

A Review of
Teresa of Avila: The Book of My Life
by Mirabai Starr and Read by Tessa
Bielecki

BY NETANEL MILES-YEPEZ

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Teresa of Avila: The Book of My Life. Translated by Mirabai Starr. Boston:
New Seeds, 2007. \$26.95. Hardcover, 346 pp.

Teresa of Avila: The Book of My Life. Translated by Mirabai Starr. Read by
Tessa Bielecki. Boston: Shambhala Audio, 2007.
\$34.95. 5 CDs, 6 Hours, Abridged.

IN THE SPIRITUAL LITERATURE OF THE PAST, rarely are the saint and the human being found together under the same cover. However, in *Teresa of Avila: The Book of My Life* (New Seeds, 2007) translated by Mirabai Starr that is precisely what we find, someone of profound holiness who is also profoundly human—doubts, foibles, fears and all. And personally, I find this much more satisfying than the traditional depictions of saints in all their perfection. For in that “perfection,” they are somehow less than human, or at the very least, something other than human. As Alan Watts once pointed-out—what can a *human being* possibly hope to learn from a *flawless being* except that we are doomed to fall short of that glory, giving us one hell of an inferiority complex, instead of tools for enlightenment.¹

The autobiography of the Spanish Christian Carmelite saint Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) has been translated into English before,² but as Tessa Bielecki notes in her Foreword to the book, Mirabai Starr is the first *woman* to translate this work into English—adding almost as an afterthought—“and that helps.”³ After having read this work, I am left in no doubt that it has indeed helped. For Teresa’s autobiography, aside from showing her to be a saint and a human being, also shows her to be very much a woman, a wonderful incarnation of irrepressible femininity. She is not a female eunuch speaking in neutral or masculine language about God, but a distinctly feminine presence in a delightfully animated love affair with her Lord. Nor does she seem ashamed of being a woman as some of her predecessors have been, but rather embraces it as an asset. For her, it is not a radical feminism, merely common sense—she simply *is* a woman, as God made her, and so what could be wrong with that?

Before going any further, I should note that I am acquainted both with the translator, Mirabai Starr, and have been friends with author of the Foreword and reader of the audio-book, Tessa Bielecki, for several years. However, far from prejudicing me in favor of the book, I tended to be somewhat more cautious as I approached it as a reviewer. Nevertheless, knowing what I know of each, I also felt more confident about what they could bring to this particular translation. For Mirabai Starr is a long-time student of mystical traditions as well as a veteran translator of two Carmelite mystical classics, Teresa of Avila’s *Interior Castle* (Riverhead, 2003) and John of the Cross’ *The Dark Night of the Soul* (Riverhead, 2002). And Tessa Bielecki, a Carmelite hermit and former abbess of the Spiritual Life Institute, is a recognized authority on, and devotee of Teresa of Avila, having authored and edited three books on her: *Holy Daring: An Outrageous Gift to Modern Spirituality from Saint Teresa, the Grand Wild Woman of Avila* (Element, 1994), *Teresa of Avila:*

Mystical Writings (Crossroad Classic, 1994), and *Teresa of Avila: Ecstasy and Common Sense* (Shambhala, 1996). And this book, although translated solely by Starr, clearly benefited from the combined knowledge of both she and Bielecki, as Starr writes in the Acknowledgments: “When the first draft of the translation was complete, Tessa came from Colorado and spent five days with me on what we fondly referred to as our ‘Teresa retreat.’ We went over the manuscript together, Tessa filled in some of the gaps in my Catholic knowledge, and I clarified some of my choices as a translator.”⁴ So despite my initial caution, my confidence in each turned out to be well founded, and both the book and the audio-book lived-up to, and even exceed my expectations.

Short of meeting the saint herself, New Seeds (an imprint of Shambhala Publications) and Shambhala Audio, have really allowed us to have the fullest experience of Teresa of Avila possible. The combined package has everything—from an intelligent and sensitive translation and reading to an aesthetically pleasing and quality audio presentation, including a lovely translation of Teresa’s “bookmark” prayer set to music by Jenny Bird and Michael Mandrell on the last track of the CD. The combined experience of the beautifully written word and a reading by one who has devotedly lived and breathed these words for over thirty years is remarkable. Rounding out the experience for me personally, was the added pleasure I had of being able to hear Mirabai Starr talk about and read selections from the book in Boulder, Colorado earlier this year before I had actually received my own copies of the book or audio-book.

Thus my first impression of Teresa of Avila—outside of the history books—came through the lilting and delicate voice of Mirabai Starr. Hearing her skillful reading, I was immediately struck by the uniqueness of Teresa’s own “voice.” Of course, it can be difficult to tell, especially through translation, what of that voice is the original author and what is the translator. For, to my mind, translations are essentially new works (derived from older works). And the problem is made even more complex by the fact that I was listening to a skillful reading of book by the translator herself, who knew exactly how to read each word, emphasizing the subtext of every passage (a comment that equally applies to Bielecki’s reading). Nevertheless, there was something that seemed quite distinctly “Teresa.” I had the sense of mature woman (Teresa was 45 when she finished her autobiography) with the undaunted spirit of a young girl; indeed, that unique “voice” put me in mind of a very pious cross between Jane Austen’s witty and sagacious,

Elizabeth Bennett and Anne Frank, who, in her innocent exuberance was somehow still able to dream of romance against the backdrop of life's terrible realities.

I thought I might test the authenticity of this “voice” by comparing two translations of the same passage side-by-side. The first is a small excerpt from the autobiography found in Tessa Bielecki's *Teresa of Avila: Ecstasy and Common Sense*:

Very often, for some years, I was more anxious that the hour I had determined to spend in prayer be over than I was to remain there, and more anxious to listen for the striking of the clock than to attend to other good things. And I don't know what heavy penance could have come to mind that frequently I would not have gladly undertaken rather than recollect myself in the practice of prayer. . . . So unbearable was the sadness I felt on entering the oratory, that I had to muster up all my courage (and they say I have no small amount of that, and it is observed that God has given me more than women usually have, but I have made poor use of it) in order to force myself. (L 8.7)⁵

And this selection is from Mirabai Starr's own translation:

These are the things I would dwell on when I was praying. During the whole time I was navigating those dangerous waters I've been telling you about, this remained my focus in prayer. But I had trouble keeping my attention on God. I was more interested in when the hour I had allotted myself for prayer would be over than I was in abiding in quietude with my Beloved. I spent more time listening for the clock to strike than I did with lofty thoughts. I often would have preferred to take any heavy penance laid on me than do what was necessary to recollect myself and practice prayer.

They say that I am an exceptionally brave woman, far braver than most, but I sometimes had to gather all the courage God gave me to show up and pray. I'm not sure if the force of resistance was a technique used against me by the spirit of evil or if it was just a consequence of my own bad habits, but sometimes I felt such overwhelming sadness when I entered the chapel that I could hardly bear it. But once I made the effort, the

Beloved helped me. After meditations like these, I was filled with a deeper sense of peace and delight than when I prayed because I wanted to.⁶

Of course, the passage in Bielecki's work has been condensed and the words are not the same, but the character of the original author still speaks through both. It is her uniqueness, if not her words. This is not the most distinctive example, but it is one that demonstrates her uncommon humility and frankness.

“Uncommon,” is appropriate, but “surprising” might better describe the person we find in this book. For the description of her youth paints the portrait of a loving and vivacious girl pulled in different directions, occasionally sneaking-out of her father's house at night and hopelessly addicted to romance novels, but also strangely drawn to things of the spirit. And even after her entry into monastic life, her story still reads like a romance of the spirit, full of holy encounters, trials and drama. Teresa is delightfully prone to crushes on her male confessors and spiritual friends, but without any sense of schoolgirl silliness. She simply likes men and admires what is admirable about them, without at the same time ignoring their obvious failings, their occasional romantic intentions toward her, or their own misunderstanding of her admiration for them. In her first years as a nun, she was even caught-up in a relationship of mutual attraction with a young priest, and frankly admits this, but was clear-headed enough to see where such attraction would lead and extricated herself from the relationship. At other times she merely laughed to herself when she perceived how others misconstrued her affection for them. And while she had many times been on the receiving end of what we might call misogynistic prejudice, one does not get the impression that she is embittered by this treatment, although she is quite realistic about its impact and the problems of the times in which she lived.

Even more interesting, we have in this book the saint herself dealing with the disconcerting pious projections of others upon her, as well as the biting criticisms of those who felt she had ego-inspired pretensions to sainthood, and who condemned her for undue pride and even recklessness as she attempted to establish herself in a simpler life at St. Joseph's (the first reform monastery she founded). Indeed, praise and blame of her mystical raptures eventually drew the attention of the dreaded Spanish Inquisition to whom this autobiography was apparently addressed as a “full disclosure” of her life and activities. Nevertheless, there is no

subterfuge in her language; Teresa is both humble and bold in everything that she says, laughing at the idea that she should be a threat to or threatened by the Church, even though she admits to being occasionally driven to “divine disobedience” by her love of God. This “divine disobedience” seems to have sometimes won her the reputation of being rebellious, but this does not seem to be the case. On the contrary, Teresa, though passionate, is essentially obedient and even too eager to please. Though there were brief flashes of rebelliousness in her childhood, as an adult this rebelliousness is clearly a response to inner guidance, to voice of the spirit pushing her toward a destiny that would ultimately impact many. However, this destiny is largely achieved after the completion of this memoir.

Nor is the book solely autobiographical, for it is divided into three distinct parts. The first is an account of her youth and her many, many (as she saw it) sinful indulgences (though “sin” is often nicely translated as “missing-the-mark” by Starr, taking a cue from the Hebrew meaning of the word for sin) as well as her many trials during her novitiate. The second part shows us an entirely different Teresa. Despite all her claims to ignorance and sinful failing, in this section Teresa shows herself to be a skillful spiritual guide in the life of prayer, as well as a wonderfully articulate spokesperson for the subtleties of contemplative prayer and its corresponding “responses” from God. Indeed, I began to feel myself an eager pupil sitting at the feet of a wise and compassionate friend and teacher. The third section is an account of her many spiritual visions and raptures, as well as her difficulties in dealing with them. Though there were many, including herself in occasional moments of doubt and fear, who tried to convince her of their unholy origin, Teresa remained firm in her belief that they were from God. She reasoned—why should the Devil give such gifts as these which only serve to intoxicate her more and more with her divine Sovereign and which seem to have had such a powerful effect upon her character?

Teresa of Avila: The Book of My Life by Mirabai Starr is a true spiritual classic and I highly recommend this translation (as well as the abridged audio-book read by Tessa Bielecki) to anyone, Christian or otherwise, who seeks to deepen in spiritual practice, especially the practice of contemplative prayer, or to any who are simply looking for good models of holiness in the past still relevant for us today.

Notes

¹ A paraphrase of Alan Watts comments in a talk entitled “Democracy in the Kingdom of Heaven.”

² *The Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila* by David Lewis, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by Herself* by J. M. Cohen, *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila* by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez.

³ *Teresa of Avila: The Book of My Life*, p.xii.

⁴ *Teresa of Avila: The Book of My Life*, p.xv.

⁵ Bielecki, Tessa. *Teresa of Avila: Ecstasy and Common Sense*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1996: p.70.

⁶ *Teresa of Avila: The Book of My Life*, pp.54-55.