



## **ALIENATA DA' SENSI: REFRAMING BERNINI'S S. TERESA**

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### **Abstract**

*Gian Lorenzo Bernini's Ecstasy of St Teresa for the Cornaro Chapel (1647–52) is perhaps the artist's most sensually-charged creation, and the apparently physical nature of Teresa's ecstasy is today even acknowledged in survey textbooks. Teresa herself opened the door to this reading when, in describing her spiritual ecstasy, she admitted that 'the body doesn't fail to share in some of it, and even a great deal'. Yet the balance between sense and spirit in the sculpture emerges somewhat differently if it is viewed (literally and figuratively) in context: as an altarpiece in a chapel where its presentation is structured as a 'performance', complete with spectators or witnesses, and as the central image of the left transept of Santa Maria della Vittoria – a church whose dedication derives from the power of the image (the Madonna della vittoria) displayed above the main altar. If the statue group is read as a divine ecstasy witnessed, rather than a mystic encounter experienced, it engages another discourse, with its own metaphors and meanings. The saint's swoon has less to do with the erotic capacity of the senses than with their absence, presenting a rather different challenge to an artist celebrated for his ability to transform insensate stone into vulnerable flesh.*

**Keywords:** ecstasy, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Cornaro chapel, miracle-working image, Domenico Bernini, Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Teresa of Avila

**DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2015w08>

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## ALIENATA DA' SENSI: REFRAMING BERNINI'S S. TERESA \*

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In short, Bernini has revealed in this location [the Villa Borghese] no less than in other parts of Rome his very great judgment, and especially in the Church of the Vittoria, where he expressed S. Teresa, who, transfixed by her Lord's amorous arrow, falls into a sweet deliquescence, and just as she is seen to be in ecstasy, so she makes him who gazes fall into ecstasy by virtue of the excellence of that great master who made her.

Luigi Scaramuccia, *Le finezze dei pennelli italiani*, 1674, p.18

In the passage above, the artist and sometime art critic Luigi Scaramuccia (1616–80) concludes his discussion of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's Roman works with a flourish, singling out for special praise the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647–52), his sculpted altarpiece for the Cornaro Chapel (Figures 8.1, 8.2). The closing conceit – that the spectator ends up mirroring certain features of the work at which he gazes – was certainly not Scaramuccia's invention, and like many such tropes, it probably reveals as much about the formulaic nature of early modern art criticism as it does about the particular character of Bernini's chapel. Yet his words – which focus on the viewer's response, and suggest that life imitates art – are well-chosen, inasmuch as the viewer's relationship to the altarpiece, and the chapel it is part of, is complex. Looking into the chapel one witnesses, and participates in, an exchange between two modes of seeing – natural, sense-based vision and supernatural, mystic vision.

The subject of the altarpiece is the Spanish mystic and founder of the Discalced Carmelite order, St Teresa of Avila (1515–82; canonised 1622). She is shown in the throes of her most famous ecstatic vision – the so-called transverberation – in which an angel appears and pierces her heart repeatedly with an arrow. Bernini

\* I would like to thank Beth K. Mulvaney for inviting me to present my early research on this topic at the Mercer-Kessler Lecture in Religion and Art at Meredith College in 2013. Additionally, I thank Mary Pardo for her always helpful suggestions on matters of Italian translation. And finally, I am extremely grateful to Erin Benay and Lisa Rafanelli for their insights, encouragement and seemingly infinite patience.



Figure 8.1: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Cornaro Chapel. Rome, S. Maria della Vittoria, 1647–52. (Photo: Eric Lessing/Art Resource, NY)

depicts Teresa limply reclining on a cloud, seemingly kept from total collapse by that angel, who holds onto a fold of her drapery. She appears largely shut off from the external, sensual world; her eyes are nearly closed, her mouth but slightly open and her limbs inert. In contrast, for example, to Adriaen Collaert's engraving of 1613, the viewer is not shown the full content of Teresa's vision (Figure 8.3). Yet the nature of that vision is implied – by the angel at Teresa's left (dispatched by God), by the gilded representation of light rays behind and natural light above the group (traditionally associated with God) and by the Holy Spirit painted in the vault of the chapel itself (one third – so to speak – of God). The near absence (or perhaps synecdochal presence) of that divine element – which both completes the narrative and guarantees its significance – engages viewers very differently from Collaert's version; rather than passive spectators, they are active participants in making the partial into a whole.

If the spectator is the medium by which meaning unfolds, his or her relationship with the altarpiece is itself mediated. Most evidently, the view of (or approach to) it is framed by the presence of another audience: the four half-length figures rendered in high relief on each of the lateral walls (Figure 8.4). These reliefs



Figure 8.2: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Cornaro Chapel, *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, altarpiece. Rome, S. Maria della Vittoria.  
(Photo: Eric Lessing/Art Resource, NY)



Figure 8.3: Adriaen Collaert, *Ecstasy of St Teresa*, engraving, 1613, plate 8 of *Vita s. virginis Teresiae a Iesu*, Antwerp, Johannes Galle, Williamstown, Mass: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute Library, 1613. (Image in the public domain, downloaded from Archives.org)

portray several generations of males from the Venetian Cornaro family – including, on the viewer’s right, the patron, Cardinal Federico Cornaro. Set above the lateral doors of the chapel, hence at the same height as the altarpiece, they are placed at an intersection of the actual architectural space of the chapel and a virtual space suggested by the perspectival reliefs behind them. Set at right angles to the altarpiece, the figures attend to it in varying degrees. The three figures nearest the altar (two on the left, one on the right) are turned toward it, while the others manifest a strange lack of curiosity, an element art historians have explained in various ways (Wittkower, [1955] 1997, p.158; Lavin, 1980, pp.101–3; Warwick, 2012, p.57).

Another mediating element involves the church itself, or more particularly, the juncture of the Cornaro Chapel (which is also the left transept arm) and the apse. This is the intersection at which anyone who visits the chapel ‘pivots’ – makes a half-turn away from the main altarpiece (the eponymous *Madonna della*

*Vittoria*, destroyed in 1833, now replaced by a copy), and toward that in the chapel. The painting thus consigned to peripheral vision has an importance that is belied by its unimposing appearance. It was both altarpiece and relic: a picture, partially desecrated by protestants, that was carried into the Battle of White Mountain (1620) and credited with the Catholic league’s victory (Figure 8.5). It thus signifies the defeat of heresy, but also, obliquely, the power of art (Bätschmann, 1998, p.216). The painting’s injuries were inflicted according to a particular logic: the eyes of all of the figures in the painting, save Jesus, were gouged out. This seems meaningful in light of the fact that the painting was a hybrid of the Adoration of the infant Jesus and Adoration of the shepherds, both of which are epiphanies. The viewer is thus implicated in a sort of triangulation involving various kinds of vision, blindness, visibility and invisibility (and implicitly, absence and presence). It is the relationship among those elements that this essay explores.



Figure 8.4: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Cornaro Chapel, Cornaro family members, detail of right hand wall. Rome, S. Maria della Vittoria. (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY)

Irving Lavin – whose exhaustive treatment of the Cornaro Chapel in *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts* remains the starting point for all further investigation – posits a complex iconographic program in which all elements of the chapel work together to create a eucharistic meaning (Lavin, 1980, pp.77–165). While Lavin does not suggest that the artist authored the theological program, he does presume Bernini to be learned in such matters and well-versed in the writings of S. Teresa. This characterization of the artist's learnedness has deep roots: the artist's son and biographer Domenico writes that the Jesuit Giovanni Paolo Oliva compared conversations with the elder Bernini on spiritual matters to thesis examinations (Bernini, 1713, p.171; Lavin, 1980, p.4; Lavin, 1972, p.160). While Lavin's knowledge of Bernini and of his art is surely unparalleled among modern scholars, every art historian, perhaps especially those who work on the early modern period, risks turning the 'learned artist' of the past into an art historian *avant la lettre*: i.e., into someone who creates meaningful objects using the same intellectual tools and processes that his or her modern counterpart uses to take them apart.



Figure 8.5: Madonna della Vittoria, engraved copy of the altarpiece formerly in S. Maria della Vittoria. frontispiece to Caramuel Lobkowitz, *Compendiosa relatio thaumaturgae imaginis beatae virginis Mariae de victoria*, Prague, Universitas Carolo-Ferdinandea in Collegio Societatis Iesu ad S. Clementem, 1672. Prague: Czech National Library. (Image in the public domain)

This essay does not attempt anything as ambitious as Lavin's treatment: not every aspect of the chapel is addressed, and Teresa's life story, writings and iconography are not examined in depth. To some degree, Lavin's thoroughness renders this unnecessary, but setting these aside also allows different frames to be placed around the work and, perhaps, different aspects of Bernini's intelligence to emerge. Teresa's writings are rich, highly personal, self-deprecating and at times self-contradictory, as seen, for instance, in her differentiations between various degrees and types of rapture and union. Although these texts are no doubt important for the overall meaning of the chapel, they are less useful for understanding the figural language used by Bernini in his altarpiece. Here, Teresa's writings will be placed within a larger constellation

of texts, mostly vernacular (often translations from Latin or Spanish), on ecstasy and individual ecstatic experiences – all of which give some indication of the general assumptions about mystical encounters with God. While Bernini was no doubt commissioned to represent a particular episode in the life of S. Teresa, the work's significance – in itself and in the context of the chapel – lies in its address of a more fundamental theme: the union of, but also the distance between, the visible and the invisible, the human and the divine.

### Visibility and invisibility

A thread that runs through much of the commentary on Bernini's statue involves the *visible* rather than the *invisible*: the display – taken as either shocking, amusing or transgressive – of an ecstasy that is seemingly more physical than spiritual. The best-known early response is that of Charles de Brosses, in a letter written from Rome in 1739. After describing the swooning saint and smiling angel, he quips that if this is divine love, he is familiar with it (De Brosses, 1799, vol.2, p.334). The earthly nature of Teresa's rapture became a commonplace of Roman travel literature in the centuries following the statue's completion (e.g., Lalande, 1769, vol.3, pp.528–9; Magnan, 1778, vol.1, cols.57–8). Many contemporary readings in fact treat this as self-evident, unconstructed, lying outside the boundaries of historical interpretation (Slade 1995, p.95; Spear, 1997, p.96; Schama, 2006, p.80; Binstock, 2009, p.227, et al.). In this they seem to follow Jacques Lacan's oft-quoted, dismissive statement about Teresa (who is oddly conflated with the Cornaro Chapel statue): 'you need but go to Rome and see the statue by Bernini to immediately understand (*comprendre tout de suite*) that she's coming. There's no doubt about it' (Lacan, [1978] 1995, p.76).

As scholars have long pointed out (either to explain away, or to confirm the statue's erotic qualities), mystical literature itself is often highly suggestive, Teresa's account of her angelic encounter being a prime example. In chapter 29 of her autobiography (here translated from the late sixteenth-century Italian edition), she writes of the event apparently portrayed in Bernini's altarpiece:

It pleased the Lord that while in this condition [i.e. immobilized by the intensity of the soul's agony] I sometimes saw this vision, seeing an angel next to me, on my left side, in corporeal form, which I do not usually see, except extraordinarily. Even though angels have many times represented themselves to me, I do not see them; rather, they are like the earlier vision I spoke of previously [i.e., an intellectual vision].

But in this vision it pleased the Lord that I would see him in this way: he was not large, but small and very beautiful, with his face lit up, so that he appeared to be one of the very eminent angels, who seem all aflame, and must be those that are called Seraphim ... Now this one that I spoke of, I saw in his hand a long golden arrow (*dardo*), with an iron tip that seemed to have a bit of fire, and he seemed to pass this through my heart several times and reach my innermost parts (*viscere*), and it seemed to me that in pulling it out he took them with it, and left me entirely aflame with the love of God. And the pain (*dolor*) was so great that it made me cry out (*mi faceva dar quei gemiti*), and so excessive was the sweetness (*soavità*) this very great pain gave me that one cannot wish it to go away. The soul is not content with anything less than God. This is not a corporeal pain, but a spiritual one, although the body also participates in it, and not a little; it is a caress (*carozza* [presumably meant to be *carezza*]) so sweet that passes between the soul and God, that I pray that his Majesty in his goodness allows anyone who thinks that perhaps I am lying to taste it (*lo facci gustare*)

(Teresa of Avila, [1599], 1613, pp.205–6).

Not surprisingly, there is no mention of eroticism in the accounts of the chapel by Bernini's two biographers, the Florentine art collector and writer Filippo Baldinucci (1625–97) and the artist's youngest son Domenico (1657–1723). The two are similar, though Domenico offers a fuller description of the altarpiece: 'He represented the Saint in an attitude of sweetest ecstasy, pulled outside of herself, having abandoned herself, unconscious (*fuori di se rapita, & in se abbandonata, e svenuta*), and near her, an angel – balancing himself with his wings in the air – sweetly wounds her heart with the golden arrow of divine love' (Bernini, 1713, p.83). These terms, as will be seen below, are consistent with the language used to discuss (and particularly to describe examples of) religious ecstasy. Yet there is an almost insistent quality to Domenico's characterization: 'sweetest ecstasy' is thrice amplified, or perhaps refined: *fuori di se rapita, in se abbandonata, svenuta*. The images conjured by these words – a thing divided, an empty husk – are somewhat unexpected, inasmuch as they seem inimical to the solidity of the life-sized marble figure.

It is easy to imagine that this language, downplaying the work's materiality, was penned in response to criticisms of the statue (and the ecstasy it represents) for excessive and indecorous physicality. The earliest

preserved example of this criticism in fact dates to the late seventeenth century: the comment in an anonymous anti-Berninian tract that the artist made her both prostrate and prostituted (Previtali, 1962, p. 58; Gastel, 2013, p.259 n.382; Warwick, 2012, pp.66–7). Yet apart from any general defense of his father, Domenico's metaphors do correspond to (and perhaps make sense of) one of the statue's more striking features: Teresa's drapery, which is voluminous, but decidedly not volumetric. Her hands and feet emerge at intervals around its perimeter, yet the massive folds give little hint of a body connecting them all. The drapery's odd appearance was in fact remarked upon by several eighteenth- and nineteenth-century visitors to the chapel (Lalande, 1769, vol.3, p.529; Winckelmann, 1781, vol.2, p.245; Westmacott, 1845, p.463).

Teresa's incorporeality becomes particularly apparent when compared to Bernini's other depiction of a reclining female ecstatic, the *Blessed Ludovica Albertoni*, completed in 1674 for the Altieri Chapel in S. Francesco a Ripa (Figure 8.6). The drapery in both is equally luxuriant, and in each there is a shallow concavity at mid-torso. Yet in Ludovica, the body covered by that drapery is still clearly articulated, the

limbs beneath appearing to be chiasmatically arranged, as if touched by divine artifice. Her right arm is bent at an acute angle, the hand pressed delicately against the fabric just below her breast. This gesture was frequently used in images of ecstatic saints, and in his iconographic handbook, Cesare Ripa uses it for the figure of *Desiderio verso Iddio*, desire for God (Figure 8.7). His hand likewise rests just below his breast – in this case presumably to avoid the flames that erupt from it, symbolizing the burning desire of the heart and mind toward God (Ripa, 1618, p.133). If Ludovica's heart is on fire, its representation is displaced to the images of flaming hearts throughout the chapel (Careri, 1995, pp.68–9).

Bernini used this gesture earlier, in his memorial monument to Maria Raggi (c.1643, Rome, S. Maria sopra Minerva). And judging from one of the surviving sketches for the Cornaro chapel, he also contemplated using it for S. Teresa (Figure 8.8). That sketch differs from the final sculpture in other ways as well: Teresa is shown more upright, and her body twists slightly at the waist. The latter is a subtle version of the *figura serpentinata*, the pose (associated most strongly with Michelangelo) that imbued a figure with grace and with



Figure 8.6: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Blessed Ludovica Albertoni*, Altieri Chapel. Rome, S. Francesco a Ripa, 1674. (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY)



Figure 8.7: *Desiderio verso Iddio*, from Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, 1618. (Image in the public domain, downloaded from Archives.org)



Figure 8.8: Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Study for S. Teresa*, Leipzig, black chalk on grey paper, Museum der bildenden Künste, c.1647. (Photo: bpk, Berlin/Art Resource, NY)

spirit, and suggested the invisible presence of a living soul (Lavin and Gordon, 1981, pp.88–99, Summers, 1972, pp.283–92). In the final marble statue, however, Teresa's body does not twist in any apparent way, nor does she bring her hand to her chest; that gesture in fact seems to be replaced by the angel's left hand, which holds, or lifts, a piece of drapery between its fingers. By the eighteenth century, that gesture became part into the lascivious reading of the group: the angel's smile is explained by the fact that he uncovers a bit of her breast (Lalande, 1769, vol.3, p.528). More decorously, Lavin suggests that the angel uses the drapery to lift Teresa to heaven (Lavin, 1980, pp.110–11). Bernini used this motif elsewhere in representing an ecstatic saint,

in this case one that is clearly being elevated (Figure 8.9). In the altarpiece of the Raimondi chapel (Rome, S. Pietro in Montorio), St Francis is lifted heavenward by a crowd of angels, one of whom delicately holds up an edge of the saint's hood. Yet that angel, and another to his right grasp Francis firmly by the arms, which would seem to separate the lifting of cloth from the mechanics of angelic elevation. Thus the angel's gesture, and perhaps the related theme of Teresa's seemingly empty garment, may refer to some other aspect of ecstatic union. Before returning to this question, it is useful to explore some seventeenth-century concepts of ecstasy, or union, and to look at other representations of it.



Figure 8.9: Francesco Baratta, from a design by Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of St Francis*, Raimondi Chapel. Rome, S. Pietro in Montorio, 1640s. (Photo: author)

## Embodiment and disembodiment

Returning to Domenico Bernini's description of Teresa, it is likely that his terminology alludes not solely to the disembodied appearance of the statue, but also to the physical and spiritual state of the saint it represents. In addition to the *Life* of his father, Domenico (who for a short stint in his teens was a Jesuit novice) wrote a number of books on church history (Delbeke, Levy and Ostrow, 2006, pp.29–32). In 1722 he published his *Life of the venerable father Giuseppe da Copertino*. Giuseppe (1603–63), a Franciscan friar and priest (and in 1767, saint) suffered many ecstatic episodes, during many of which he levitated, and occasionally even flew. Domenico writes about these in terms analogous to those he used to describe his father's statue of *Teresa*. Giuseppe experienced *svenimenti*, was outside of himself (*fuori di se*), or outside of his senses (*fuori di sensi*), or separated (*alienato*) from his senses (Bernini [1622] 1626, pp.23, 74, 148, 222, 220). Providing a kind of symmetry to these out of body experiences, at the conclusion of the ecstasy, he is said to have returned to himself (*ritornato in se*). These turns of phrase have modern English equivalents, of course: people are said to be 'out of their minds,' or 'beside themselves' or to 'have come (back) to their senses'. Today these expressions have very little, if any, power as tropes, or figured speech, and even in the early modern period it was possible to use them unselfconsciously. Yet – as will be shown below – when they were used to describe people in the throes of ecstasy, the strangeness of their literal meaning would have resonated.

These characterizations of ecstasy are part of a larger body of descriptions Domenico Bernini uses throughout the text, often quoting from the testimony of actual witnesses. In other episodes of self-alienation, Giuseppe's mouth is partially open yet he does not breathe (p.124), he becomes a dead weight (p.120), his body does not move, even when subjected to painful stimuli, and (most interesting) his immobility is said to make him look like a statue (p.37). The importance of this book – published nine years after Domenico's *Life* of his father, and sixty years after the completion of the *S. Teresa* – is not its singularity or any tenuous connection to Bernini *padre*, but in the fact that its descriptions of ecstasy are entirely typical.

Teresa's autobiography uses some of the same language (for instance her body does not respond to the soul's commands to move, or even to breathe; p.205). Yet as a first-person narrative, it is inherently different from outside accounts. If it explains the meaning and context of these encounters more fully, it can also be sparse with regard to concrete details. Two aspects of the ecstatic experience contribute

to this. First, when the mystic is alienated from her own senses, description of the physical actualities (her own appearance) becomes impossible. (One might look like a statue from the outside, but it is difficult to imagine feeling like one). And second, what the soul experiences in the presence of God is difficult, if not impossible, to express. Teresa's account of her transverberation in fact evinces this. She begins with a concrete description: she sees the seraph who visits her; he is in *bodily* form, standing to her *left*; she sees the arrow in his hand, which *appears* to have a tip of flame. The description then shifts from observation at a distance to internal, subjective experience: the arrow that enters her flesh leaves her in turn empty, in pain, filled with sweetness, and aflame with love. Both body and spirit are then entwined through the metaphor of a caress (heard or felt) to describe the union of two intangibles, the soul and God. This is where the description *per se* stops, as if words fail. She ends by conceding that the only way one might understand the experience is by having it oneself: the proper symbolic expression of ecstasy is thus ecstasy, not a symbol at all, but the thing itself.

On the other hand, third person accounts – which by far outnumber the subjective accounts of the ecstasies themselves – are more specific in describing the seemingly inanimate body. Like biographical topoi generally, these tend to be variations on particular themes. In almost every text, the insensate body is said to appear dead or almost dead; as evidence of this, some note the pallor of the flesh, the extremely shallow breathing or the near absence of a pulse. In their accounts, the biographers or hagiographers often make reference to the presence of witnesses – usually other nuns or priests, but on occasion visitors such as physicians. Many of these accounts use the same simile employed by Domenico Bernini – that the ecstatic's body is like a statue made of marble, bronze or wood, or a painting, or more generally, an image; it is a lifeless simulacrum of a living body (for instance, Castillo, 1589, p.330; Villegas, 1595, p.206; Razzi, 1593, pp.380, 879; Razzi, 1601, p.106; Antoninus et al, 1606, p.27; Pio, 1615, p.222; Bartoli, 1650, p.106). One of Teresa's late sixteenth-century biographers, Francisco Ribera, uses the metaphor of stone to describe the weight of her body when she was *fuori da se*, as a sacristan discovered when he tried to move her (Riviera, 1622, p.278). As in this episode, the witnesses may become participants, attesting the truth of the ecstasy by attempting to disturb it. These attempts range from mildly amusing to borderline sadistic: hair pulling, nose pinching, piercing with sharp needles and burning with lit candles are among the listed disruptions (Lombardelli, 1586,

pp.32–3; Castillo, 1589, p.331; Silvestri, 1590, pp.35–6; Pio, 1615, p.233; Granata, 1644, pp.462; Frigerio, 1657, p.84).

These accounts are of interest for Bernini's *S. Teresa* in light of the presence of witnesses, but also with regard to their inattention. One of the 'common sense' explanations suggests that the majority of the Cornaros don't look at Teresa's ecstasy because their line of sight is blocked by the framing columns of the aedicula (Wittkower, 1997, p.158). The question of whether these figures can see anything is in fact a good one, though it has little to do with calculating their angle of vision. Here the ecstatic saint is literally and figuratively a piece of marble; if the Cornaro pay no attention, it is likely because – at least as far as a supernatural vision of God – there really is nothing to see. The action, it would seem, is elsewhere.

There is actually a pictorial tradition of including witnesses who are unable to see what is happening. The most familiar and long-lived example of this is in depictions of *St Francis receiving the stigmata*, accompanied by another monk, usually identified as Francis's friend and follower *Brother Leo*. The earliest example is the late thirteenth-century fresco in the upper church of *S. Francesco, Assisi* (Figure 8.10). The major thirteenth-century biographies of Francis (by Thomas of Celano and Bonaventure) do not mention anyone else being present at the stigmatisation. While art historians have advanced various justifications for his presence, no definitive answer has emerged (Gardner, 2011, p.38). The motif continues to appear in images of the stigmatisation – and Leo's repertoire of inattentive or puzzled gestures increases: he sometimes reads, sometimes sleeps, and sometimes shades his eyes

from the bright light of Francis's apparition. Whether or not there is an overarching explanation for his presence, it is possible to interpret the unseeing Leo (eyes otherwise occupied, closed or blinded by the light) as a foil to Francis, an emblem of non-comprehension, set in the same landscape but inhabiting a different world. This doesn't necessarily malign Leo; as Teresa implies with regard to her own angelic encounter (similarly, a piercing), it can only be understood through experience. In the Assisi painting, Leo reads words inscribed on parchment but Francis becomes the flesh on which is written a different kind of text altogether. Bonaventure in fact contrasts Francis's stigmatisation with human artifice, invoking the language used in *Exodus* to describe the stone tablets of the law; the saint carries the image of the crucified Christ 'engraved in the members of his body by the finger of the living God' (Bonaventure, 1978, p.307).

Variants of the 'Brother Leo' character begin to be incorporated into images of other holy ecstatics at least as early as the sixteenth



Figure 8.10: Giotto (attributed), *Stigmatisation of S. Francis of Assisi*, fresco. Assisi, upper church, 1290s. (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY)



Figure 8.11: Domenico Beccafumi, *St Catherine of Siena receiving the stigmata*, oil and gold on wood, 28.6 x 41.3 cm, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, c.1513–5.

century, and these eventually divide into different types. The Sienese artist Domenico Beccafumi (1486–1551) stays very close to the prototype in several early sixteenth-century paintings of S. Catherine of Siena receiving the stigmata (Gordley, 1992, p.403). In Figure 8.11 – a small panel (likely from a predella) in the Getty Museum – a Dominican tertiary and two nuns are in attendance at the miracle. Two of these figures, seated behind Catherine, appear at least cognizant that something is happening between her and the altar crucifix, and the other, (the Leo analogue) dozes on a set of steps in the near distance. As in depictions of Francis, she presents a visible contrast to the saint, in posture and degrees of consciousness. A new wrinkle, however, is the use of art works in differentiating the two. Catherine leans forward toward the figure of Christ (which, whatever its function here, is at base a work of sculpture), while the inattentive nun effectively turns her back on an altarpiece of the *Adoration of the Christ child*, set against the back wall. This particular antithesis also implicates the spectator, given that his or her relationship to the depicted altarpiece (and the real predella panel) is counter to that of the nun, and structurally replicates – albeit at a right angle – that of Catherine.

Various dynamics play out in other images of visions and ecstasies as well, often involving – as in the Beccafumi – a triangulation between ecstatic saint, depicted witness(es) and the actual viewer. In some cases, the viewer is privy to what the internal witnesses

do not see, implicitly sharing with the ecstatic the otherworldly vision (Figure 8.12). In other cases, the external viewer and internal witnesses are bonded through a kind of shared ignorance: both see that the saint is in ecstasy (often hovering on their own personal cloud), but neither is privy to the actual vision (Figure 8.13). A variant on this theme links spectator and witnesses by the fact that neither sees the vision, and neither can make sense out of the ecstatic, who appears utterly shut off from the world (Figure 8.14). This last image, from Hieronymus Wierix's series of engravings depicting the life of Ignatius Loyola, shows the saint in the midst of an ecstasy that according to the inscription, lasted for a full week. Daniello Bartoli, in the *Life of the saint* published in 1650, writes that Ignatius 'was so fixed on God, that his soul, having abandoned all responsibilities for serving the body, left it with the appearance of a dead thing'; indeed had a weak pulse not been detected, the body would have been buried (Bartoli, 1650, pp.42–3). Here the image comes closer in type to what is seen in the Cornaro Chapel: the saint becomes (at least temporarily) a body left behind, as the ecstatic encounter takes place somewhere else. Its novelty is in depicting rapture as a kind of loss (of movement, of consciousness), rather than a superabundance of spirit that lifts the gaze toward heaven and the hand to the heart.

Paintings and prints depicting ecstasy similarly (though generally without witnesses) had begun to appear by the final decade of the sixteenth century –



Figure 8.12: Hieronymus Wierix, *Vision of S. Ignatius of Loyola on the journey to Rome with two Jesuits observing*, engraving from series on the *Life of Ignatius of Loyola*, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, c.1611-15. (Image in the public domain)



Figure 8.13: Adriaen Collaert, *Levitation of S. Teresa*, plate 17 of a series of 25 engravings on the *Life of S. Teresa*, Williamstown, Mass: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute Library 1613. (Image digitalised by Archive.org)



Figure 8.14: Hieronymus Wierix, *S. Ignatius of Loyola in an ecstasy lasting for seven days*, engraving from his series on the *Life of Ignatius of Loyola*, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, c.1611-15. (Image in the public domain)

works similarly lacking narrative ‘energy’, but (unlike the Ignatius engraving) also lacking a larger narrative context. An example of this is Caravaggio’s *Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy* (Figure 8.15), which is either a novel depiction of the stigmatisation (lacking the traditional cross-bearing seraph, and adding a comforting angel), or a less easily categorised encounter with God (Askew, 1969, pp.284–5; Treffers, 1988, pp.146–50; 159–60; Wallace, 2003, p.12). In contrast to previous representations of the saint (whether receiving the stigmata or in the throes of a more generic ecstasy), the narrative is strikingly understated: Francis seems barely to move, the angel is rendered less as an otherworldly apparition than a loving presence, and Brother Leo is doubly removed, by distance and by darkness. It brings to mind Bellori’s characterization of Caravaggio’s *Cerasi Chapel Conversion of St Paul* (another epiphany) as ‘completely without action’ (Bellori, 1672, p.207). A common thread in all modern readings is the painting’s enrichment of the traditional means (shared wounds; similar cruciform pose) for suggesting Francis’s Christlikeness. These include iconographical and formal analogies: Francis and his angelic comforter call to mind the *Dead Christ supported by an angel*, or the *Agony in the garden*, while

the background figures (Leo and two others, barely visible) recall the *Annunciation to the shepherds*, the three sleeping apostles and/or the approaching soldiers at Gethsemane.

Yet Caravaggio’s *Francis* is not unique. By the late sixteenth century, images of St Mary Magdalen and of St Catherine of Siena show them similarly extracted from their traditional narrative contexts. And within this overall category of images a distinction can be made between those saints who appear to possess volition, and those whose visible reactions to ecstatic bliss range from understated to non-existent – closer to the traditional depiction of Brother Leo than to that of Francis. For example, Orazio Gentileschi’s *St Francis Supported by an Angel* (one of several versions by the artist) follows the same general iconographic formula as Caravaggio’s, but differs considerably in the interaction between saint and angel (Figure 8.16). Caravaggio’s Francis looks cautiously, though one narrowly opened eye, at the angel who holds him, while his right hand appears to edge toward the wound in his side. He even begins to raise his left arm in a gesture suggesting astonishment, presumably in reaction to what he both sees and feels. Orazio’s saint, on the other hand, does not move at all: his arms hang limp, knees buckle, and



Figure 8.15: Caravaggio, *Francis of Assisi in ecstasy*, oil on canvas, Hartford, CT, Wadsworth Atheneum, c.1594. (Photo: Nimatallah/Art Resource, NY)



Figure 8.16: Orazio Gentileschi, *St Francis supported by an angel*, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, c.1600. (Photo © 2015 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

the angel who holds him leans backward against the weight, his left leg extended to support the sinking body. Viewing the two in terms of the narrative model of the hagiographical texts, Gentileschi's saint is *fuori da sè*, while Caravaggio's has just *ritornato in sè*. Other examples of this type (seemingly soulless bodies, filling – or implicitly extending beyond – the pictorial field), would include Caravaggio's *Ecstasy of Mary Magdalen* (known through copies, such as that in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Bordeaux), Peter Paul Rubens' depiction of the same subject (Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille, c.1620), Francesco Vanni's *St Catherine of Siena in Ecstasy* (Museo della Badia Benedettina della SS. Trinità di Cava) and

Agostino Carracci's engraving of 1595 after Vanni's *St Francis in Ecstasy*.<sup>1</sup>

### The dying and the dead

Art historians who have examined images of ecstasy bordering on death often propose metaphorical readings, in which that apparent death points, through resemblance, to another, more theologically significant,

<sup>1</sup> For an example of Agostino Carracci's print, after Vanni's original (British Museum, V.3.38), see: [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=1453747&partId=1&searchText=V.3.36&people=104501&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1453747&partId=1&searchText=V.3.36&people=104501&page=1)

meaning. For example, Francis of Assisi's limp body alludes to that death to the sensory world necessary for rebirth in Christ (Askew, 1969, p.287). Or in Lavin's reading of S. Teresa, she appears in the throes of death (though not dead) in order to suggest a martyrdom, albeit self-generated, of love (Lavin, 1980, pp.114–18; Perlove, 1990, pp.42–3). While it is certainly correct to read these images as figured pictorial language (after all, they are not literally images of the saints' deaths), one might construe the structure and content of that figuration differently. To begin with, the lifeless body of the ecstatic saint is a truth of sorts: the image is a literal, or proper, representation of the event as it is experienced by those who witness it. Yet stepping back from the subjective reality of the spectator to the more general understanding of ecstasy, the body that appears dead is a figure for that which is absent: like a synecdoche, it stands for the soul it contained. This parsing of the rhetoric of representation may seem needlessly fussy, yet it is useful inasmuch as sixteenth- and seventeenth-century explanations of the ecstatic state often hover uneasily at the boundary between literal and figural.

What does happen during ecstasy? There is no universal agreement in sixteenth- or seventeenth-century sources. Yet a good, if broad, summation is found at the beginning of the long article on ecstasy in the *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*: 'every true ecstasy is an expression of the need to see God, to live in God, to be transformed into God' ('Extase', 1961, col.2045). The three phrases in fact suggest three phases, beginning with the distance implied by sight and ending with an implosion of subject, object and distance into a single substance. But does this sequence represent a journey outward or – as Teresa's manual of contemplative prayer, the *Interior castle*, suggests – inward? The descriptive language of early modern writers usually points to the former. Beyond the common references to flight and elevation of the soul, there is the violence implied by the term *ratto* (rapture, but also rape), the cries or screams heard at the moment of ecstasy, suggesting a painful rending of soul and body, and even the explanation for the (not uncommon) phenomenon of levitation during ecstasy – i.e. that the body rises upwards in its desire to follow the soul (Pizzuto, 1622, pp.110–13; Bernini, 1726, pp.83, 120, 139, etc; Cepari, 1621, p.224; Yepes, 1622, pp.309–10).

The soul's upward journey is understood as metaphorical, although the implicit physicality of the experience is often acknowledged, and occasionally the possibility of an actual rupture is considered (Salvatore, 1629, p.82; Lisbona, 1605, p.398). After all, Paul's oft-cited statement in 2 Corinthians 12:2 is

ambiguous: 'I know a man in Christ above fourteen years ago (whether in the body, I know not, or out of the body I know not; God knoweth), such a one caught up (*raptum*) to the third heaven'.<sup>2</sup> Yet in general the understanding was not literal, ascent being a central (though not the only) figuration of the soul's or mind's journey toward God (Turner, 1995, pp.252–73). At the beginning of his *History, life, miracles and ecstasies of Sor Juana de la Cruz* of 1610, the Spanish Franciscan Antonio Daza attempts to define precisely the terms that he will use in the text that follows:<sup>3</sup>

Raptures, which the Hebrews call *Turdemà*, which is to say deep sleep, and the Greeks call *estasis*, which means ascent, or flight of the soul (*salita ò volo dell'anima*), not because the soul may exit the body and after that return to it (which it would be a serious error to admit, since it would be both death and resurrection at almost the same point), [but] because in raptures, to whomever they are given, it is in fact as if he were dead or sleeping, which is, according to St Dionysius, a consequence of love, which causes ecstasy in the soul, lifting (*levando*) a man from himself and transforming him into that which he loves.

(Daza, 1616, n.p., my translation)

Daza's explanation of rapture comes by way of the mysterious late fifth- (or early sixth-) century eastern church father known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. His writings – long known in the west through Latin translations and commentaries – became the most authoritative source for mystical theology. By the sixteenth century, Dionysian concepts were in wide circulation, and key ideas regularly appear in vernacular texts, including those of S. Teresa (Girón-Negrón, 2008, pp. 694–9). One of the central ideas is the 'unitive power' of love mentioned by Daza: the idea (found in Pseudo-Dionysius's *Divine names*, 4:13) that the lover (in this case the ecstatic) is transformed into the thing he loves (God). This grows out of several new testament passages (also frequently cited or alluded to by modern writers), such as Galatians 2:20: 'And I live, now not I; but Christ liveth in me'. Often, however, such a union is placed in the future, after the subject's death and Christ's second coming. As Paul famously writes, human knowledge of God is imperfect – 'through a glass in a dark manner' – but that vision will eventually become clearer and God will be seen

2 This, and all further biblical quotations are from the Douay-Rheims translation.

3 The text was early on translated into Italian, French (1614), German (1620), and English (1625). I am using the Italian translation published in 1616.

face to face (*facie ad faciem*): 'Now I know in part; but then I shall know even as I am known' (1 Corinthians 13:12). This reflexive (or specular) formulation is even more tightly constructed in 1 John 3:2: 'when he shall appear we shall be like to him: because we shall see him as he is'. Explained in these terms (the lover's self-transformation into the beloved), rapture serves as a sort of promissory note for future bliss. Yet this joy is a double-edged sword: a foretaste of eternal paradise that is not itself eternal and that leaves the soul in desperate longing for return, even if by death (Teresa, 1618, p.205, Orsini, 1608, pp.461–2; Capua, 1608, pp.177–8).

This definition of ecstasy presents certain difficulties in terms of theology, but also with regard to pictorial or sculptural representation. As for the former, the apophatic notion of God that is so bound up with mysticism – the belief that one can only know God by negation, by defining what he is not – that it raises the question of just how one becomes like him. For artists, the difficulty is more basic and perhaps more easily surmounted: how does one visualise the union of similitude (as it comes to be called) between an incorporeal being and an invisible human soul? Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theologians rely heavily on metaphor in describing this transformation, sometimes suggesting that the face of each functions a mirror to the other, and other times emphasizing the necessary inequality of the two (Piergili, 1640, pp.172–3, 179; Ribadeneyra, 1604, pp.232–3). A much repeated trope has the soul essentially swallowed by the immensity of God, like wine poured into a sea, or (eucharistically) drops of water poured into wine (Jacopone da Todi, 1617, p.948; Herp, 1546, p.54r; Arfio, 1600, p.228). The angel's flame-like drapery in the Cornaro Chapel may allude to the ardor of divine love (Lavin, 1980, p.111), but arguably not even Bernini could approximate the strangeness and power of such a metaphor.

Yet Christian painters and sculptors had long faced the problem of conveying the essential similarities of God and man, most pointedly when dealing with the opposite end of biblical human history – Genesis rather than Revelation. While Genesis 1:26 has God creating man in his own image and likeness (*ad imaginem et similitudinem*), since the patristic period those terms were understood as applying to the invisible soul rather than the visible body. The resemblance between God and Adam's soul is clarified in the second iteration of the creation story, in Genesis 2:7. The most intimate moment between the creator and his creation (up to that point simply a statue modeled out of moist earth) is when God breathes into the face of Adam, imparting

his own spirit to make Adam into a living soul. In a very general sense, artists since the late middle ages used their proper (unfigured; 'natural') language of visible bodies, to affirm this through negation: the dissimilar appearance of God and Adam suggests that the qualities they share lie elsewhere, in the invisible soul. One of the brilliant features of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel *Creation of Adam* (1508–12) is that while the bodies maintain the traditional contrast of age and type, their similarity is suggested by poses that subtly mirror one another. That of God displays a fluent grace while Adam's suggests the tautness of newly inspirited flesh, yet both twist at the torso, with limbs alternately extended forward and pulled back. As touched upon earlier with regard to the *figura serpentinata*, the body's movements were considered, among other things, signs for the presence of a soul (in Latin, *anima*; hence to have a soul is to be *animated*, to move; lacking that, one is but a *corpus* – a body, literally a corpse) (Delbeke, 2012, pp.35–6, 50–1). Thus Michelangelo suggests life – using means that were by 1500 already well established – but also introduces a language to convey the fragile (in fact, soon to be severed) union of similitude between man and God.

Returning to the representation of ecstatic union, in a sense the group of images discussed above (by Caravaggio, Gentileschi, Bernini and others) intertwine elements of the Michelangelesque and pre-Michelangelo solutions. If the saints' bodies appear lifeless, it demonstrates (through negation) that their souls are elsewhere, presumably in union with God. Yet it can also be argued that the poses of these inanimate (or at least unanimated) bodies suggest the likeness between the two invisible entities whose ecstatic reunion occurs 'offstage'. While the God that is encountered by the Christian soul is presumably the triune deity of father, son and holy spirit, the written accounts often specify interactions with Jesus (Teresa, 1618, p.182; Villegas, 1595, p.419; Razzi, 1593, p.327). This makes sense for any number of reasons, not the least of which being their shared incarnation: Christ experienced the world they inhabit and experienced it as they do, through the senses. Indeed, a sensual (comm)union with Christ was already part of their ritual life through the transsubstantiated bread and wine of the Eucharist.

Also like humans, Christ died, at which point, according to scripture, he gave up the ghost (Matthew 27:50; Mark 15:37; Luke 23:46; John 19:30). The separation of spirit or soul from body is akin to that of soul wrenched from the body of the ecstatic (Tomasi, 1669, p.40). While art historians have pointed out the similarity of Teresa's pose and expression to depictions of the swooning virgin Mary in various passion scenes,



Figure 8.17: Annibale Carracci, *Pietà*, oil on copper, 41.3 cm x 60.7 cm, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Gemäldegalerie, c.1603. (Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)



Figure 8.18: Correggio, *Lamentation*, oil on canvas, 157 x 182 cm, Parma, Galleria Nazionale, 1524–5. (Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY)



All of these elements are present in Bernini's statue of Teresa, including a partially clenched right hand (something not found in swooning Virgin images). It is of course possible to read them generally as signs of Teresa's devotion and a desire (not uncommon among mystics) to experience Christ's pains and humiliations. Yet this particular combination of features points back not just to Christ of the gospels, but to a particular image type (the Pietà) and a particular point in the passion narrative. The image conjured by Teresa's pose and expression is not one of Christ's physical or emotional suffering, but of his insensate body, the 'detachable' outer garment of his humanity. This analogy of soul's flight into ecstasy and the temporary exile of Christ's soul is structurally apt and is also hinted at by the number of biographers and hagiographers reporting ecstasies in which their subject remained *fuori di se* for three days before finally returning to themselves (for example, Razzi, 1593, p.600; Antoninus, et al, 1606, pp.27–8; Ribadeneyra, 1604, p.180). This idea also illumines the angel's unusual gesture in the altarpieces of the Cornaro and Raimondi chapels. Textile imagery is woven throughout the gospel accounts of the passion – the sudarium, the seamless garment, the divided cloak and the veil of the temple – and artists exploited its metaphorical potential in various ways. An early example is Giotto's Scrovegni *Crucifixion*, in which Christ's empty robe held by the Roman soldiers formally parallels both Christ's dead and Mary's fainting bodies. By the sixteenth century, that same idea is compressed into two figures – Christ and a weeping angel who displays his garment – in Moretto's haunting *Man of Sorrows* (Brescia, Pinacoteca Tosio Martinengo). And an even more radically reduced example is found in the *Instruments of the passion* designed by Marten de Vos, where the sudarium placed above Christ's robe suggest the image of his body on the cross (Figure 8.19). There is no doubt of a theological significance to this pairing, one that deserves attention it cannot receive here. What is worth underlining, however, is that Bernini figures the absence of Teresa's soul (from her body, from the spectator's sight) by quoting elements of Christ's similar state, and by using a textile trope associated with Christ's empty flesh. And at the same time, these elements evoke the identity with Christ that allows her blissful, albeit temporary, union.

Unlike the 'natural' reading of Bernini's Teresa as in the throes of sensual ecstasy, the essay posits that the saint is shown in a way that suggests she is alienated from her senses, not present at all. While this reading need not (and considering the history of the statue's reception, probably *cannot*) banish eros, it should

complicate it by admixing the ideas of absence, distance and – the potent concomitant of both – desire.<sup>5</sup> Putting aside the question of whether anyone ignoring the obviously erotic is in denial (Schama, 2006, p.125; Binstock, 2009, p.227), one still may ask why the artist would take such a seemingly indirect path. To provide at least a partial answer, it is necessary to return, briefly and finally, to the frames around Teresa: the Cornaro Chapel, and the church of S. Maria della Vittoria.

### The power of images

Although the church of S. Maria della Vittoria is dedicated to the Virgin Mary, its name also refers to a work of art: its former altarpiece, a vandalized painting held to be instrumental to the Catholic victory in the Battle of White Mountain on 8 November 1620 (Giordano, 1991, pp.179–212). The damaged image was found near Prague by Domenico di Gesù Maria, the Spanish-born defensor general of the Italian Discalced Carmelites. In June 1620, Domenico had been dispatched by Pope Paul V to serve as 'spiritual advisor' to Maximilian, Duke of Bavaria, who, in an alliance with the Holy Roman Emperor, was leading the army of the Catholic League against the Bohemian Protestants. Domenico ended up playing a more active role in the military expedition, displaying his damaged image to intensify the commanders' hatred of the protestant heretics, and assuring them of divine protection for the overmatched Catholic forces. He was also present at the battle, and toward its end (which occurred around two hours after its beginning), he accompanied Maximilian to the battlefield, holding aloft his crucifix (affixed to a pole), and wearing the vandalized painting suspended from a cord around his neck. According to early sources, rays of light and balls of fire burst forth from the image (Caramuel Lobkowitz, 1655, p.344; Filippo della SS. Trinita, 1668, p.386).

Upon Domenico's return to Rome in December 1621 (after taking the image 'on tour' to various European cities), Pope Gregory XV granted permission to install the venerated painting in the discalced Carmelite church of S. Paolo (afterward rededicated to S. Maria della Vittoria). On Sunday, 8 May 1622, it was set within an architectural shrine (bedecked with all manner of gems, precious stones, gold and silver) and ceremonially processed from S. Maria Maggiore to S. Paolo, a journey punctuated by cannon fire from Castel Sant'Angelo and memorialized in 'souvenir' prints sold along the route (Anonymous, 1622, pp.4, 5, 10; Caramuel Lobkowitz, 1655, pp.394–7; Bernini, 1711,

<sup>5</sup> In a future study, I will return to the theme of desire, as both represented in, and invoked by, early modern religious art.

vol.4, pp.602–5 [reproducing the account of Biagio della Purificazione]). The image apparently continued to work miracles after its placement above the church's main altar (Filippo della SS.Trinita, 1668, p.434).

This is important to remember inasmuch as the image itself is underwhelming: small, difficult to see and – at least judging from its copies – not of particularly high quality, even discounting the damage inflicted on it. If today the story of the image is something of a historical footnote, in 1647, when Bernini began work on the Cornaro chapel, it was arguably the most significant element of the church. It certainly received the lion's share of attention in guidebooks, and in 1644 John Evelyn noted that the main altar was 'infinitely frequented for an Image of the Vergine' (Panciroli, 1625, pp. 329–34; Totti, 1638, pp.268–9; Rossi, 1652, pp.270–1; Evelyn, 1955, pp. 239–40). Thus when Bernini received the commission, he was in the position of competing with the image on the main altar. While the work was not much of a challenge in terms of its artistry, its accrued meanings – triumph over iconoclastic desecration, over an opposing army, over heresy itself – made it impossible to dismiss.

While miracle-working images were not uncommon in early modern Rome, the *Madonna della Vittoria* was unusual. For instance, no claim could be made for its antiquity, no lineage to St Luke; in its subject matter and (from what one can tell) in its style, it was 'modern'. And, as mentioned at the beginning of this essay, in a basic sense the painting's subject matter is vision: first and foremost the natural vision (and consequent adoration) of the supernatural God incarnate. Yet the actual painting's defacement complicates the issue of vision. The act of vandalism calls attention to the painting's materiality, by breaking through its surface and breaking the spell of its pictorial illusion. Specific types of damage inflicted on images, such as marking out eyes, have been interpreted as a means to rob the figure depicted, or even the painting itself, of its vitality or power (Freedberg, 1989, pp.415–6; Selbach, 2010, p.161). Here that power presumably lies in its status as an image: its potential idolatrous allure. It is ironic that in an apparent attempt to disrupt the practice of improper adoration (*idolatria*), the iconoclast – by blinding those who gaze upon Christ – effectively destroys a depiction of proper adoration (*theolatria*).

Bernini's chapel takes up a number of these issues – especially vision, both external (the eyes of the body), and internal (those of the soul). Teresa is in a mystic union – as close as one comes before death to seeing God face to face, as he is. Her bodily eyes, however, are nearly closed, reversing the traditional depiction

of a heavenward gaze.<sup>6</sup> While it seems that Cornaro family members should be directing their gazes toward the miracle over the altar, the majority of them pay no heed (and as Margaretha Lagerlöf has noted, the family members themselves – with the exception of Federico – seem blinded by the lack of drilled pupils; 2012, p.14) Following the logic of the texts cited earlier, this is not surprising. An ecstatic saint is by definition *fuori di sé*; were the Cornaro to gaze intently at S.Teresa, they would only be seeing the material remains of the ecstatic soul, the garment – as the angel's gesture suggests – of flesh. Bernini's statue of Teresa is essentially a rendering in stone of a body that would, according to the topos used by hagiographers and theologians, itself appear to be a stone statue. If the altarpiece is meant to represent more than simply a body (albeit a body watched over by an angel) it does so only obliquely, in the golden rays behind her, lit from the window above. While these rays have been read as divine radiance descending into the material world, they may also emanate from (serve as synecdoche for) the unrepresentable union of God and soul. Ecstasy is, after all, the *flight* of the soul, an upward movement.

Although the placement of donor portraits at right angles to the altar and altarpiece is standard in funerary chapels, it can serve as an emblem of the necessarily indirect relationship between the mortal human and eternal God. The actual spectator has a more direct view of the altarpiece, but his or her access to its meaning is no less oblique. The perspectival relief behind each set of portraits – constructed (more or less) for a viewer standing in front of the chapel – provides a glimpse into a barrel-vaulted chamber three bays deep (Figure 8.4). Although the nature of these spaces is still open to debate (the nave or a transept arm of a church?) there is a structure on the rear wall of each that seems purposefully ambiguous: an architectural element effectively cut in half by the juncture of the actual lateral wall and the fictive opening. It appears to be the limitations of fixed perspectival vision (rather than simply the cropped composition of the panel) that prohibit the viewer from seeing the whole. Whatever it may represent – an ornate passageway or perhaps the frame of an altarpiece – it also serves as the perch for an angel,

6 Although it is most closely associated with Guido Reni's seventeenth-century saints and sibyls, the motif is found a century earlier in Raphael's *S. Catherine of Alexandria* (London, National Gallery), and – not coincidentally for Reni – the *Ecstasy of St Cecilia* for San Giovanni in Monte in Bologna (Bologna, Galleria Nazionale). Bernini used it early in his career in the *Anima beata* of 1619 (Rome, Palazzo di Spagna) and *S. Bibiana* of 1624–6 for the eponymous Roman church.

either meant to be real (perhaps placing the Cornaro in heaven) or marble, and thus a work of sculptural art, within a space both artful and artificial.

The illusionistic reliefs could be said to reiterate, in miniature, the visual logic of the chapel itself. The right-angle relation of the viewer to the relief (and the structure it appears to contain) mirrors that of the Cornaro to the chapel's altarpiece; what is visible in that fictive structure suggests a broken pediment, like that over the altarpiece; both contain an angel that serves as a hinge between the visible and the unseen (or unseeable). The arrow-brandishing angel above the chapel's altar is the only figure who unmistakably reacts to Teresa's ecstasy (the wry smile that was so suggestive to certain eighteenth century viewers). Arguably, much of the power in the chapel derives from what is not shown, left in suspension at the heart of a space that otherwise comes close to sensual overstimulation.

## Conclusion

As this paper has suggested, Bernini's means (and perhaps, at least partially, ends) in the chapel constitute a deferral of meaning, a part that points to a larger whole. The argument is perhaps counterintuitive in that it makes the central elements what is considered the ultimate example of the Baroque (for better or worse) into a sort of understatement, a rhetorical demonstration of the limits, but also the unlimited powers of art. Bernini's personal motivations for choosing such a strategy have not really been discussed here – perhaps a glaring omission, given what must have been personal and professional challenges in the wake of Urban VIII's death in 1643 and the failure of his project for the towers of S. Peter's (McPhee, 2002, pp. 165–89). Yet in Domenico Bernini's biography of his father there is one anecdote that suggests a convergence of the sculptor, sculpture and (at least by implication) spectator (Bernini, 1713, p.48). In this

passage (evocatively used by Frank Fehrenbach in his discussion of Bernini's negotiations between the material and immaterial), Domenico echoes his own earlier description of Teresa and (no doubt incidentally) rounds out Scaramuccia's words in the text used as this essay's epigraph (Fehrenbach, 2005, p.30). While in the service of Urban VIII, Bernini was struck down by a nearly fatal illness, caused by his ceaseless labours – especially the physically taxing work of carving marble, in which 'he was so fixated that he seemed in fact ecstatic (*così fisso, che sembrava anzi estatico*), and in the act of sending through the eyes the spirit (*spirito*) to render the stones alive'.

Gian Lorenzo's fixation – suggesting both engrossment and fixedness, immobility – and his intent gaze (presumably *facie ad faciem*) connote ecstasy, which makes sense inasmuch as ecstasies were described as both still and as engrossed. Yet the artist seems to play both roles in the ecstatic encounter: like God breathing the *spiraculum vitae* into his work of sculptural art (Genesis 2:7), Bernini attempts to send forth his own enlivening *spirito* into a stone body. The notion of a statue obtaining true life by facing the gaze of its creator seems dangerously close to a parody of the standard topoi of ecstasy. It also speaks to the difficulties of portraying such ecstasies: the closest a non-ecstatic might come to witnessing union was through the seemingly lifeless simulacrum left behind. And those twice-removed from the miracle must make do with is a lifeless statue of a lifeless statue. Yet, as Domenico Bernini's and Scaramuccia's words suggest, that statue may nonetheless possess something close to immortality, in the quasi-eternal fame bestowed on it by the artist's imagination and touch. It is perhaps a kind of consolation for the viewer standing before the Cornaro chapel, poised midway between the blinded witnesses in the church's altarpiece and the unseeing witnesses in the chapel.

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