

IMAGES IN ART

By NICHOLAS MADDEN

A VISITING PRIEST TOOK two photographs of St Thérèse when she was a novice in order to send them to her family. Céline brought her camera to the convent when she joined and either supervised or took the rest of the extant pictures of her sister. She also did portraits of her after her death, relying on photographs and memory, including a charcoal that appeared frequently as the frontispiece to the *Histoire d'une Ame*. It was she who also retouched photographs for publication. It has been observed sharply but truthfully that Céline's concern was with appearance, influenced by the prevailing pious sentiment. To do this in representing someone who claimed that she never sought anything but the truth is evidence of a misguided sincerity. Eventually the original photographs were published by François de Saint Marie as *Le visage de Thérèse de Lisieux*. These originals go a long way to reaching down to the very depth of her being, a prerogative which, with La Tour, one would have thought reserved to the portrait painter. Others have ably complemented this work so that we have an abundance of material to illustrate the literary remains of this remarkable woman.

Thérèse's striking story has inevitably inspired works of art. Apart from the intrinsic interest of the writings of Thérèse and this iconic resource, we have here a canon, in some sense, by which to judge whether these works of art achieve a deep likeness, no matter how much they may be at variance with appearance. This canon is taken for granted in the review of the three works chosen here, so that the points made should indicate what, if any, contribution they make to the tradition to which Thérèse belongs and to the women in the same tradition.

The film 'Thérèse' (1980)

Alain Cavalier, who made *Thérèse*, admitted that filming the invisible is impossible – 'so one tries to do it'. He did not have the advantages of directors of films like 'A Man for All Seasons' or 'Gandhi', where honour could be 'flashed off exploit', in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins. His task was to get at the inner spirit of his subject and to convey through a pattern of images the mysterious source of her forbidding attractiveness. He chose to evoke the final ten

years of her life in an austere sequence of black and white vignettes, with a minimum of props, no backdrops, no scenery, no music. The bleak style gives his work an intensity which mirrors the saint's poverty of spirit. The film is elegantly crafted: shots that catch face, expression, gesture, action, leave us with a resonance of the *je ne sais quoi* of a spiritual genius. Catherine Mouchet plays Thérèse with finesse, bringing out her vivacity, her humour, her simplicity, her strength, her distinctive quality. This is mimesis of a high order.

Thérèse once said that she would like to comment on the *Song of Songs*. By making it the leitmotif of the film, Cavalier has given it a function not unlike that of the chorus in Greek drama. The saint translates the Scripture into life, while the verses of the *Song* reveal the significance of what we see and hear. This exegesis finds 'hidden mysterious meanings' in the text because our exegete has assimilated the Word of God in a personal way.

The film is not a documentary, but it is rooted in facts. Innumerable touches, like the surreptitious reading of a newspaper, the garnering of a tear, assure us that the director has studied the evidence. There are also deviations from history, notably the introduction of the fictitious Lucie, the fractious nun. These are not distortions, but exemplify the axiom of the Chinese sage, Xun Zi,¹ that 'one image is worth more than a thousand words'. We know that Thérèse haemorrhaged and that she dressed up to play the part of Joan of Arc, but that in fact a year separated these events. With artistic licence, Cavalier has made them coincide to show Thérèse's sense of identity with Joan. It is a case of Picasso's 'lie that makes us realize the truth'.

A glance at some of the images will indicate how Cavalier uses them. M. Martin puts a warming-pan in his daughter's bed. But the bride cannot rest; she gets up to pray or removes the coverings to endure the penitential cold as a way of redemption. John of the Cross taught her that the meeting place with her Beloved would be the 'flowery bed', 'her very Spouse the Word', and more specifically his humanity. This would involve the admission on her death-bed that the suffering which she endured was inconceivable before it took hold of her, a consummation willed without reserve. The clock situates Thérèse socially; her calling is to strive for sanctity in a bourgeois milieu. More, because she experiences her temporality as a coordinate with what breaks into it, she uses time serenely but with sustained concentration. While the director eschews her more famous sayings, he has her say 'I will bring flowers', her intimation of finding heaven on time-bound earth through beneficence.

Thérèse's feet are swathed in bandages as a remedy for chilblains. She was dedicated to the Child Jesus and to the Holy Face. In the tradition of icon-painting we see the baby in swaddling bands that foreshadow the winding sheet of the dead Christ; Thérèse will know these mysteries from within: 'I am a babe in arms'; 'I never knew one could suffer so much'. Her father would lose his mind; this is symbolized by the cloth that he places over his face and she is made to feel responsible. But she believes that he will shine like the sun in the light of the Resurrection. It is this conviction of life out of death that inspires the dance in bandages, a blend of grotesquerie and abandon.

Thérèse liked games and she liked to win. She plays draughts with Céline; the polyvalence of the image ranges from witty playfulness to the hazarding of her 'all' to win Pranzini, the condemned criminal who so affected Thérèse.² Life for her is basically a divine comedy. This makes her final game with Céline nothing short of sublime: she devises the ploy by which her sister will articulate her will when she is frantic with pain. To Thérèse's 'I am suffering', Céline answers 'So much the better'. Lucie represents antithetically the inability to transform the unpromising conditions of convent life into the stuff of divine drama. She may also be the saint's alter-ego, showing the struggle of an intelligent and wilful girl to yield to the *élan* at the core of her being. We find Thérèse washing the back of an old nun, reminding us of the raw flesh and blood to be integrated into a life of faith; the doctor rubs her own back roughly as part of his diagnosis. The *Song* is mute; Thérèse copes with buffoonery.

We have no evidence of what it was for her to become a woman, nothing comparable to the confidences of Ann Frank to her diary. Her admitted unease in her body would seem to be a symptom of the eschatological surge of her life, and her fastidious propriety to be evidence of the exclusiveness of her dedication. She comes to enjoy being splashed with suds at the common laundry, demonstrating her resourcefulness in turning the petty details of life to her account. When she breaks frozen water to wash, the *Song* gets to the heart of her little way: 'the mighty waters cannot extinguish love'.

Contemplatives see in this Thérèse the worth of a hidden life of prayer and abnegation; the rest of us can realize that God comes to us in the burning bush of everyday monotony; all may be reminded that the ultimate source of meaning and value is Love.

The opera 'Thérèse' (1973)

The distinguished British composer, John Tavener, was another artist who was moved to creativity by the impact of Thérèse. In 'Thérèse' the

challenge for Taverner and his librettist, McLarnon, is to exteriorize the inner drama of the way to glory through suffering. In the opera *Thérèse* is not sure whether she is being led to safety or is being deluded by an insubstantial dream. If the one being purified is reduced to what seems no better than the idiom of the absurd, how is the artist to communicate the apophaticism of profound experience, what Cavalier called 'the invisible'? He has to be resigned to the use of symbolic resources proper to his medium in order to give us intimations of what is, in the last resort, ineffable. Here again the artist looks to the *Song of Songs* for the language of love, and John of the Cross's interpretation of what is required to realize this kind of love is wisely invoked to articulate the *noche oscura*.

The crisis of faith which the saint underwent during the final months of her life is the theme of the work. The set, which suggests a skull, indicates that 'her dying and death are dealt with symbolically – entirely inside her mind'. Alleluias in church Slavonic sound from heaven at the beginning and the end, an inclusion to remind us that we are privy to the specific work of contemplatives, the praise of God. But we are made to realize as well that this ecstatic outcome of love requires a journey through 'the depths of Hell', itself a bewildering mode of praise. Between Christ's opening *Veni* and his final *Surge amica*, *Thérèse* will have to share in the *Eli lama* of his God-forsakenness. 'I do not know how to die' gradually modulates into her 'My God, thou hast not forsaken them', as she emerges into her predestined role of co-redemption.

The opening scene takes place on Good Friday when *Thérèse* has vomited blood, which she interprets as a sign of her soon going to heaven. However, she has to taste the bitter foolishness of possibly vain belief, a torment which the opera dramatizes. Christ consoles her. He takes on the appearance of her Father who showed her the God-man's face on earth. It is no coincidence that the journey-myth is one of the oldest in human culture and so the opera uses three journeys to symbolize the paradoxical 'little way'. The character of Rimbaud, the French poet who so profoundly influenced the Surrealists, now appears to act as guide, with her father, through purgatory and hell. He mocks and taunts *Thérèse* into a 'disorganization of sense' in which she is made to acknowledge that self-centredness may have infected her childhood conviction of privilege. This night of sense is complemented by one of spirit, where pride is found coiled at the heart of satisfaction in having been cured by a miracle. She withers into the truth: 'I will sit with sinners'. The poet tries to undermine her faith in Christ; she has to admit that his face is hidden.

The *noche oscura* is now given to the bass voices as she is led on her journey to the hell of Pranzini, where she is confronted with the re-enactment of his crimes. She is tempted to imagine that instead of a proper revulsion, she has made evil her good by preferring the criminal to an innocent victim. It is not merely her subjective dispositions that have to be purged, but also her undertaking of vicarious redemption. Repentance became the way to innocence for Pranzini, so that Thérèse can rightly think of having won him to be her 'child'. Because her heart has become as vast as the seashore, she can choose both the murderer and the murdered. What she did to the least she did to Christ; Rimbaud's 'I is an other' is transposed into Paul's 'now not I' as Pranzini takes the form of Christ. Rimbaud significantly confesses that 'saints are strong ones, artists are no longer needed' and withdraws.

Christ reappears in glory, but unseen by Thérèse who now journeys to battlefield and concentration camp. This is the apocalypse of the earth where she has determined to spend her heaven, 'till time dies'. The purpose of life is concentrated here into the dissolution of death, and like the Thérèse of the opening scene, the soldiers do not know how to die. Neither do the skeleton-thin men who shuffle in the camp where 'grey bodies mingle with grey smoke'. Because of her own case Thérèse can sing: 'Thou hast not forsaken them'.

Goodness seems to be entirely overwhelmed by evil when little girls, beautiful in the springtime of their lives, are vaporized in an atomic cataclysm. We cannot find an explanation, but we do have an answer. In spite of the harsh evidence of our senses, the witness of Thérèse to love is what prevails. The core of her mission is to embody an imperishable love, to be a living witness to the truth that God is good and that all will be well. Christ finally declares her beauty and she proclaims the alpha and omega of reality in ecstatic realization: 'love . . . love'. A reprise of alleluias lifts us into the serenity and holiness of heaven.

Taverner has the reputation of composing music of 'iconic simplicity and luminosity'. In the programme notes he tells us that the music here is architectural and that it abounds in palindromic, circular and spiral devices. We find colour, a profusion of high melismata, complicated chords, tinkling bells, the martellato of violence, the crash and peal of drums and trumpets. He is the master of serial technique, but applies it to tonal material. His harmonic invention is often backdrop to diatonic melodies. Inevitably there are programmatic references. The music for Thérèse is full of contrasts, Christ's is lyrical, Rimbaud's flamboyant and jeering, while Pranzini touches low Cs in his depravity. The

composer quickens 'into lit presence the continuum between temporality and eternity', to use a phrase of Steiner's,³ and more specifically he brings within our emotional range elusive depths of the spirit. There may be moments of excessive contrivance but we sense that a world blasted by human idiocy and malevolence is being put right by the dynamic love of a young woman. Taverner enables us to imagine something of the scale of her achievement. This noble work can be said to have realized its aim of revealing one exemplary instance of the ways of God with humankind.

Portrait of Thérèse in stained glass (1993)

After her conversion at Christmas 1886, Thérèse realized that it was 'Jesus who took the net himself, cast it and drew it in filled with fish'. With this gospel image she interprets her new found energy and extends it to embrace her desire to work for the conversion of sinners: 'He made me a fisher of souls'. This passage is obviously central to the inspiration of Phyllis Burke's window of St Thérèse in the Carmelite Church at Clarendon Street, Dublin. Thérèse stands in the prow of her boat, grasping the net in which we see a jumble of limbs and heads that represent the innumerable people she is believed to have helped to heaven: Pranzini, Père Hyacinth, her missionaries, the anonymous priests for whom she offered her life, including the 'bad' one she encountered on her pilgrimage to Rome and who is credited with enlightening her on the unsuspected needs of the clergy, and the multitude of devotees won over by her autobiography, or sometimes with little more to go on than a crude 'holy picture'. The most obvious captive in the net is a glorious redhead, some Gallic Niamh Cinn Óir.⁴

Thérèse is often portrayed as an *ingénue*. However, we have it on good authority that during a community conversation about the hazards of war, when she was asked what she would do were she raped by a rampant soldier, she put it all in context by saying that she would pray that the child would not be like his father. We know that she would have been content to live in a brothel, praising God from disreputable hiddenness. Nor is this Gothic imagination. Mary Magdalen, whom she presumed to have been caught in this vulnerable avocation was a favourite saint precisely because of her capacity for reckless love, turned to good account when she met Christ. Thérèse had no illusions about the source of her innocence. Just before she died she said: 'I have no (meritorious) works'.

In the window, Thérèse is depicted in her full Carmelite habit, the browns and magentas letting light glance off the heavy serge tunic, the

choir mantle a blend of creams and yellows, her consecrated virgin's veil a pattern of blues and greys. Her head is inclined as she gives full attention to her task, her face full of concern for those she is hauling aboard and bearing signs of what it costs. Her eyes in particular convey inwardness. In a photograph Thérèse poses with her hands clasped on her knees. While the other nuns look weary and strained, her hands show marvellous composure. In the window her hands are neither passive nor agitated. Their power is coming from elsewhere. They are the hands of a contemplative who understands activity. In his book on Thérèse, von Balthasar thinks of her as referring to 'the Son of God, who leaves his Father in heaven and yet retains the vision of the Father in the midst of his earthly activity'.⁵ Her activity was shaped by contemplation.

In an agony of trying to identify herself in the Church, with the help of St Paul, Thérèse concludes: 'my vocation is love'. She realized that it is love that energizes the Church and that it is the lover who appropriates the activity of those less mature and vivifies it with the life of the Body of Christ. To maintain the saint's perspective, the artist has placed the figure of Christ at the apex of the unfolding mandalas that come into full focus in Thérèse and her net. The net originates with Christ and she is caught into it; what she is doing is an extension of what he is doing. This is articulated in a Celtic interlacy of limbs, the members of his Body, charged with 'nert', supernatural power, the power which Christ radiates. Thérèse has a role in the economy of receiving and giving 'nert'. An arm dangling from the net symbolizes the world's need of this mediation. The sea is subtly evoked in acidic greens, ultramarine and deep purple. Thérèse might be fishing off Kiltonan Port in Galway.

We are in the presence of home truths. The sea spoke to her of the power and greatness of God; the setting sun was a symbol of grace 'guiding the white-sailed ship on its course'. *Tout est grâce*, so her craft, with its strong carvel-built bow of reds, ochres and siennas will hold steady to wind and water as she hauls in her catch.

Thérèse said that she was not at home in her body. An existentialist would have been confounded to hear her say: 'what a joyful experience it is for me to see my body undergoing destruction'. The little way can be perplexing and will not yield to reductionism. But we have to remember too that she was a *comédienne manquée*, if we are to believe Marie de Gonzague: 'mystic, comic, she can make you weep with devotion and just as easily die with laughter'.

The artist does not overlook her humanity, nor the sacrifice of cloistered life so heroically disguised in her writings. She tells us that

the memory of scenery from her trip to Rome would give her courage. The artist refrains from including the clichéd rose, but she gives us a glimpse of a Swiss valley, at the bottom of the window, with its delightful ochres and greens out of which spring flowers and lancet leaves that might have flourished in Inversnaid: 'Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet'. Perhaps she had discovered a landscape that corresponded to the breadth and hushed stillness of her inner life. Song-birds are perched at the top of the window and a faithful dog looks up at his mistress from below. When a child, she had many pets and had special care for birds. Her father got her a dog to console her during the mysterious neurasthenia that afflicted her; Tom became part of life at Les Buissonnets. On one occasion he managed to find her in the cloister, was sheltered under her great veil 'and could not have been more content'. He almost brings Thérèse to live next door. Are we to take it that he is here looking forward to the new Earth?

In contrast to Couturier's window at Plateau d'Assy, where the saint is almost a Belsen figure holding up Veronica's Holy Face, this window portrays her as a woman of confident strength, engaged in strenuous activity with almost casual competence. She is shown as the exemplar of effective hope, a serene, majestic, triumphant servant of God. This complements rather than elides Taverner's vision and strikes home for us, whose impasse is to flounder in helplessness and at the same time long for fulfilment. We are on the way to a solution if we learn to accept our truth and reach out to God to lift us to himself. Thérèse is the witness to a permanent truth. There are no concessions to the malaise of contemporary pressure groups. She would have found a somewhat surprised champion in Dean Swift, a man of very different temper, who saw that 'God's mercy is over all his works, but divines of all sorts lessen that mercy too much'. Where we muster resignation, she can say: 'I rejoice that at the hour of death, being imperfect, I need the mercy of God'. Nor was this a fabricated sentiment; she had momentarily lost control. The basic material for the stained-glass artist is light. Here by diffracting it so effectively, she gives us an awe-inspiring glimpse of the treasures hidden in it as it streams through the cosmos. By scrambling the rainbow, she has revealed something of the wonder of Thérèse discovering for us the presence of the Light of the world.

Truth in the perception of beauty

Since the whole thrust of art is towards the particular, to the splendour of the significant individual, I have drawn attention to three works of art rather than engaging in a discussion of the function of

imagery in general. Art does not have to be moral or political; beauty is authentic simply because truth is radiant. If that has a formative influence on us individually or socially, well and good, but it has done its job if we are delighted. The artists whom we have examined found their inspiration in Thérèse of Lisieux and they have shared their fascination with us.

Plato distrusted art because it was too bound up with the flux of the phenomenal, too remote from the serene consistency of his ideas. His critics draw attention to the typical, the symbolic, the vicarious, all of which revel in the concrete and give play to imagination and intentionalised emotion. Our efforts to comprehend reality through a pattern of concepts need to be complemented by an engagement with what confronts us through a passionate use of colour, sound and rhythm. Theology can only benefit from the complementarity of religious art. Ideally, a religious work of art will echo personal experience not merely of divine things but of God, having its centre on the periphery of mysticism. The religious artist has to reconcile the tension of longing to return to Eden and the expression of an anticipation of the eschaton, of making something beautiful that uncovers the presence of God. While our artists do not profess to communicate God, they are undoubtedly concerned to reveal 'a divine thing'.

In one of his letters, Bonhoeffer provides us with an analogy which we may transpose in order to guess at what is going on in these works of art. He speaks of the 'polyphony of life' where the love of God is the *cantus firmus*, the melody, and our other loves are the counterpoint, themselves indeed but setting off what is primary. It seems to me that these products of art which I have described act as counterpoint to the mystery that is Thérèse. Père Lethel, a Carmelite theologian, has pointed out that Thérèse, by identifying herself with littleness as a way to greatness, by being immersed in darkness to have access to the light of love, participates in the twofold exchange which we find in the Incarnation and Redemption. In these mysteries God becomes human so that humankind may become God, and where the sinless One became sin so that we might become the justice of God.

It would be perverse to attempt to say what a work of art means; it is its own interpretation; it is in order to point to facets of its structure and even to try to divine its generative core. Art has to do with unity in diversity; it grows around a seminal intuition plunged by emotion into the fertile ground of the artist's creativity; the growth of the work is as consistent as the burgeoning of an oak tree, image giving rise to image.

I have tried to show how the primal response of three artists leavened their imaginations and set up the brilliant fission that evoked

something of the marvel of a spiritual genius. It may be near the mark to suggest that Cavalier's work had its origin in his sense of the impact of the greatness of God on the littleness of Thérèse. Taverner admits us to the secret of his inspiration by heading his score with the words of Archimandrite Sophrony: 'the way to this superabundant love lies through the depths of hell'. Their work in this way validates and is validated by the theological analysis of Lethel. Finally, Burke unfolds the apostolic implications of the saint's vision and self-sacrifice as the realization in her history of the themes of greatness and littleness, darkness and light, enabling her to give even as she has received. Thérèse once claimed that she never sought anything but the truth. These artists enable us to catch a glimpse of her truth in their perception of her beauty.

NOTES

¹ Xun Li (313–238 BCE).

² Pranzini is the criminal condemned to death for whom Thérèse prayed and who showed signs of repentance on the scaffold. This was very significant in her gaining insight into her mission to save souls.

³ George Steiner, *Real presences* (London, 1989), p 227.

⁴ Niamh Cinn Óir, a legendary woman of great beauty in Irish mythology. It would be a compliment to a prostitute to call her 'Niamh'.

⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, Donald Nicholl (trans) *Thérèse of Lisieux: the story of a mission* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1953).