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## “Teresa speaks to poets”: Mystical Experience, Apology and Literary Creation in Kate O’Brien’s *Teresa of Ávila*

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**Abstract.** Kate O’Brien’s connection to Spain, and the extent to which it is central to her work, has been widely studied using as background information the eight months she spent in Bilbao working as a governess (1922-23), an experience which inspired her novel *Mary Lavelle* (1936). However, her biography of Teresa of Avila has received less scholarly attention than the rest of her novels or travelogues. Although O’Brien referred to the Spanish writer and mystic in many of her works and interviews, she especially celebrated her in the biography *Teresa of Avila* (1951). In this essay, I will start by tracing the similarities between the lives of Kate O’Brien and Teresa of Avila in order to emphasize O’Brien’s identification with Teresa of Avila. I am going to argue, firstly, that Kate O’Brien’s biography of Teresa is as much a defence of herself as a writer against her censors and detractors, as it is a passionate apology of the Spanish mystic, just as Teresa’s *The Book of Her Life* is a theological apology written in order to justify herself to her confessors. Secondly, that Kate O’Brien, drawing on the terminology of Teresa’s mystical method, traces a parallelism between the mystical experience and the act of creative writing.

**Key Words.** Kate O’Brien, Teresa of Avila, Religion, Mysticism, Biography, Spiritual Autobiography, Literary Creation, Comparison between Irish Literature and Spanish Literature.

**Resumen.** La conexión de Kate O’Brien con España, que resulta esencial para comprender su obra, ha sido ampliamente analizada usando como trasfondo los ocho meses que pasó en Bilbao trabajando como institutriz (1922-23), que inspiraron su novela *Mary Lavelle* (1936). Sin embargo, su biografía de Teresa de Ávila ha sido menos estudiada que sus novelas y libros de viaje. Aunque O’Brien mencionó a la escritora y mística española en muchas de sus obras y entrevistas, la homenajeó especialmente en la biografía *Teresa de Ávila* (1951). En este ensayo, comenzaré trazando las similitudes entre las vidas de Kate O’Brien y Teresa de Ávila para destacar la identificación que O’Brien sentía con la mística abulense. En primer lugar, argumentaré que la biografía de Teresa escrita por Kate O’Brien es tanto un alegato contra sus censores y detractores, así como una defensa apasionada de la mística española; de la misma

forma que *El libro de la vida* de Teresa de Ávila es una disculpa teológica escrita para justificarse ante sus confesores. En segundo lugar, defenderé que Kate O'Brien, basándose en método místico de Teresa, traza un paralelismo entre la experiencia mística y el acto de la escritura creativa.

**Palabras clave.** Kate O'Brien, Teresa de Ávila, religión, misticismo, biografía, biografía espiritual, creación literaria, análisis comparativo entre literatura irlandesa y española.

## 1. Introduction

Teresa of Ávila<sup>1</sup> (1515-82) – Teresa of Jesus, as she named herself in religion – and Kate O'Brien (1897-1974) apparently stand worlds apart. Teresa was a Spanish nun, religious reformer and author of one of the earliest and best-known autobiographies written by a woman, the *Libro de la vida* (*The Book of her Life*, 1562-5), among other major works of mysticism, poems and letters. As Eibhear Walshe observes, “Kate O'Brien falls into no ready category as a writer, appearing to vacillate between popular fiction and ‘literature’, Catholic conscience and Wildean dissidence, bourgeois history and feminist writing” (*Ordinary* 1). O'Brien's connection to Spain, and the extent to which it is central to her work, has been widely studied. (Walshe 1993, 2006; Morales 2011; Legarreta-Mentxaka 2011; Davison 2017; Mittermeier 2017), often using as background information the eight months she spent in Bilbao working as a governess (1922-23), which inspired her novel *Mary Lavelle* (1936).

Kate O'Brien was especially attracted to the city of Avila and its famous saint, Teresa of Jesus, a figure she admired as “a woman who had made herself powerful in a male world and supreme within female communities” (Walshe, *Kate O'Brien* 66), and whose life she celebrated in a biography entitled *Teresa of Avila* (1951). O'Brien's biography of St Teresa is prefigured in her travelogue *Farewell Spain* (1937), published just one year after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (Legarreta-Mentxaka n.p). The eponymous chapter “Santa Teresa” sketches an opinionated portrait of the Spanish mystic in approximately thirteen pages out of the twenty of which the chapter is comprised. O'Brien politically appropriates for the Republican side a key symbol of Franco's Catholic Nationalism – Teresa has been named “la Santa de la Raza” (Di Febo 67) – and “makes it her own” (Walshe, *Ordinary People* 9). In *Farewell Spain*, O'Brien's thesis is that Teresa is “a woman for all seasons”: “But Saint Teresa is for ever, for history and humanity as long as they remain. And she was of Avila. A genius of the large and immensurable kind of which there have been very few, and only one a woman” (O'Brien, *Farewell* 101-102). In the context of a book which is a politically outspoken manifesto, O'Brien openly declares herself a supporter of the Spanish Republic (O'Brien, *Farewell* 123) and labels Teresa as a radical but she immediately contextualizes her opinions by including quotations from the saint's works:

She was a communist: ‘Let no sister have anything of her own but everything in common and to each be given according to her need. Neither must the prioress, etc. ... all must be equal’. She was a feminist: ‘I will not have my daughters women in anything, but valorous men’ (O'Brien, *Farewell* 109-110)

Leaving aside her sanctity, O'Brien “celebrates Teresa's achievements as a secular figure, as the woman who gained power and respect in a man's world” (Walshe, *Kate O'Brien* 73). The Irish writer sees Teresa as a genius not just because of her writing but mainly because of her life (Breen 185). Teresa, O'Brien insists in the Introduction of her biography, “is a woman of

genius” and this genius “was for life. Teresa lived as a genius” (*Teresa* 13-14). Although O’Brien controversially claims that “genius has hardly ever flowered in a woman” (*Teresa* 11), Legarreta-Mentxaka argues that the biography can be considered an exercise of “feminist historiography” and contains an unrecognized lesbian subtext (n.p), a thesis which is developed to the full by Jane Davison (2017). While the discussion of the underlying lesbian strain in the text is not the aim of this essay, I agree with Teresa Deevy, one of the first reviewers of the text, that Kate O’Brien is plainly in love<sup>2</sup> with her subject (54) and, I would add, regards her as a spiritual model.

Kate O’Brien’s “personal portrait” of Teresa appeared simultaneously in London and New York in 1951. As Patricia Bastida points out, this text must be placed in the context of the many feminist revisions of women saints published in the twentieth century (52). Due to O’Brien’s Spanish censorship records<sup>3</sup> and the slightly heterodox profile of the biography it was not translated into Spanish when it was first released. The Spanish version was published in 2015 on the occasion of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Teresa’s birth, in a translation by Antonio Rivero Taravillo and featured a Prologue by Justin Harman, then Irish Ambassador to Spain. Harman justifies the publication of the book because “he cannot think of a better Irish contribution to the celebration of the saint’s anniversary than the publication of this excellent biography by an Irish writer who felt a profound affection and respect for Spain and its people” (O’Brien, *Teresa de Ávila* 9).

Beyond the admiration that the twentieth century Irish writer felt for the Spanish one, Kate O’Brien and Teresa of Avila also appear to have lived parallel lives, which their biographers describe as risky and troubled (Rossi 11; Walshe, *Ordinary People* 2). I will start by tracing the similarities between the lives of Kate O’Brien and Teresa of Avila in order to emphasize the identification of the two writers underlying O’Brien’s biography. In this essay I am going to argue, firstly, that Kate O’Brien’s *Teresa of Avila* is as much a defence of herself as a writer against her censors and detractors as it is a passionate defence of the Spanish mystic, just as Teresa’s *The Book of Her Life* is a theological *apologia* (Weber 43) written in order to justify herself to her confessors. Secondly, that Kate O’Brien, who demonstrates some knowledge of mysticism as she draws on Teresa’s mystical method in her biography and traces a parallelism between the mystical experience and the act of creative writing

## 2. The Parallel Lives of Teresa of Avila and Kate O’Brien

Teresa of Avila and Kate O’Brien experienced similar times of political flux and cultural change although they lived in different centuries and thus in very different historical epochs. Teresa lived during the reigns of Charles I and Philip II, the autocratic 16<sup>th</sup> century king. In her native city of Avila Teresa found many of the models for her religious life, as well as the individuals and institutions that helped to shape her concepts of prayer and monastic reform (Bilinkoff xi). However, Avila also made her suffer, when it opposed the foundation of her first disalced convent, St. Joseph, and forced her to return to the convent of the Incarnation, the very place that she had wanted to leave. Teresa was born when “the Renaissance was aflood in Europe ... and the Reformation was gathering up on a curve of coming power” (O’Brien, *Teresa* 17). Among the many strains of Renaissance thought, Teresa and her mystical teachings should be contextualized within the *Humanismo Español*, corresponding to the development of the Italian Renaissance movement in Spain, which took place in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Her lifetime thus spanned the religious movements of Reformation and Counter-Reformation (Bilinkoff xi) and thus coincided with the time of Martin Luther’s Protestant reform and the Council of Trent (1545-1564). Interestingly, O’Brien develops a comparison between the Spanish and German religious figures as reformers in her biography: “She was, like Luther, passionate, fearless and self-assured... in her sheer passion to serve God, she resembled Luther” (*Teresa* 67-68). The

Reformation drew from the teachings of Erasmianism, an undercurrent of religious thought between Catholicism and Lutheranism (Pérez-Romero 39) in search of an individual encounter with God. As Davison notes, O'Brien "was attracted to the notion of interiority that she found in the works of Erasmus, and she found a similar spiritual philosophy in the writings of Saint Teresa of Avila" (133).

Like the Spanish subject of her biography, the Irish writer Kate O'Brien grew up in a country torn by religious and political turmoil. Furthermore, she lived through two world wars. O'Brien was born in Limerick, a city which simultaneously delighted and wounded her<sup>4</sup> and which, remained a central concern and an influence across her life and works (O'Neill 45). In 1897, the year of O'Brien's birth, Ireland was still a part of the British Empire and would have to undergo an armed revolution in order to become the Irish Free State. Whereas Teresa had no formal education as was usual for the women of her time, Kate O'Brien attended University College Dublin, her studies coinciding with the Easter Rising of 1916, followed by a three-year civil war before the Irish Free State was established in 1922.

Teresa of Avila and Kate O'Brien were daughters of merchants, born into large wealthy middle-class families: Kate had nine brothers and sisters while Teresa had twelve, by her own account in the first chapter of *The Book of Her Life* (*The Life* 66). They both lost their mothers at an early age and idealised their fathers, who ended up struggling with debt. With regard to the early stages of their education, they also follow similar paths: they were sent to convent schools, a decision which greatly influenced their lives. Teresa entered the Augustinian convent of Our Lady of Grace, where, as she explains in *The Book of Her Life* (*The Life* 71), she first glimpsed her vocation for a contemplative life devoted to God and felt "much happier than [she] had been in [her] father's house (*Life* 72, Teresa 27). Teresa's rejection of paternal and male authority informed her decision never to marry and to enter the convent of the Incarnation: "But I was still anxious not to be a nun ... although I was also afraid of marriage ... even then, I saw that that was the best and safest state" (*Life* 75). Teresa was reluctant to get married because by the time she was thirteen years old her mother was dead because "marriage and the bearing of many children invalidated [her mother] and she died, seeming much older than her years, when she was thirty-three" (O'Brien, *Teresa* 18). As Pérez-Romero explains, "against this kind of strenuous life designed for women, female monasteries created a convent culture, where nuns were freed from the burdens of childbearing and the caretaking of men, and could exercise creative talents through writing and other artistic and intellectual and spiritual pursuits" (Pérez-Romero 51). Therefore, as Marcelle Auclair puts it, Teresa's marriage to Jesus was first a marriage of convenience turned into a love match (44).

In a similar manner, Kate O'Brien's education at Laurel Hill, a Catholic convent school in Limerick, was hugely influential for the Irish writer. As O'Brien's biographer Eibhear Walshe points out, "she carried a veneration of the world of the convent into her adult life and into her fiction and most of the important adult women in her childhood were nuns, her mother's sisters in the Limerick Presentation Convent and her teachers at Laurel Hill" (*Kate O'Brien* 13). The nuns at Laurel Hill provided her with a model of an independent female vocation outside the expected way of family and marriage, just as the Augustinian nuns of Ávila had done for Teresa. Their schooling in convent schools isolated Kate O'Brien and Teresa from the usual conditioning of a patriarchal society. Holy women abound in the work of Kate O'Brien, either as nuns or as secular figures of austere spirituality and authority (Walshe, *Kate O'Brien* 19).<sup>5</sup> Nuns represent the emotional distance the writer valued as the one precious necessity for the creative life (Walshe, *Kate O'Brien* 19). Kate was married once, for eleven months, to the Dutch journalist Gustaaf Renier. However, she never wrote about her marriage. It was Renier, writing to Kate's sister Nance, who described their marital life: "Kitty says she has never been happy with me, that she is not made for matrimony" (quoted in Reynolds 38). Furthermore, Kate

O'Brien often expressed her approval of Teresa's choice of virginity (Walshe, *Kate O'Brien* 36) as understood in its etymological sense (Latin *virginitas*) of purity and integrity of heart.

Despite the fact that O'Brien lost her Catholic faith when she became an adult, she retained a profound reverence for Catholicism as a form of cultural identity (Walshe, *Kate O'Brien* 14) and for the ideal of intellectual European Catholicism she portrayed in her novel *The Land of Spices* (Walshe, *Kate O'Brien* 86). In this aspect, she is radically different from Teresa, who remained an orthodox Catholic throughout her life and, furthermore, experimented a second conversion as profound as that of St Augustine when she had just turned forty (Moorcraft 14). In contrast, O'Brien was very critical with Irish Catholicism but she never completely left her attachment to her religion and "felt attracted to the self-regulating Catholicism she discovered during her time in Spain" (Davison 8).

A recurrent motif in the criticism of Kate O'Brien's biography of Teresa of Avila is the merging of the figures of the two writers. Walshe notices an unconscious identification between Kate and Teresa (*Kate O'Brien* 136) inasmuch as the Irish writer saw in the Spanish one a projection of her own identity. Eavan Boland has also noted their convergence: "The line-drawing [between Kate and Teresa] is not quite accurate" (22). Deevy argues that the book is "a mingling of two personalities" (54). Another intriguing parallelism between Teresa's *The Book of Her Life* and O'Brien's *Teresa of Avila* are that Teresa wrote *The Life* and Kate her biography when they were in their fifties, looking back at their worldly youth and deeming it an immature stage of their lives.

Many scholars of Teresa of Avila have claimed that the term "autobiography" used about *The Life* is problematic because the book was written under the command of Teresa's confessors (Weber 42). Teresa's confessors asked her to write a book about her mystical experiences because her visions had started to be questioned by the Spanish Inquisition. On the contrary, Carmen Martín-Gaité argues that it did not matter that her starting point was obedience to male authority because Teresa "started obeying in order to disobey", to do things her own way (62). Furthermore, the male command turned out to be very fruitful in Teresa's writing because of two factors. Firstly, she had to exercise all her skills and shrewdness to avoid falling foul of the anti-reformist and anti-feminist tendencies within the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Catholic Church (Martín-Gaité 63). *Alumbrados* or "Illuminists" (especially women), who claimed to have received spiritual enlightenment from their religious experiences (Ahlgren 12, Pérez-Romero 98) were feared and persecuted by the Spanish Inquisition. The second way in which obedience was productive was that complying with her confessors' orders forced Teresa to write about the ineffable by using what Peter Tyler calls "first-hand language of the soul" (84).

In addition to facing the potential attacks of the censors, Kate O'Brien faced a daunting task when attempting to write a biography of the Avila saint. Countless biographies about Teresa were available, including a best-selling one by Marcelle Auclair in 1950, the year before O'Brien published her own. In the Preface of Auclair's biography, André Maurois quotes Thomas Carlyle's statement that a well-written life is even rarer than a well-spent one (v). Carlyle also stated that the writing of a life should be an act of sympathy (quoted in Lee, 1). These two characteristics – humility before the task and sympathy for the subject – guide O'Brien when she makes her opening disclaimer: "Let no reader suppose that in the few pages here set before him he will find either the life or, miraculously trapped, the spirit of Teresa of Avila. The present attempt is a portrait, or rather, it is notes for a portrait" (*Teresa* 9). From the outset, O'Brien insisted on the personal and not comprehensive nature of the biography.

### **3. Mysticism as a metaphor for creative writing in *Teresa of Avila***

As Jane Davison argues, Teresa of Avila was an essential model for Kate O'Brien as a writer (133). In relation to the connection between Teresa's mystical experience and the gift of writing

John Hildebidle accurately observes: “Teresa believed ... in the Christian God ... [but] her accurate development and expression through herself of what that belief was is analogous to an artist’s self conscious exploration of his gift” (53). Along Hildebidle’s line of thought, in this section of the essay I am going to show that Kate O’Brien uses the mystical method to describe the experience of creative writing, albeit not necessarily implying that the Irish writer believed in God as a source of inspiration. Before delving into this connection between mysticism and creation, I will briefly introduce the stages of this method according to the Carmelite tradition. Most definitions of mystic traditions agree that mysticism is an experiential process of knowing God, a searching for a kind of knowledge, which according to Louis Bouyer, is referred to as “*gnosis*” as opposed to the traditional philosophical knowledge – “episteme” (311). The theologian and mystic William of St Thierry called this kind of knowledge *gnosis* or “science” (quoted in Bouyer 318), which provides an explanation for Kate O’Brien’s definition of mysticism as a “science of the spirit” (*Teresa* 49). David Scott defines mysticism as a study of ways in which the largely hidden aspects of God’s nature “have been approached and understood” (817). The etymology of the word “mysticism” in English is also worth paying attention to. “Mysticism” and “mystery” share the same root word, which in English means to “muzzle”, to keep quiet or to keep a tight mouth (Scott 817). This idea of “secrecy” in the etymology of “mysticism” is directly relevant not only to perceive O’Brien’s “muzzled” lesbian condition which, according to Davison, is conveyed in *Teresa of Avila* through “coded markers” (121); but also to understand Teresa’s “unorthodox” message of liberation in *The Life* (Pérez-Romero 86).

Love is the central emotion in O’Brien’s biography of her admired Spanish writer. In the affective tradition of mysticism, as followed by the Spanish mystics Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross (1542-91), there is an important connection between mysticism and love (Scott 822). The influence of the courtly romance tradition in literature gave the mystical experiences of these two writers a language of the heart and of passionate love through which they could communicate their feelings. When drawing on the erotic metaphor, Edith Stein describes the mystical experience as the moment in which the religious realm transforms itself into the space of love, initiating a true transformation of metaphysics (58).

From a psychoanalytic, non-Catholic perspective, Julia Kristeva defines mysticism as a psychosomatic experience which reveals the erotic secrets of faith, an experience in which there is an extraordinary union between the soul and its God, where the finite marries the infinite in order to accomplish its true eternity “alone with God” (*Teresa, amor mío* 43). This face-to-face and intimate connection with God is also emphasised by Kate O’Brien: “But to advance into the very face and presence of God, and to insist that it is He who invites the audacity, to talk and walk with Him, and truthfully and coolly memorize such intimacy in all its phases, and coolly write it down” (*Teresa* 47). O’Brien commends Teresa for the audacity of trying to face and address God directly, without the mediation of a priest, and adds two new dimensions to mysticism, as understood by Teresa of Avila: the acts of memorizing and writing the mystical experience. O’Brien’s implicit argument in *Teresa of Avila* is that when Teresa writes about her mystical experiences her insight is valid for writers because the process of literary creation is similar to the mystical process. There are numerous illustrations of this argument in O’Brien’s text of which I have selected but two: “when she [Teresa] strives most scrupulously for precision in recording her raptures, she speaks to poets, anywhere, in any time” (*Teresa*, 32); “a poet, advanced and impetuous in imagination, will also see how far into the movements of his soul its clear ascent might carry him” (*Teresa* 49).

Teresa of Avila describes the four stages of prayer of the mystical ascension in chapter XI of *The Book of Her Life*, where she presents us with the analogy of the watering of the garden, quoted by O’Brien in her biography of the mystic.

It seems to me that the garden can be watered in four ways: by taking the water from a well, which costs us great labour; or by a water-wheel and buckets, when the water is drawn by a windlass ... or by a stream or a brook, which waters the ground much better, for it saturates it more thoroughly and there is less need to water it often, so that the gardener's labour is much less; or by heavy rain, when the Lord waters it with no labour of ours (*Life* 127, quoted in *Teresa* 49).

In the context of O'Brien's aforementioned analogy between the mystical method and writing, the watering simile could also be interpreted as a metaphoric way of describing the process of literary creation, which can present different degrees of difficulty, just as there are easier or more arduous ways or watering a garden.

The first degree of prayer is Meditation, a word which has a different meaning in the context of sixteenth-century Christian spirituality from that which it has today (Green 39). For Teresa, "Meditation is made up of 'reflection' or reasoning upon a particular subject – usually an episode in the life of Jesus – and 'affection' or opening our heart to the divine after having thought about the truths encapsulated in our chosen subject" (Green 39). The subject of O'Brien's Meditation is Teresa of Avila. At the outset of her biography of St. Teresa, O'Brien acknowledges that her text is "freely developed from one writer's long reflection on a markedly individual and dangerous fellow creature" (*Teresa* 9). O'Brien adds that her choice of subject is "passionate, arbitrary, personal" (*Teresa* 10), hinting that she is emotionally involved with the subject of her biography.

Meditation develops – there is no clear dividing line – into Recollection (*Recogimiento*) "whereby the practitioner detaches herself from outward stimuli and fixes her faculties, her attention and dedication on the centre of the soul where the Deity dwells" (Green 39). The imagination – essential in literary creation – also plays an important role in the visualisations that are part of Teresa's meditative method. After the prayer of Recollection comes a stage which Teresa calls the Prayer of Quiet (*Oración de Quietud*). Teresa does not always clearly distinguish between Recollection and Quiet as, again, the dividing line is not rigid (Green 41). In the Prayer of Quiet, the practitioner experiences an interior peace, joy and delight. As Green observes, "there is a receptivity, stillness and inner silence in the depths of the soul and a new knowledge of God which is not a rational understanding but a conviction springing from the experience itself" (Green 41). The next stage of experience of which Teresa speaks of is the Prayer of Union (*Oración de Unión*). In the terminology of most mystical writers, "union" denotes the final, ultimate achievement of oneness with God, but Teresa does not use this term in this sense because for her the final mystical goal is the spiritual marriage (Green 42). In the next section of this essay, I will show how a kind of "spiritual marriage" between the biographer and the subject of the biography develops out of the merging of the voices of Kate O'Brien and Teresa of Avila through use of unreferenced quotations.

#### **4. Speaking through Teresa's words: the quotations from Teresa of Avila's works in O'Brien's biography**

In this section, I am going to analyse the quotations, which are longer than five lines, from Teresa of Avila's works, *The Life* and *Spiritual Relations*, included by Kate O'Brien in her biography. As I shall show, O'Brien quotes widely from *The Life in Teresa of Avila*, producing an effect of confusion of the voices of the biographer and the subject of the biography. This kind of intertextuality contributes to support my argument that the Irish writer uses her biography of the saint to defend herself and to trace a parallelism between the mystical experience and the experience of writing. There are fourteen long quotations (thirteen, in fact, because the fourteenth one is a repetition of the first) from Teresa of Avila's *Life* and *Spiritual*

*Relations* in O'Brien's biography. Although in the Acknowledgements, O'Brien thanks "Professor E. Allison Peers for permission to quote from his translations of Saint Teresa's *Spiritual Relations*, *The Way of Perfection* and *The Interior Castle*" (Teresa 6), I have not traced any quotations from the last two books. O'Brien does quote profusely from *The Life* and includes two short quotations from *The Foundations*, the book in which Teresa recounts her experiences of founding her convents throughout Spain. Quotations from *The Life* and *Spiritual Relations* sometimes span almost two pages from Teresa of Avila's works.

Having already provided some contextualization for *The Life*, the best known and most read of her books, I will briefly introduce *The Spiritual Relations*. *The Spiritual Relations*, *Spiritual Testimonies* (Kavanaugh and Rodríguez) or *Cuentas de Conciencia* in Spanish (literally, "accounts of conscience") are autobiographical texts less known than *The Life*, but not less interesting. O'Brien describes this work as the "beautiful *addenda*" to Teresa's spiritual autobiography whose "main purpose is to clarify a unique spiritual state spread out over her life" (Teresa 74). Scholars of Teresa of Avila call them "the other autobiography" (Diego-Sánchez and Castro-Sánchez) or "interior biography" (De la Madre de Dios and Stegink). According to the Augustine friar Luis de León, first editor of Teresa's works, in *The Spiritual Relations* she reported God's favors and what He literally said to her (quoted in Diego-Sánchez and Castro-Sánchez 75).

The quotations from *The Life* and *The Spiritual Relations* can be classified into two categories according to their theme. The first group of quotations presents Teresa of Avila apologizing for her sins and defending herself against the men who question her. These men include the overzealous *letrados* or men of letters, the official theologians from the Catholic Church and her confessors, about whom Teresa confesses that those "with only a little of it [learning] had done her soul a great harm" (*Life* 84). The second category of texts portrays some of Teresa's mystical experiences which can be classified under the aforementioned four stages of prayer leading to the mystical method (Meditation, Recollection, Quiet, Union).

In the first two of the apologetic quotations from Teresa's autobiographical works, O'Brien presents the saint as she "watched herself ... [being] self-conscious in a merciless fashion" (Teresa 40). In two of the quotations from *The Life* that O'Brien includes, Teresa speaks about evil influences, "occasions of sin" and vanity, "which were an offence both to [her] honour and to [her] God" (*Life* 69-71, 97-100; *Teresa* 22-23, 40-41). In the same passage Teresa also refers to "the many years she spent in this pestilential pastime" (*Life* 100; *Teresa* 41) and how God continually saved [her] from the danger of losing [her] entire reputation (*Life* 105; *Teresa* 45). Paradoxically, Teresa agrees with Luther, her contemporary and religious antagonist, in believing that only overcome temptations provide the strength that leads to faith (Lorenz 76).

In the light of the confusion of the voices of Kate O'Brien and Teresa of Avila generated by O'Brien's way of quoting from the Spanish writer's works, it would not be far-fetched to affirm that Kate O'Brien is confessing her own sins by adopting Teresa's technique of self-depreciation, which Weber calls "the rhetoric of humility" (159). The issue of "honour" (in Spanish *honra*) was crucial for Teresa during much of her life, just as her reputation as a writer was important for O'Brien. The occasions of sin, which Teresa repeatedly mentions, mirror those in Kate's life, such as "the gradual disintegration" (Walshe, *Kate O'Brien* 124) O'Brien was going through at the time of writing Teresa of Avila's biography. As Walshe notes, Kate's drinking had become problematic and she had fallen into difficulties with money (*Kate O'Brien* 124-25). Through Teresa's voice, O'Brien also complains about her "grief at not having in myself the strength to turn the desires into actions" (*Life* 105; *Teresa* 45), a statement which could indicate that O'Brien could have been suffering from depression or at least, a mid-life sense of discouragement or lack of achievement.

Teresa's discourse about men of the Catholic Church – official theologians and confessors – is where her subversive feminist message perceived by Pérez-Romero, appears at its most ostensible. Teresa's subversive discourse echoes Kate O'Brien's problems with men in the Irish literary establishment, especially censors. O'Brien quotes an excerpt from *The Life* in which Teresa openly challenges the learned men of the Catholic Church by observing that when she "hear[s]" "servants of God, men of weight, learning and intelligence, making such a fuss because God is not giving them devotion, it revolts [her] to listen to them" (*Life* 131, *Teresa* 48). Through citing Teresa's text, – specifically the simile "the mystical gift is like literary inspiration" – and referring to intelligent men of the Catholic Church who, nevertheless, do not receive God's gift, O'Brien gets back at male writers who envied her literary talent. She also uses Teresa's voice when the latter confronts her confessors, to strike back at the male literary critics and censors who became an obstacle to her literary career, whom Ailbhe Smyth refers to as "the bully-boys and their laws" (33) or, in Walshe's words, "[the critics] who had badly wounded and beaten her" (*Kate O'Brien* 130). O'Brien's struggle with censorship as well and her financial difficulties eventually caused her to break with contemporary Ireland (Walshe, *Kate O'Brien* 91,131). The banning of some of Kate O'Brien's novels had a number of unpleasant consequences such as a loss of readership and income as well as upsetting her Limerick relations (Walshe, *Kate O'Brien* 67). O'Brien's fight with censors and the narrow Catholic nationalism of Éamon de Valera's Ireland echoes Teresa's struggle with her confessors, as illustrated in the following passage from *The Life*, reproduced in the biography:

I am more afraid of people who are themselves terrified of the devil than I am of the devil himself...*especially if they are confessors* [who] can upset people a great deal, and for several years they were such a trial to me that I marvel now that I was able to bear it. (*Life* 243, *Teresa* 61, italics in O'Brien's text)

As Teresa was exasperated by her confessors "who had little learning" (*Life* 84) and could not understand her, O'Brien was very frustrated with the restrictive Catholic moralism in de Valera's Ireland of the 1950s.

The content of the second category of quotations from Teresa of Avila's autobiographical work included in O'Brien's biography can be encapsulated by the general comparison "The process of literary creation is similar to a supernatural experience". O'Brien chooses three passages from *The Life* and one from *The Spiritual Relations* describing the throes, joys and paradoxes of the mystical experience – which resemble those of literary of creation. In the first quotation from *The Life*, Teresa expresses the contradiction she feels when she simultaneously experiences the call of God and the call of worldly pleasures. The two appear to be incompatible so that she "could not, therefore, shut [herself] up within [herself] (the procedure in which consisted [her] whole method of prayer) without at the same time shutting in a thousand vanities" (*Life* 105, *Teresa* 42). Teresa's conundrum could also have been Kate O'Brien's dilemma when she could not make her dedication to writing and her social life compatible. As Sharon Tighe-Mooney points out, Teresa had to give up attachments in order to achieve a higher spiritual level (55).

Following the analogy between mystical experience and literary creation, Teresa's sentence "it was no longer in my power to give up prayer" (*Life* 105, *Teresa* 43) could be interpreted – in the context of Kate O'Brien's lifetime dedication to writing – that she could not give up her vocation of being a writer, despite the difficulties she encountered in her way. When Teresa was granted the gifts of Prayer of Quiet and Union, she felt a great "delight and sweetness" (*Life* 219, *Teresa* 56), that is, a feeling of joy and a new knowledge (*gnosis*) comparable to that felt by the writer at moments of inspiration. However, just as certain women – the *alumbradas* – who reported going through similar mystical states were accused of "having

been subjected by the devil to serious illusions and deceptions” (*Life* 219, *Teresa* 56), women writing in Ireland in Kate O’Brien’s lifetime would have been regarded with suspicion. Through Teresa’s words about prayer, Kate O’Brien is emphasizing what Walshe calls “her vocation of female creativity” (*Kate O’Brien* 88), since O’Brien passionately committed to her writing and it was her writing that “sustained and satisfied her” (Walshe, *Kate O’Brien* 149).

In another passage, from chapter 18 of *The Life*, Teresa describes the sensations experienced in the Prayer of Union as being like “a soft whiteness and an infused radiance... so different from the earthly light in that it does not weary the eyes” (*Life* 259, *Teresa* 52-53). In her description of “this experience, when sense is arrested and the soul takes charge”, O’Brien compares Teresa to poets such as Wordsworth (*Teresa* 52). In the mystical terminology, and indeed in most religions, light is a metaphor for God. Light also has traditionally been used to stand for inspiration or intellectual enlightenment. O’Brien adds that Rilke, known as “the poet of light”, “would have recognized [this kind of experience]” (*Teresa* 53).

At the beginning and end of her biography of Teresa, O’Brien quotes a passage from *The Spiritual Relations*. Thus, as Deevy remarks, the book ends, most fittingly, with Teresa’s own account of a soul’s mystical experience:

Whence He comes, and how, she cannot tell, but so it is, and for as long as it lasts she cannot cease to be aware of the fact. When the vision leaves her, she cannot recall it to the imagination, however much she may wish to do so; for clearly, if she could, it would be a case of imagination and not of actual presence, to recapture which is not in her power; and so it is with all supernatural matters. And it is for this reason that the person to whom God grants this favour has no esteem for himself. He sees it as a free gift and that he can neither add to it nor subtract from it (*Spiritual*, trans. Peers, n.p, *Teresa* 96.).

In this excerpt the mystical /creative gift is compared to a supernatural experience. O’Brien argues – through Teresa’s words – that the vision (mystical or creative) is granted as a grace independent from the subject’s will. However, as Llamas-Martínez points out, this text is not only an exposition of the process of Teresa’s inner life – in which she, interestingly, writes about herself in the third person – it is also a response to the questions of an Inquisitor (118). Transposed to O’Brien’s situation, it becomes a declaration that she cannot help writing what she writes because it is what her inspiration dictates her, and that she will continue to write in spite of the attacks of her censors and detractors.

## 5. Conclusions

Beyond many other parallelisms in their lives, Teresa of Avila and Kate O’Brien produced an extraordinary literary output which attests to their strong vocations as writers. Their literary creation was an essential part of their lives; thus, what which O’Brien affirms about Teresa could be affirmed about O’Brien herself: “And her writings, the simpler works no less than the profound, are a great gift she made to life” (*Teresa* 76). To further illustrate the similarities between the two, what Bilinkoff observes about Teresa’s literary production can be applied to Kate O’Brien’s, namely that the Irish writer and the Avila mystic attached an importance to helping people – especially women – through the written word (148). Their texts were deeply subversive, shared a dissident spirituality and strived at the formation of an individual conscience as writers.

The closeness between the Avila writer and herself leads O’Brien, in her biography of Teresa, to adopt Teresa’s voice in order to leave her encrypted message to the men who made her writing career difficult. O’Brien thus follows the method of mysticism in its etymological

sense: she keeps quiet but encodes her subversive discourse, just as Teresa of Avila did in her works. O'Brien's biography is heteroglossic in Bakhtin's sense of the word, that is, it has two voices merging into one another (O'Brien's and Teresa's). The interaction of these two voices allows for a kind of ventriloquism in which O'Brien speaks through Teresa who, like her, was pursued by men who questioned the orthodoxy of her writings.

Kate O'Brien's biography of Teresa of Avila accomplishes at least four purposes. Firstly, it is a description of the process of writing as similar to the mystical experience. This description of literary inspiration in religious terms has precedents in Irish writing, as James Joyce compared literary inspiration to the Incarnation of Jesus in the body of the Virgin Mary. Secondly, it is a vindication of the figure of Teresa beyond the application of various psychological theories deeming her hysterical or mad. Countering these ideas, O'Brien invokes Teresa as a teacher of writing. "She speaks to poets, anywhere, in any time" (*Teresa* 32) and recommends reading her, even to agnostic readers: "Let those who will not have mysticism ... be generous enough ... to read these works I speak of" (*Teresa* 74). Thirdly, it is intended as Kate O'Brien's apology, as she clarifies in the Introduction: it [this biography] is an apology not for Teresa but for this writer's constant admiration for her" (*Teresa* 9). Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, *Teresa of Avila* is the rendering of a "spiritual marriage", to use the mystical term, in which Kate O'Brien seeks, through Teresa, to find redemption from her previous faults and the reinvention of herself as a writer.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the team at CITES (Universidad de la Mística, Avila) for allowing me to consult their library during the summer of 2019. My thanks are especially due to the Director of the Centre, Francisco Javier Sancho Fermín and its librarians, Teresa Collado and Milagros Quintela. I would like to dedicate this article to the memory of my mother, M<sup>a</sup> Ángeles Íñigo – a teacher, a lover of literature and a woman of great faith – who passed away in February of 2016, when I was writing its first version of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Part IV of O'Brien's biography ("Martha and Mary Walking Together") contains numerous expressions of O'Brien's admiration and attraction for Teresa (*Teresa* 74, 76, 83, 94).

<sup>3</sup> About the reception of Kate O'Brien's works in Spain during Franco's dictatorship, see Morales (2010).

<sup>4</sup> Kate O'Brien felt displaced in Limerick because of her condition as a lesbian censored writer who dressed in masculine clothes and did not speak with an Irish accent (Walshe, *Kate O'Brien* 135).

<sup>5</sup> As Sharon Tighe-Mooney observes, the characters of Agatha Conlon in *Mary Lavelle* (1936), Jo Kernahan in *The Last of Summer* (1943), Ana de Mendoza in *That Lady* (1946), Eleanor Delahunt in *The Flower of May* (1953) and Clare Halvey in *As Music and Splendor* (1958) are modelled on nuns (245-47). As an unlikely nun who enters the convent almost in spite of herself, Jo Kernahan is, out of O'Brien's "holy women", the one who resembles Teresa of Avila the most (Tighe-Mooney 247). Jana Fischerova recognizes in Helen Archer of *The Land of Spices* another example of a woman who enters a convent to escape from a personal conflict (71).

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