrality) fulfils at least two distinct functions, both constitutive of the anthropological dimensions of human beings.
2. The first function performs the need to enhance the cohesion among the members of the community. The sacred produces unity and maintains through its rituality its own constitutive condition. Ritual gestures and formulaic words ordain the sense of belonging, restating the necessity to carry out one's own duties, to respect the prohibitions, to celebrate the events. Imposing the observance of the rules, the sacred becomes the guardian of the community.
3. To belong to a group is a constitutive condition of existence of many animals, of many not-human leaving species [herd (of cows), school (of fishes), pride (of lions), swarm (of bees), etc.]. Their rules are dictated by instinct, which must be considered a deterministic and necessary ratio. It is not so for humans, whose instinctive drives/compulsions are submitted to motivations which are complex and uncertain, and belong to a sophisticated and aleatory (random) ratio, which moves among different points of view. And here we have the sacrality which introduces in the aleatority (randomness) of the intellect and of reason, the necessity of the law and respect for the rules.
4. We have to be careful, there is no clear cut division between the determinism of the instinct and the aleatority of reason. On the contrary, the border is vague: also humans, not only animals, are subjected to instinctive compulsions (fear, hunger, escape, sex). But humans' cognitive and emotional devices are intensely complex and they can manage and traverse contradictory itineraries. Furthermore: as Alfred Bühler showed in

his analysis of languages and cultures, human beings can proceed in the so-called participated oppositions [A and (A and not-A)]. In the mind of a human being a shoe is, and at the same time is-not, a footwear: the shoe may be conceived also as a percussive tool, an object to reproduce in a painting, a provocation device (as it was interpreted by Nikita Krushchev in the UNO Assembly in 1960). It is the same linguistic principle which permits us to use a word according to its literal meaning (denotation) and, at the same time, in metaphorical expressions (connotation). Vice versa it is improbable that a cat could conceive a mouse other than as a prey. What we call human reason is the dialectic of the instincts.

5. The second function of the sacred is to give an answer to the metaphysical need: we intend with that expression the need to attribute to single acts, words and texts, practices and places (i.e.: images, statues, books, food, buildings) an effect or a further power, able to move forward its ordinary factual reality. To move on, to go beyond the factual dimension, this is the sense of metaphysical: we use to say also that the human being needs transcendence: and this is another critical word, not easy to use.

65 Marthe Robin: Deciphering a Mystical Strategy of Resilience and Manipulation

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Abstract

Marthe Robin was a pious woman in the odour of sanctity, known among French Catholics for having lived for a certain number of years without having been nourished by anything other than a consecrated host. She was the repository of the grace of “mystical starvation”. This consisted of absolute fasting for a much longer period than would normally allow an individual to survive. This was not the only astonishing grace she received. For, among other things, she had supernatural visions, she engaged in a hard fight with the devil and every week she relived the passion of Jesus in her flesh. How did she come to this? Currently, there are contrasting hypotheses about the mystical graces of Marthe Robin: that suggested by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, which has begun a process of her beatification, and that suggested by Conrad de Meester, a specialist in Christian mysticism, who revealed a “mystical fraud” by working for some ten years on all the material concerning her. This lecture investigates the modalities of the creation of a monumental “resilient” religious imagery, motivated by a desire for recognition of the young Marthe, ill and disabled, born of the illegitimate union of her mother with the boy from the farm next door and never recognised by her “father”, except at the civil registry office. For decades, the French Church recognized the marks of holiness in Marthe Robin’s life. Behind the scenes something else was going on. Deciphering a “holy” strategy of manipulation that made Marthe Robin a badge of resilience, regardless of the legality of the means used to take a new turn.

Delahaye, Christian, *Quand les évêques vénèrent la fraude*, <https://www.editions-empreinte.com/post/quand-les-eveques-venerent-la-fraude>

De Meester, Conrad, *La Fraude Mystique de Marthe Robin*, Paris, Cerf, 2020.

Fontaine, Christine, *A propos de « La Fraude mystique de Marthe Robin »*, <http://www.dieumaintenant.com/aproposdelafraudemystique.html>

Guitton, Jean, *Portrait de Marthe Robin*, Paris, Grasset, 1999.

Entretien avec le Père Bernard Peyrous, Postulateur (de 1996 à 2017) de la Cause de Béatification de Marthe Robin, <https://www.martherobin.com/>

86 Resilience as Semio-Technique: A Case of Spiritual Warfare

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Abstract

Spiritual warfare can be considered a technique to face a difficult existential problem. Since it produces a meaning where a meaning seems absent or lost, it must be considered a semio-technique (Donatiello, Galofaro, Ienna 2018), enabling code-making (Eco 1976), which proposes the functions of a new coding correlation between body or mind states (previously undetermined and inarticulate) and spiritual interpretations. This correlation is performed through semiotic judgments, in form of metasemiotic propositions. For example, in letter 368 Padre Pio writes to his spiritual director: "For several days my soul has been plunged in deepest darkness [...]. My spiritual digestion is upset and there is a nasty taste in the mouth of my soul which makes the sweetest wine of this earth taste bitter". This chain of metaphors and similes is not a pure invention of code, since it is performed according to a well-established tradition. For example, the expression "spiritual digestion" (in the Italian text: "stomaco spirituale") is borrowed from Saint Francis of Sales' works, whose ancient source is Origen's doctrine of the five spiritual senses. This semio-technique allows the mystic to cope with a contingent crisis related to desire (gluttony, fornication, vainglory ...) providing a meaning to ascetic experience and its difficult trials, linking existential engagement and religious tradition.

88 “The dark presence”: Alda Merini’s *Mistica d’amore*

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Abstract

Mistica d’amore (Frassinelli, Segrate, 2008) is a collection of five shorter books of poetries by Alda Merini previously published starting from 2000. The author, a lay woman, is the most important spiritual poet of the contemporary period.

In Merini’s collection evil is represented as the dark (*l’oscura presenza*) – its presence, which is continuous, can be inner or it comes from outside. In moments of weakness it attacks with a great power. Reading *Mistica d’amore* we prevalingly find the first grammatical person. Virgin Mary, Jesus, Saint Francis etc. speak using the pronoun “I”. Sometimes we also find a diegetic voice of an impersonal narrator who tells about the fight against evil.

The definitions of evil are multiple – our purpose is (first) to analyze its apparitions in order to understand how it threatens a contemporary mystical subject. We will (then) examine the moments of combat. If one continuously resists the *dark presence*, the attacks of the enemy, its failures and successes, require the subject to adapt and readapt strategies. One of them is to liberate the evil spirits on purpose. The resilience in Merini’s collection is a spiritual ability to speak directly to God (in poetry), to invoke Christian hierarchies, to use theological knowledge in order to call or even create beings – who can be traditionally Christian or fantastical – that protect and help those who fight or oppose evil.

131 Between the Presence and the Absence of God: Resilience in the Mystic Experience of St. Faustina Kowalska (1905-1938)

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Abstract

Maria Faustina Kowalska was a Polish nun, with many charismatic gifts, such as the ability to dialogue with Jesus and the Virgin, to see the souls in Purgatory – in order to pray for them –, and to watch over people's hearts. Canonized in 2000 by Pope John Paul II, she is famous as the Apostle of Mercy, on account of the revelations received from Jesus, the spread of the Chaplet of the Divine Mercy and the creation – thanks to a painter – of a miraculous image of Merciful Jesus. She is the author of a diary, *Divine Mercy in my Soul*, which tells the story of part of her life, but above all her special relation with Jesus, both in moments of joy and in those of difficulty and suffering. Kowalska's experience allows me to reflect on the theme of resilience, due to her need to summon up the energy and courage to fight the difficulties of everyday life, such as the fear of not being believed about her mystical experiences or the doubts that they might be wrong, just a trick or a form of pride. Furthermore, she is constantly afraid of being abandoned by God – like many mystics in Christianity – because of her sins.

The aim of my proposal is to analyze, through the personal testimonies included in Faustina's diary, her experience in the light of her special charismas, focusing above all on the way in which her supernatural gifts and the words heard from God represent a powerful weapon against so many fears and in moments of 'despair'. In particular, I will consider the mechanisms through which she engages in resilient behaviours, analyzing them from a historical-anthropological perspective, to underline how Faustina reacts to the constant alternation between the presence and absence of God in her life.