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A CELL OF ONE'S OWN

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Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* enunciated the needs and thoughts that had occupied the minds of women for a long time. I used the title of her essay for my own, changing "room" to "cell" and accepting the accidental ambiguity of this word in both Spanish and English. A cell can be a room in a prison, but the cell I am referring to is quite the opposite; it is a room that many women chose not as a punishment but as a place to liberate their souls, to give wings to their spiritual life, and, sometimes, to write.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf sees little hope for her Judith, Shakespeare's fictional sister, in sixteenth-century England: «I told you in the course of this paper that Shakespeare has a sister, but do not look for her in Sidney Lee's life of the poet. She died young -also, she never wrote a word. She lies buried where the omnibuses now stop, opposite the Elephant and Castle»¹. If I had a chance to mitigate the despair of Virginia Woolf's words, I would have told her to think of Spain, land of the Inquisition, to go to Avila and find Teresa's cell.

When the Church of England and the Catholic Church separated, it meant, too, that there were no longer any cells available for aspiring English nuns. Before the schism, however, as Peter Brown tells us in *The Cult of the Saints* «The Christian Church, from an early time, had encouraged women to take on a public role, in their own right, in relation to the poor, they gave alms in person, they visited the sick, they founded shrines and poorhouses in their own name and were expected to be fully visible as

¹. WOOLF, Virginia. - *A Room of One's Own*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. (A Harvest HBJ). San Diego, New York, London, 1957. (Paperback edition); p.117. (all quotations are taken from this paperback edition.)

participants in the ceremonial of the shrines»². If we look at the *Canterbury Tales* we will also see that pilgrimages were occasions for women to pursue their own interests, away from housewifely duties, away from their lords, husbands, and children. Before the sixteenth century many European women writers were nuns, such as Hrosvita von Ganderssheim (10th c.), Hildegard von Bingen (11th to 12th c.), Catherina Benicasa (Saint Catherina of Siena) (14th c.), and Teresa de Cartagena (15th c.). We can assume then, that Virginia Woolf either dismissed or ignores the little independence that women had in regard to church activities.

Convents were not a temporary refuge, but a permanent place where women chose to stay on their own terms. My purpose, however, is not to prove that the Catholic Church provided convents with women's literary careers in mind but that, by considering life in a convent an acceptable alternative to marriage, made possible and accesible to women to room they needed for their thinking and writing.

I will discuss briefly two Spanish-speaking nuns: Teresa of Avila and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. I have chosen these two women -who sought and gained physical an spiritual autonomy- because both refused to marry and instead became nuns, both wrote in Spanish, and furthermore the Catholic Church played a very important role in their respective worlds. I have also chosen these two women because of the differences between them. Their reasons from becoming nuns and their spiritual and literary ambitions diverged in important ways. Although these two women may not have been radically opposed to each other, Teresa of Avila is mostly absent where Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is always present, that is in the manuals, works and books about literature in Spanish from a feminist perspective. Or, to put it in another way, Teresa was canonized by the Catholic Church, and Sor Juana was canonized by the feminists.

These two canonizations were reached from different directions. Therefore, emphasizing the religious aspects of

². BROWN, Peter.- *The Cult of the Saints*. The University of Chicago Press (Phoenix edition), 1982; p.46.

Teresa's works overlooks their nonsaintly qualities. And the feminist canonization of Sor Juana often obscures her predecessors' works, in the attempt to establish, through her, a paradigm of feminism.

Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada (Spain, 1515-1582) writes in her *Life* about her doubts in becoming nun and, at the same time, expresses her fear of getting married. On the one hand, her desire to please others seems to be the reason for her doubts, but on the other hand, marriage at that time meant becoming the property of one's husband, and giving birth frequently meant risking one's life. As Teresa explained: «*But I was still anxious not be a nun, for God had not as yet been pleased to give me this desire, although I was also afraid of marriage.... These good thoughts about being a nun came to me from the time to time but they soon left me and I could not persuade myself to become one*»³. Ultimately she chose the monastic life: chastity meant freedom, anonymity in a world governed by men concerned mainly with "things of this world."

Teresa was far more interested in being free to be herself, to lead her own spirit to its highest point of perfection. Teresa "renounced" the fulfillment of her sexual desires because she had more urgent ones. By belonging to Jesus Christ she belonged to no one else. Her female body and soul would be possessed only by God; hence her religious name in Spanish was Teresa de Jesús. She describes this possession of body and soul in her *Life*: «*I would see beside me, on my left hand, an angel in bodily form.... In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip I seemed to see a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it and he left me completely afire with a great love for*

³. AVILA, Teresa of.- *Life*. Translated by E. Allison Peers. Image Books. Doubleday and Co., Inc. New York, 1960, chapter III, p.74. In Spanish: *Obras Completas: Vida*. Aguilar. Madrid, 1987. (All quotations in Spanish are taken from this edition). «*Comencé a rezar muchas oraciones vocales (...) mas todavía deseaba no fuese monja, que este no fuese Dios servido de dármelo, aunque también temía el casarme (...) Estos buenos pensamientos de ser monja me venían algunas veces, y luego se me quitaban, y no podía persuadirme de ello.*» (chap. III, p.59)

God. The pain was so sharp that it made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused by this intense pain that one can never wish to lose it, nor will one's soul be content with anything less than God. It is not bodily pain, but spiritual, though the body has a share in it-indeed, a great share»⁴.

It is obvious reading poems like "Vivo sin vivir en mí" (Vivo sin vivir en mí/ y tan alta vida espero/ que muero porque no muero) that Teresa's intimacy with her divine spouse was the inspiration for her creativity and pleasure. But she didn't stop at getting a room of her own: she wanted as many rooms as women who wanted them, and her efforts to find them, that is, to found convents, made her a fun raiser, a diplomat, and a public figure operating in a male society. She found burdensome her comings and goings, her writing letters beggin, asking, and thanking whoever helped and encouraged the Descalzas, but she didn't hesitate. Thus we see from her letters to King Philip II that Teresa was decisiva and straightforward. For instance, in her letter dated September 18, 1577, Teresa begins with the perfunctory «The Grace of the Holy Ghost be always with his majesty. Amen» and then goes directly to her purpose of her letter: a denunciation of the Calzados for their slanders against Father Gracián⁵.

⁴. AVILA, Teresa of; *Life* (Peers), Chapter XXIX, pp.273-274. *Vida*, p.177: «Quiso el señor que viese aquí algunas veces esta visión; veía un ángel cabe mí hacia el lado izquierdo en forma corporal, lo que no suelo ver sino por maravilla (...) Veíale en las manos un dardo de oro largo, y al fin del hierro me parecía tener un poco de fuego. Este me parecía meter por el corazón algunas veces, y que me llegaba a las entrañas. Al sacarle, me parecía las llevaba consigo, y me dejaba toda abrasada en amor grande de Dios. Era tan grande el dolor, que me hacía dar aquellos quejidos; y tan excesiva la suavidad que me pone este grandísimo dolor, que no hay desear que se quite, ni se contenta el alma con menos que Dios. No es dolor corporal, sino espiritual, aunque no deja de participar el cuerpo algo, y aún hartó.»

⁵. AVILA, Teresa of; *Obras Completas*. *Cartas*. Carta CXCv, 18 de Septiembre de 1577. (My translation): «La gracia del Espíritu Santo sea siempre con vuestra majestad. Amén. A mi noticia ha venido un memorial que han dado a vuestra majestad contra el Padre maestro Gracián, que me espanto de los ardidés del demonio, y de los Padres Calzados; porque no se contentan con infamar a este siervo de Dios (...) sino que procuran ahora deslustrar estos monasterios adonde tanto se sirve a nuestro Señor. Y para esto se han valido de dos Descalzos, que el uno, antes que fuese fraile, sirvió a estos monasterios, y ha hecho cosas adonde da bien a entender que muchas veces le falta el juicio.»

Teresa's writings fit well the model Virginia Woolf describes in regard to Jane Austen's novels⁶. As is the case with Jane Austen, we cannot find in Teresa's works anger, attack, or rage that deforms and twists them. For Teresa, the human race is not split into two, with men being the opposing faction; despite men's having the power to prevent her from doing what she wants to do -which is to live her spiritual life in the way she wants and understands- she does not hate or fear them. Indeed, she is able to express herself without impediment.

Teresa didn't escape, hide, and protect herself from any harm or deprivation society might have imposed on her, she set off to build both real rooms -the convents mentioned- and a spiritual castle, her book *Interior Castle*. The vision that prompted Teresa to write *Interior Castle* reveals her concept of a cell of one's own: «A most beautiful crystal globe, made in the shape of a castle, and containing seven mansions, in the seventh and innermost of which was the King of Glory, in the greatest splendour, illumining and beautifying them all»⁷. Whether or not we believe in the religious value of her words, they persuade us of Teresa's strong will in gaining power over her spiritual and intellectual life.

Teresa's writings are also an invitation to all women to build and enter their own castles, where, as she says in the conclusion of *Interior Castle* «(they) can enter it and wald about in it at any time without asking leave from your superiors...

⁶. WOOLF; *Ibid*, Chapter IV.

⁷. AVILA, Teresa of; *Interior Castle*. Translated by E.Allison Peers, Doubleday and Co., Inc. New York, 1961, p.8. Peers attributes these words to Fray Diego, Teresa's confessor and biographer, who explains this vision in a letter he writes to Fray Luis de León, dated Sept. 4, 1588. In the first chapter of *Las Moradas (Obras Completas)* we can read: «Estando hoy suplicando a Nuestro Señor hablase por mí porque yo no atinaba a cosa que decir ni cómo comenzar a cumplir esta obediencia, se me ofreció lo que ahora diré, para comenzar con algún fundamento; que es considerar nuestra alma como un castillo todo de un diamante o muy claro cristal, adonde hay muchos aposentos, así como en el cielo hay muchas moradas. Que si bien lo consideramos, hermanas, no es otra cosa el alma del justo, sino un paraíso adonde dice Él tiene sus deleites.»

because nobody can take it away from (them)»⁸. This is, without doubt, the declaration of independence of one woman for all women, the room Virginia Woolf's Judith never had.

Scholars admire Teresa of Avila's works for the novelty of their style. E.Allison Peers, for instance, describes Teresa's style as a "sweet disorder". And when comparing Saint John of the Cross' prose style with Teresa's, Peers finds St.John's expression clear and objective and, therefore easier to translate than Teresa's «almost complete disregard of the literary conventions»⁹. Menéndez Pidal speaks of the «desaliño habitual de los escritos de Santa Teresa» and of «her way of despensing completely with all and any stylistic technique... showing its attractiveness outside of or in opposition to everything and anything we can call literature»¹⁰.

Such descriptions deserve comment, as they have been the source of a general misconception of Teresa's style. We may consider Teresa's style "sweet", but the adjective seems inappropriate. Even though "sweet" may not convey a pejorative message, the word "disorder" certainly does. "Disorder" implies a lack of structure, an absence of balance, that it is not found in her works. When scholars like Peers use "disorder" to define Teresa's style, they seem to be using the male style of writing of that time as their only reference. Accordingly, if we load the word "disorder" with this bias, it would be more correct to say of Teresa's writings that they have a "sweet out-of-the-male-canon" structure.

Teresa herself refers to her style as rough, heavy, and unpolished. She did not consider herself a good writer, as she always in a hurry to go back to "important things like spinning". And yet she knew clearly that what she was writing is important and

⁸. AVILA, Teresa of: *Interior Castle* (Peers), p.234. *Las Moradas*, p.485. «Me parece os será de consuelo deleitaros en este castillo interior; pues sin licencia de las superiores podéis entraros y pasearos por él a cualquier hora. (...) que no os lo puede quitar nadie.»

⁹. PEERS, E.Allison: "Preface" to *Teresa of Avila's Life*. Image Books. Doubleday and Co., Inc. New York, 1960, p.15.

¹⁰. MENÉNDEZ PIDAL, R.: *La lengua de Colón*. Espasa-Calpe. Colección Austral. Madrid. 1968, pp.74-78. (My translation).

was inspired by the Holy Ghost: «Before I begin to speak of the fourth Mansions, it is most necessary that I should do what I have already done—namely, commend myself to the Holy Spirit, and beg Him from this point onward to speak for me, so that you may understand what I shall say about the Mansions still to be treated. For we now begin to touch the supernatural, and this is most difficult to explain unless His Majesty takes it in hand, as He did when I described as much as I understood of the subject, about fourteen years ago»¹¹. I am probably not the only person who suspects that Teresa is teasing, and very effectively so, many of the men of letters of her time. By not representing a threat to or competing with any of her contemporary theologians and literati, she was able to write what she wanted. Indeed, her cultivation of a personal voice gained her a fame that a more imitative stylist could not have done.

Teresa's self-declared inability to express her ideas and feelings paradoxically materializes in model literary and mystical works. Now the question arises: Was she unawares of what she was writing and how she was writing it, or was it all the time deliberate? There seems to have been two options: writing the way a simple woman is perceived by the authorities as being accepted and admired for doing it; or trying to write like an intellectual and failing to be accepted either as a woman of ideas or as a communicator of these ideas. Teresa appears to have chosen the first of those two.

This does not mean, however, that Teresa acquiesced to the established rule. Rather, she used it to her own and her fellow women's advantage and reformed it just as much as she did the Carmelite order. Again, Teresa acted with no perceptible anger, without the "black snake" Virginia Woolf speaks about in *A Room*

¹¹. AVILA, Teresa of: *Interior Castle* (Peers), p.72, 4th mansion, chapter I. *Las Moradas*, p.404. «Para comenzar a hablar de las cuartas moradas bien he de menester lo que he hecho, que es encomendarme al Espiritu Santo, y suplicarle de aquí en adelante hable por mí, para decir algo de las que quedan, de manera que lo entendáis; porque comienzan a ser cosas sobrenaturales y es dificultosísimo de dar a entender, si su Majestad no lo hace, como en otra parte que se escribió catorce años ha, poco más o menos.» (She refers to the chapters XI-XII of her *Life*).

of *One's Own*. Instead, Teresa created and enjoyed a cell of her own.

Juana Ramírez de Asbaje (Mexico 1651-1695) was very different from Teresa of Avila. Sor Juana was born out of wedlock in the colony then named New Spain, or what is today Mexico. From a very early age she dedicated her time to learning and writing. Despite her good standing in the vice-regal court, she chose not to marry and instead entered a Carmelite convent (1667). It has been argued that her illegitimacy¹² made her decide not to marry, but I disagree, as at least one of her sisters married before Juana took her vows. But Sor Juana was not looking for the total enclosure, dissociation, and "recogimiento" that her Carmelite cell offered her, and so she left after three months and entered the convent of Saint Jerome in 1669¹³.

This convent was worldly enough for Sor Juana to keep in contact with the court and with intellectuals. She had a slave to do the menial chores, and she had a cell of her own¹⁴. Her refusing marriage and becoming a nun thus meant gaining room and time to maintain and develop her already-recognized literary skills and ambitions. Her surroundings gave her the themes, patrons, and public she needed and desired. Her poetry, intensely baroque, reflects the world of etiquette in which she became acclaimed as the Tenth Muse and the Phoenix of Mexico.

¹². It should be taken into account that the word "illegitimacy" when Sor Juana was born, didn't imply "outcast". Sor Juana was recognized by her father, and was not only socially accepted, but also considered "persona grata" in the viceroyal court.

¹³. For a clear understanding of the differences in social behavior among different colonial convents, read LAVRIN, Asunción: "Women and Religion in Spanish America", in *Women and Religion in America*, edited by Rosemary Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller, Harper and Row, San Francisco, pp.42-78. And LAVRIN, Asunción: "Female religious" in *Cities and society in colonial Latin America*. Edited by Louisa Schell Hoberman and Susan Migden Socolow. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1966, pp.165-195.

¹⁴. Sor Juana, like many others nuns, bought her cell with all its contents. On January 20, 1692, she applied to the archbishop of Mexico for a license to buy the cell that had belonged to mother Catalina de San Jerónimo. On February 9, 1692 she took possession of the cell «to use and dispose of as she might see fit». These documents are in CERVANTES, Enrique A: *Testamento de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz y otros documentos*. Mexico, 1949. (Vol. XXII of his works), numbered edition, No.336, pp.50-51. (My translation). It is most interesting that the above quoted sentence is very much like the one Teresa used to describe the Interior Castle, only Teresa was referring to a spiritual room, whereas this document refers to the actual room of bricks and cement.

Sor Juana's very success, however, became the source of the criticism and censure that eventually silenced her. She reacted to this criticism with justifiable anger, for the fact that she was a woman was what made men feel threatened by her writing. She had chosen the option dismissed by Teresa: to try to write like an intellectual but to fail to be accepted.

Her *Reply to Sor Philotea de la Cruz* (1st March 1691), four years before her death, was written to the bishop of Puebla to explain her earlier *Carta Atenagórica* (1690), which was Sor Juana's rebuttal of a sermon written forty years earlier (1650) by the Portuguese Jesuit theologian Antonio Vieyra. If the sermon was pompous, the *Carta Atenagórica* was no less so. Nonetheless, the bishop of Puebla published it, and then he reprimanded Sor Juana for getting involved in theological disquisitions.

Sor Juana wrote her *Reply to Sor Philotea* as an autobiographical essay, in which she explains her inner drives and argues for the right of women to use their intellectual abilities, thereby contradicting many of the church's restrictions on women's activities. Her *Reply*, then, is not only a justification and explanation of her writing; it is also a sample of such writing itself.

For some critics, like Alan Trueboold and Georgina Sabat de Rivers, Sor Juana's *Reply*, together with some of her poems, are the expression of a programmatic feminism. Indeed, the canonization of Sor Juana as a feminist may well begin with one of her most popular poems, the one in which «*she demonstrates the inconsistency of men's wishes in blaming women for what they themselves have caused*»¹⁵. The poem says much about the standing, at that time, of men in relation to women, and viceversa. It also shows that Sor Juana defended women in the way that Tirso de Molina or another Spanish nun of the fifteenth century, Teresa de Cartagena, had done. But what especially attracted my attention is the standing of the author in the poem:

1st quatrain

¹⁵. TRUEBOOD, Alan (Translator): *A Sor Juana Anthology*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1988, pp.110-113. This Sor Juana Anthology is a bilingual edition of selected poems by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

Silly you *men* -so very adept
at wrongly faulting *womankind*
not seeing you're alone to blame
for the faults you plant in *woman's* mind

2nd quatrain

After you've won by urgent plea
the right to tarnish her good name
you still expect her to behave-
you, that coaxed her into shame.

15th quatrain

So why are you *all* so stunned
at the thought you're all guilty alike
Either like *them* for what you've made *them*
or make *them* into what you can like.

17th quatrain

I well know what powerful arms
you wield in pressing for evil:
your arrogance is allied
with the world, the flesh, and the devil!¹⁶

There is a precise and repetitive identification of two groups: men and women, with men referred to in the plural through the poem and woman as a single representative of all women in the beginning of the poem. When we reach the ending quatrains, women

¹⁶. DE LA CRUZ, Sor Juana Inés: *A Sor Juana Anthology*, pp.110-113.

Hombres necios que acusáis
a la mujer sin razón
sin ver que sois la ocasión
de lo mismo que culpáis:

si con ansia sin igual
solicitáis su desdén,
¿por qué queréis que obren bien
si las incitáis al mal?

Pues para que os espantáis
de la culpa que tenéis?
Queredlas cual las hacéis
o hacedlas cual las buscáis.*

Bien con muchas armas fundo
que lidia vuestra arrogancia,
pues en promesa e instancia
juntáis diablo, carne y mundo.

* Literally: «Love them the way you make them/ or make them the way you want to find them»

become *them* but are still the object that men are entitled, by command, to shape: «*Either like them for what you've made them/ or make them what you can like*». The last quatrain is governed by *I*. This *I* addresses itself directly to men while referring to a third party-women. The poet is the naming force, and therefore, able to define and judge both groups including herself in either. By referring to women as "them", and to men as "you", the poet in effect establishes a certain intimacy or directness in her relationship with men, in contrast to her stands of detachment from women.

Sor Juana's nunhood was for her a state of asexuality that allowed her to write whatever she pleased. We must admit, though, that the style she chose was modeled on that of the male writers of her time. Success to her succeeding in the male style. She knew that her competition was not only men of letters but also theologians, and she accepted the challenge willingly.

In the *Reply* Sor Juana mentions several women outstanding for their intellectual powers, women just as or more brilliant than herself, but she does not quote them. Instead she includes the male definitions, the definitions of Saint Paul and Saint Jerome. She thus attempts to justify once again her writings and her thoughts to the ultimate authority: men.

Whether or not this justification makes Sor Juana a feminist is to say. The word "feminist" is extremely ambiguous, and it also is a twentieth-century concept difficult to apply to the women of the seventeenth century. So Juana felt it necessary to prove her skills and to demonstrate how much she knew; she wrote

as a way of self-assertion, which takes her far from Teresa of Avila.

Going back to my point at the beginning: Virginia Woolf speaks to Jane Austen as the ideal model. About her writing, Woolf observes: *«She did it without hate, without bitterness, without protest, without preaching. That was how Shakespeare wrote, I thought, looking at Anthony and Cleopatra, and they may mean that the minds of both had consumed all impediments»*¹⁷.

Both women, Teresa of Avila and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, had a cell of their own. But after reading their works, one is left with very different impression of these cells. Teresa is always aiming at "recogimiento", seeking self-control and independence from worldly authority and avoiding penetration of the men's world. Juana, on the other hand, was trying to and succeeding at penetrating the male world, in order to expand the existing rule to gain equality with the male order.

Canonizing these women, however, has not enhanced their works, although it has converted them into instruments of particulars credos and politics. Making the holiness of Teresa or the feminism of Sor Juana the trademark of their respective literatures is, indeed, taking "pars pro toto" and thereby maiming the "toto". The miracles have overshadowed Teresa's life; her arm has become a relic; and so have her writings. Sor Juana has been made a martyr of the feminist cause and, in time, if not already, will be seen as a relic too.

My proposal is to decanonize the works of both nuns and instead to consider their writings in light of their own times

¹⁷. WOOLF: Ibid, p.75.

and circumstances and then, to try to understand them on their own terms, rather than to transform them into allies or enemies of our contemporary thoughts.

