

JENNY PONZO

NARRATING THE STIGMATA: RETICENCE AND VISIBILITY IN HAGIOGRAPHIC AND MYSTICAL LITERATURE

1. *Introduction.*

The semiotic dynamics characterizing mystical discourse have been the subject of a great deal of research in the last few decades¹. One of the most-explored features is the role of the body in the experience and narration of the Other that is longed-for and finally reached in ecstatic, fugacious and sublime glimpses. In particular, studying the mystical literature of the 16th and 17th centuries, Michel de Certeau observes that the mystical experience of that time was characterized by an approach that took «physical forms, more concerned with a symbolic capacity of the body than with an incarnation of the Verb. It was an approach that caressed, wounded, ascended the scale of perceptions, attained the ultimate point, which it transcended. It “spoke” less and less. It was written in unreadable messages on the body transformed into an emblem or a memorial engraved with the sufferings of loves»². These features are not typical of Early Modernity alone but rather characterize mystical discourse across time, up to the present³.

This paper is part of the project NeMoSanctI, which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 757314).

¹ See for instance M. de Certeau *et al.*, *Le discours mystique: approches sémiotiques*, Urbino, Università degli Studi di Urbino, 1986 (Documents de travail et pré-publications, 150-152); the essays collected in *Estasi-Ecstasy*, edited by M. Leone, «Lexia», XV-XVI (2014); A. Luciano, *Anime allo specchio. Le mirouer des simples ames di Marguerite Porete*, Roma, Aracne, 2011; A. Luciano, *Metafore di luce*, Milano-Udine, Mimesis, 2022; M. L. Solís Zepeda, *Decir lo indicible: Una aproximación semiótica al discurso místico español*, Roma, Aracne, 2016.

² M. de Certeau, *La fable mystique, XVI^e-XVII^e siècle*, Paris, Gallimard, 1982; English translation by M. Smith, *The mystic fable. Volume one. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*, Chicago-London, Chicago University Press, 1992, pp. 5-6.

³ The tendency for mysticism to periodically gain importance and centrality in Christian-Catholic culture has led some scholars to speak of ‘waves’, the latest of which

Stigmata are among the signs that most effectively testify to the body's participation in the mystical experience. According to Georges Didi-Huberman⁴, these signs provide a representation of the Christian mystery of incarnation. The stigmatized person realizes this mystery through their body and becomes an indexical sign of Christ and the divine more generally. Didi-Huberman also observes that stigmata provide a *frontal* vision of a sign that derives from the *inside* of the body.

These two spatial dimensions of stigmata (namely the interior depths made externally visible) can be interpreted in light of two further ideas. The first is the concept of the «utopic body» formulated by Michel Foucault. According to the French author, the body is the primary model and the main actor of all the utopias and, in some cases, the body itself, «in its materiality, in its flesh», «brings in all the space of the religious and the sacred, all the space of the other world»⁵. Foucault makes this observation after reflecting on semiotic practices concerning tattooing the body and covering it with religious and institutional clothes and ornaments; however, this concept seems particularly pertinent in reference to the mystical experience, in which the body itself of the mystic becomes the agent and the text of the encounter with the Other.

The second is the idea that suffering performs a mediating function. As Julia Kristeva has observed, Christian culture places suffering «at the interface between the human and the divine», thus reconciling them⁶. In this sense, we can say that the suffering body – or, more precisely, the wounds themselves – work as a channel⁷ allowing communication – and even communion – with the divine. This concept is well exemplified by a sentence in Lydwine of Schiedam's hagiography: «she often passed from the wounds of the flesh to penetrate the abysmal openings of the divinity through the

was recorded in the 20th century. Cf. *Misticismi e santità carismatica nel primo Novecento tra storia, religione e politica: donne e sacerdoti, esperienze e scritture, interventi del Sant'Uffizio*, edited by L. Billanovich – G. Mongini – S. Stroppa, monographic issue of «Ricerche di Storia Sociale e Religiosa», n.s., XL (2011), 79; F. Galofaro, *Mistica e linguaggio ai primi del '900. Teresa di Lisieux e Gemma Galgani*, in *Semiotica e santità. Prospettive interdisciplinari*, a cura di J. Ponzo – F. Galofaro, Torino, CIRCe, 2019, pp. 86-106.

⁴ G. Didi-Huberman, *L'immagine scoperta. Motifs de l'incarnazione dans les arts visuels*, Paris, Gallimard, 2007.

⁵ M. Foucault, *Le corps utopique, les hétérotopies*, Paris, Nouvelles Editions Lignes, 2019, p. 17, translation mine.

⁶ J. Kristeva, *Soffrire. Conferenza di Quaresima*, in *Bisogno di credere. Un punto di vista laico*, Rome, Donzelli, 2006, pp. 127-141: 130-131, translation mine.

⁷ In the sense of R. Jakobson, *Closing Statement. Linguistics and Poetry*, in *Style in language*, edited by T. Sebeok, New York, Wiley, 1960, pp. 350-377.

rapture of contemplation»⁸. The wounds of stigmata thus become open doors to the interiority of both the flesh and the soul, doors that make communication between the world and ultramundane reality possible.

As is well known⁹, in Christian culture sacredness is conceived as a separate dimension, a dimension that is difficult to attain and the sight of which is always imperfect and partial. This is also true of the utopic body of the mystic and the main visible signs of his or her sacred status, namely stigmata: despite the frontality of these signs, their visibility is not always total or absolute. Rather, there are certain limits on their perceptibility and impediments to viewing them, regulated by systems of veiling through which they are evoked but not made directly or fully visible.

My essay explores precisely this issue of the visibility of stigmata by taking into consideration a corpus of hagiographies spanning from the Middle Ages to the present. I examine these texts in search of recurring narrative motifs concerning the reception and ostension or concealment of stigmata, in particular in the case of female mystics¹⁰. Examples are drawn from the hagiographies of Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), Lydwine of Schiedam (1380-1433), Marguerite Marie Alacoque (1647-1690), Teresa Neumann (1898-1962), Marthe Robin (1902-1981), and Alexandrina Maria Da Costa (1904-1955).

2. *Stigmata in action.*

In the corpus under consideration, stigmata appear in a narrative in which they are not only described but also framed as part of an act involving multiple subjects. The first act related to stigmata is their reception on the part of the mystic and this event can happen in two ways, both connected to ecstatic experiences. The first way consists in participating in the Passion of the Lord: the mystic takes an active part in the Passion of Jesus, in an ecstatic state that she describes as extremely real. This experience entails the mystic sharing Jesus' suffering so fully

⁸ T. Kempis, *St. Lydwine of Schiedam, Virgin*, English translation and introduction by V. Scully, London, Burns & Oates, 2012 (1912), p. 114.

⁹ See for instance E. Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, vol. II, Paris, Ed. de Minuit, 1969.

¹⁰ The investigation is focused on female mystics in order to delimit an extensive corpus that would otherwise be even wider and more diverse. The examples have been chosen for their key role in defining and codifying the phenomena under consideration and the way they are narrated, and/or for their representativity of recurring topos and motifs.

as to not only feel the same pain but also receive the same wounds on her body, the stigmata. The second way is through Jesus acting directly to personally inflict the wounds. After reception, the stigmata themselves *can perform actions* in key moments, particularly during especially intense episodes of ecstasy such as every time the mystic experiences the Passion, on Fridays, or during encounters with Jesus. On these occasions, the stigmata break open, bleed or ooze fluids, become more painful, etc.

The act of receiving stigmata from Jesus is well represented in Catherine of Siena's hagiography. Raymond of Capua reports an account in which Catherine describes how she was awarded her first stigmata by Jesus himself, as a sign of his having responded to her prayer:

When I implored your eternal salvation with earnestness, God promised it to me, but I desired to retain a testimony of it, and I said to him. «Lord, grant me a token of what thou wilt do,» and he replied, «Reach hither thy hand.» I extended my hand; he took a nail, and putting the point in the middle of my hand, he pressed on it with such power, that it seemed to me that my hand was transpierced, I felt just such a pain, as it seems to me, would be felt, if a nail had been driven with a hammer. Hence, thank God, I now have his holy stigma in my right hand; no one sees it, but I feel it very sensibly and suffer from it continually¹¹.

Catherine receives the other stigmata while in a state of ectasis inside a church, in the company of several people. Her external movements and posture give the bystanders some hint of what is happening to her, but no visible signs appear on her body and the episode can only be fully understood through her own account delivered privately to her confessor who is also the narrator. The stigmata are transmitted by Jesus as luminous rays and Catherine asks that they not be visible to others:

... on a sudden we saw her body that was prostrate on the ground, rise a little, kneel, and extend its hands and arms. Her countenance was inflamed; she remained a long time motionless and with her eyes closed. Then, as though she had received a deadly wound, we saw her suddenly fall, and resume a few moments after the use of her senses. She sent for me and said to me in a low tone, «Father, I announce to you that, by the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, I bear his sacred stigmata in my body». I answered her, that I suspected after what passed in her ecstasy, and I asked what our Lord did to her. «I saw», said she, «my crucified Saviour, who descended upon me with a great light; the effort of my soul to go forth to meet its Creator, forced my body to arise. Then from the five openings of the sacred wounds of our Lord, I saw directed upon

¹¹ R. of Capua, *The life of Catherine of Siena*, English translation by a member of the Order of the Sacred Heart, Dublin, James Duffy & Co., year n.d, p. 122.

me bloody rays which [pierced] my hands, my feet and my heart. I understood this mystery, and cried out “Ah! Lord my God, I entreat thee that these cicatrixes may not appear exteriorly on my body.” Whilst I was speaking the bleeding beams became brilliant, and reached in the form of light, these five places on my person, my hands, my feet and my heart»¹².

The physical pain deriving from the stigmata is so hard that Catherine almost dies for them. Nevertheless, Catherine continues to ask Jesus to take part in his sufferings, and so she is afflicted with a number of pains, illnesses, distresses, but always endures them with peace and «without demonstrating any sign of sadness»¹³.

Examples of the motif of transverberation can also be found in the hagiography of Marguerite Alacoque. According to her description, Jesus once took her heart in his own and then returned it to her in the form of a burning flame, leaving her with a perpetual pain that reignites the first Friday of every month, when «That sacred heart was presented to me as a bright sun of brilliant light, whose burning rays went straight into my heart, which suddenly felt like a fire so lively that it seemed to have incinerated me»¹⁴. This account also presents the topos of the wounds of the crown: «One morning (...) the sacred Host appeared to me bright as a sun (...) and in the middle of it I saw Our Lord with a crown of thorns in his hand. He placed it on my head (...) and said: “You, my daughter, receive this crown as the token of the one that you will soon receive for conforming to me.” (...) Two terrible blows [struck] my head, so that it seemed to me my entire head was surrounded by sharpest thorns of pain, the piercing wounds of which will end only with my life (...)»¹⁵.

Similarly, the hagiography of Lydwine of Schiedam states that: «For a certain visible likeness of a crucified Child with five wounds appeared to her [Lydwine] lying in bed, which afterwards changed into a sacramental host with the same wounds hung in the air over the sheet of her bed», and a footnote explains: «on this occasion the Saint received the *Stigmata*, but (...) at her request these signs of the divine favour were concealed by the partial covering of the wounds, which nevertheless continued to cause intense pain»¹⁶.

¹² Capua, *The life of Catherine of Siena*, pp. 122-123.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 265.

¹⁴ M. M. Alacoque, *Vie et œuvres de la bienheureuse Marguerite Marie Alacoque*, édité par Monseigneur Gauthey, Paris, Ancienne Librairie Poussielgue, 1915, pp. 69-70, translation mine.

¹⁵ Alacoque, *Vie et œuvres*, p. 114.

¹⁶ Kempis, *St. Lydwine*, p. 181.

Marthe Robin's hagiography is a good example of the fact that the various motifs listed above are not mutually exclusive but sometimes appear together. Indeed, in her hagiography the motif of stigmata reception as the consequence of a direct act by Jesus – through transverberation – coexists with the motif of the stigmata playing an active role during her experience of the Passion: «in 1929 and 1930, she saw a “stinger of fire”, coming from the chest of Jesus, which split in two, hitting her two feet and both hands, while a third stinger pierced her in the Heart. Her parents saw their daughter bloodied. Doctors were disarmed»¹⁷; «In 1931 (...) Ms Robin began to suffer the Passion on Fridays. Since then, this phenomenon continued to happen each week. At the same time, stigmata appeared on the back of her hands and feet»¹⁸.

Besides these one-time, inchoative episodes – namely, receiving the stigmata and their periodically 'activating' during intense ecstatic experiences – there is also a durative aspect in the narratives I have examined. That is, even when the stigmata do not take on a central role, they often remain constantly visible or at least internally perceptible across time. As these examples show, the narration of stigmata is related to a set of recurring motifs. Besides the motif of their reception, there are the motifs of transverberation, that connects the mystical body of Jesus to the body of the holy woman in a specular relationship; of Jesus appearing inside a luminous host; of Jesus violently pressing the crown of thorns onto the head of the saint, etc. Of particular relevance here is the mystics' recurrent request that Jesus make the stigmata *invisible* and that they be able to hide the pain and ecstatic experience of the Passion.

3. *Visible and invisible stigmata.*

In some cases, stigmata are visible signs on the mystic's body, and the hagiographies provide quite accurate descriptions of their features. For instance,

[Teresa Neumann's] Blood began to flow in conjunction with the contemplation of Mount Oliveto: it flowed from the corners of her eyes onto her cheeks, the stigmata bled, the wounds of the flagellation impregnated her shirt and night gown. The wounds caused by the thorns on her forehead bled from nine more or less deep points, completely impregnating the white handkerchief on her

¹⁷ J. Guitton, *Portrait de Marthe Robin*, Paris, Grasset, 2012 (1985), p. 60, translation mine.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 62.

head. During the transport of the Cross, in Holy Week, her shoulder swelled and formed a stain¹⁹.

As this example shows, the description of stigmata is not static; it is not similar, for instance, to an ekphrasis representing an artwork in a state of immobility. On the contrary, stigmata are described as part of an action (they break open, bleed, stain the mystic's clothes, etc.).

As mentioned above, the mystic's participation in the Passion is also evidenced through specific movements: «Her hands – the eyewitnesses report – moved around her forehead, almost as if to remove the thorns; the fingers of her hands clenched in the painful spasm of the nails of the crucifixion and her tongue tried to moisten her lips burned by pain»²⁰. This is another way of narrativizing the stigmata by including them in a pattern of actions. As this quotation shows, in some cases the stigmata reception and the mystic's visions and participation in the Passion more generally, during which the stigmata assume a central role, are accompanied by more or less complex bodily mimicry. This mimicry is particularly important in cases in which the stigmata remain invisible to the gaze of observers and can only be perceived by the mystic herself. This case is well exemplified not only by the above-quoted passage from the hagiography of Catherine of Siena, but also by the hagiography of Alexandrina da Costa who, despite having prayed that her experience remain invisible, 'performed' the entire Passion for quite some time in the presence of numerous bystanders:

At noon Alexandrina gets out of bed. (...) She prostrates herself completely on the floor, always well composed, with her arms stretched out beside her hips. At a certain point she climbs up on her knees, turns her eyes to the sky, opens her hands as in a sign of acceptance. (...) The agony in the Garden was long and painful; Alexandrina would emit deep moans and sobs. (...). Capture follows. The repugnance at the traitorous kiss is clearly seen; you hear the words: "It's me", which Alexandrina chanted, sometimes kneeling and other times standing. Then, holding her hands placed on top of the other, she takes a few steps around the room, or moves dragging herself on her knees, while repeating several phrases spoken by Jesus before Annas, Caiaphas, Pilate. At a certain point a slap is keenly felt: she herself delivers it with her right hand, on her left cheek. (...) The coronation of thorns appears with evidence: Alexandrina heads, on her knees, to the wall of the chamber, sits down and then violently bows her head forward, contracting the veins and muscles of her neck as if beaten on the head²¹.

¹⁹ I. Corona, *Teresa Neumann. La mistica stigmatizzata che visse senza cibo e acqua*, Tavagnacco, Edizioni Segno, 2012, pp. 39-40, translation mine.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 40.

²¹ G. Amorth, *Dietro un sorriso. Beata Alexandrina Maria da Costa*, Torino, Elledici, 2018, pp. 43-44, translation mine.

The case of Alexandrina shows that, when stigmata are invisible, the ‘performance’ of the Passion in which the wounds are experienced inside but without leaving external marks is a key part of the account of the stigmata, that is, a key element of their narrativization. When it is not possible to describe the stigmatic sign, the *enactment* of it becomes central. If there is no visible mark on the mystic’s skin then her whole body bears testimony of the stigmata by enacting the actions surrounding these wounds. As I argue elsewhere, mystics’ performance of the Passion can be described as an interpretative style through which the mystic reads and enacts the Passion, an experiential interpretation involving the entire body²². When the life stories of mystics are narrated in hagiographic texts, verbal descriptions of these performances become a central feature of the representation of the stigmata themselves.

Another key feature is the description of the physical pain accompanying mystics’ experience: if no sign is available to be perceived, the sign itself is signified through both the performance and the description of the sensorial effect of the mystic’s body: pain is thus the sign of stigmata²³. Moreover, a further element used to legitimate and complete narrations of invisible stigmata is the *a posteriori* report and explanation of the mystic herself, as she provides fundamental information supplementing the performance and confers a meaning on it. Together, these narrative devices overcome the problem of the invisibility of interior stigmata and render them somehow visible by inserting them into a narrative pattern: description might not be possible, but narration still is.

The fact that the performance and narration of stigmata constitute a form of visibility is confirmed by the way the hagiography of Alexandrina narrates this phenomenon ceasing at a certain point: «As for the Passion, since that day Alexandrina continued forever to experience it every Friday (...), but without exterior signs. (...) She felt the open sores and [the] spear blow. But bystanders did not perceive anything (...), her face went on smiling»²⁴. Alexandrina continues to have an interior perception of the stigmatic signs (like «the open sores» and «spear blow»), but there is no movement to make these signs perceivable from the outside.

²² J. Ponzo, *The mystics’ participation to the Passion and confabulation: semiotic reflections*, «Rivista italiana di filosofia del linguaggio», 2022, pp. 73-84.

²³ As it is well known, in the Christian-Catholic mystical tradition pain is also connected to pleasure, so that the two are reciprocally implicated. For more considerations on this topic with regard to the mystics under consideration, see J. Ponzo, *Dinamiche di violenza nella pratica mistica del digiuno*, «Actes Sémiotiques», 125 (2021), <https://www.unilim.fr/actes-semiotiques/7231> (4/12/2023).

²⁴ Amorth, *Dietro un sorriso*, p. 64.

4. *Rhetoric of reticence.*

Many hagiographies posit the invisibility of the stigmata as the result of the mystic having explicitly made this request of Jesus, like in the above-mentioned case of Catherine of Siena as well as that of Alexandrina: «[Alexandrina] had prayed: “Oh Jesus, put on my lips a deceitful smile, in which I can hide all the martyrdom of my soul”. Indeed, all those who approached her did not suspect anything of her pains; they only saw that smile»²⁵. In all the hagiographies considered here, there is a similar mindset: the mystics consider their pain to be an intimate experience and feel ashamed and humiliated when it becomes visible. In Marguerite Alacoque’s autobiography, for example, we read: «Seeing myself so scarcely humble and mortified that I could not suffer without making others aware was unbearable to me, and all my consolation consisted in recurring in the love of my own abjection (...)»²⁶.

This saint opens her narration with another hagiographic topos, that of describing the process of writing her memories as a punishment since in reality she longs to be forgotten and only narrates her experience out of obedience. This demeanor is connected to the tropes of reticence, preterition and dissimulation. Rhetoric studies classify reticence as a «figure of silence»²⁷, together with the ellipsis. These tropes limit communication by interrupting it or subtracting elements from it. In the texts under investigation, the phenomena surrounding the mystics’ extraordinary spiritual experiences are alluded to, but the narrators often assure readers that what they are reporting is only a limited part of a wider reality. The rest of the experience is shrouded in silence so as to respect the mystic’s modesty and avoid arousing morbid curiosity about her or the miraculous facts surrounding her. As the above-mentioned examples show, however, in many cases the text asserts the narrator and mystic’s reticence even while providing a great deal of information about these phenomena, including stigmata. Therefore, another fundamental trope in these narrations is preterition, defined as the «declared refusal to

²⁵ *Ibidem.*

²⁶ Alacoque, *Vie et oeuvres*, p. 101. The term «abjection» opens a further path for reflection, which however would require a much more extended argumentation: stigmata could be considered as a sign of the *abjection* in the sense proposed by Julia Kristeva (who affirms that the self-abjection as the definitive proof of humility toward God is the characteristic feature of Christian mystics). Cf. J. Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l’horreur. Essai sur l’abjection*, Paris, Seuil, 1980.

²⁷ B. Mortara Garavelli, *Il parlar figurato. Manualetto di figure retoriche*, Bari-Roma, Laterza, 2010¹⁴, p. 88.

dwell on topics that are barely hinted at. And yet in the meantime we talk about it, showing that we do not want or are not able to talk about it»²⁸. Finally, dissimulation is a trope consisting in the intention to hide the true character of things: the ‘deceitful smile’ Alexandrina prays for is an example of dissimulation. In this case as well, however, this is second-degree dissimulation: it is presented as concealment, but at the same time the truth of the pain hidden behind the smile is also openly revealed to the reader. We can thus argue that what these texts engage in is not reticence and dissimulation per se, but rather a *rhetoric of reticence*, one that appears closer to the trope of preterition.

The roots of this rhetorical style can be found in a religious imaginary connecting sacredness and secrecy. Traces of this imaginary can be found in the Hebrew Bible, for instance in *Deuteronomy* 29, 28 as well as the idea of *revelation* itself²⁹. Christianity makes secrecy and discretion an important principle in regulating prayer (cf. *Mt.* 6, 1-6 and 16-18) and develops the concept of modesty.

In the framework of their semiotic square of the modalities of veridiction, Algirdas Julien Greimas and Joseph Courtès describe the *secret* as a reality that does not appear (something which *is* but does *not seem*)³⁰. Setting off from this basic definition and bringing it into dialogue with Gorgia’s theses, Ugo Volli observes that «for something to be a secret it must not only naturally (A) exist and (B) not appear, but must be (C) knowable and (D) communicable. (...) There is no secret except in the context of a cognitive and above all communicative relationship»³¹. At the same time, «we cannot speak of secrecy for the sole fact that something is not known to someone, or is not communicated by those who eventually know it. The secret requires an extra modal condition, that is, the fact that those who hold it do not want to make it known»³². Therefore, each culture codifies the relationship between secret and communication and the ways in which the secret itself can be communicated. The rhetoric of reticence in hagiographic-mystical literature is one of the strategies the culture under consideration has formulated to communicate something that belongs to the sphere of the sacred and is therefore difficult and problematic to express.

²⁸ Mortara Garavelli, *Il parlar figurato*, pp. 84-85.

²⁹ Cf. U. Volli, *Figure della reticenza. Riservatezza, segreto, pudore, privacy, silenzio, sacro, storytelling*, «Versus», CXXX (2020), 1, pp. 19-32: 26.

³⁰ A. J. Greimas – J. Courtès, *Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, Paris, Hachette, 1979.

³¹ Volli, *Figure della reticenza*, p. 21.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 22.

This rhetoric also influences the narrative structure of hagiographic texts, in particular the pathemic configuration: the verbal representation of stigmata is very often accompanied by a specific passion on the part of the mystic, namely shame. In the framework of the semiotic study of passions, scholars have devoted some attention to shame. For instance, analyzing the novel *The Scarlet Letter*, Francesco Marsciani observes that this passion is connected to the public visibility of a mark (in this case a red letter rather than a bleeding wound)³³. The shame of stigmatized people can be interpreted as a fear of showing parts of their bodies that they feel are connected to a very intimate experience, body parts that risk becoming the object of a voyeuristic gaze that might transform them into fetishes. In semiotic terms, a fetish is an attractive and seductive object that has lost its semiotic nature: it ceases to be a sign because it ceases to refer to something other than itself, to allude to transcendence³⁴.

A further lens for interpreting this shame can be drawn from Lotman and Uspenskij, who claim that shame is the passion caused by violating a code inside a community³⁵: in fact, the stigmatized often feel as if they have transgressed the code of the cultural system to which they belong. This is because they identify with stereotyped roles, defined by society in general and religious orders in particular, that require discretion and humility. For someone who has chosen to conform wholly to a certain lifestyle, the condition of being marked by unmistakable signs connected to a-normal practices triggers shame. This is especially true for female mystics, who act within particularly rigid and stereotyped roles, and for whom the access to the sacred usually takes places in mediated forms³⁶.

Indeed, the mystical experience confers a kind of agency that exceeds the usual limits imposed to the religious in general and to women in particular and takes place in a private and intimate sphere, with no external mediation: the revelation of this sphere, therefore, can generate fear and shame in relation to the public and institutional sanction of this unusual agency, which is not only lived as a sign of abnormality, but at the same time also as a form of personal freedom to be protected, thus constituting an important feature of the individual identity of these subjects.

³³ F. Marsciani, *Uno sguardo semiotico sulla vergogna*, «Materiali semiotici. Quaderni del circolo semiologico siciliano», XXX (1989), pp. 117-132.

³⁴ Cf. U. Volli, *Fascino. feticismi e altre idolatrie*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1997.

³⁵ J. Lotman – B. Uspenskij, *Tipologia della cultura*, Milano, Bompiani, 1975 (1973).

³⁶ A number of scholars have underlined the independence and non-conformist behavior of many female mystics, for instance in relation to the practice of fasting and their freedom of thought. See R. Bell, *Holy Anorexia*, Chicago-London, The University of Chicago Press, 1985; J. Kristeva, *Thérèse mon amour, récit*, Paris, Fayard, 2008.

Finally, the passion of shame can also be interpreted in light of the value of modesty, a value that is deeply rooted in Christian culture. In *Genesis* (3, 10-11), Adam and Eve's first act after eating the fruit of knowledge is to cover their bodies, as their nudity has become a source of shame³⁷. Christian culture, especially beginning with Paul of Tarsus, elaborates this biblical motif about covering the body and integrates it with the dualistic conception of body and soul inherited from Platonism. The result is an idea of modesty in which the body must not only be covered but also mortified and its needs and pain ignored and hidden, as in the case of the mystics considered here³⁸. This conception of the body is connected to a certain idea of humility that could be in turn connected to self-hate. The self-hating, humble body idea is thoroughly developed by Catherine of Siena, for instance: in many passages, her writings define self-hate as hostility towards the sensual component of the person. Becoming conscious of the sensual nature of the body leads to despising it, and consequently achieving the virtue of humility by recognizing our mortal and weak nature.

5. *Verbal visibility.*

Much attention has been devoted to the iconic and visual representation of stigmata, while the strategies used for the verbal description of these signs has perhaps been less explored. A significant insight into the mechanisms of visual representation of stigmata can be found in Didi-Huberman's reflection on «open images», that is, images that disclose the inside of the body and represent the mystery of the incarnation of the divine. Christian-Catholic culture has formulated a peculiar regulation of the visibility of the inner parts of the body of holy characters such as saints. The analysis of a corpus of artworks – especially statues – led me to identify three different regimes for representing the inside³⁹. The

³⁷ Cf. U. Volli, *Figure del desiderio. Corpo, testo, mancanza*, Milano, Cortina, 2002; M. Leone, *Pudibondi e spudorati. Riflessioni semiotiche sul linguaggio del corpo (s)vestito*, «Rivista italiana di filosofia del linguaggio», II (2010), pp. 74-94.

³⁸ This concept of modesty and related 'self-hate' is particularly widespread in certain fringes of Christian culture and certain epochs, such as the Early Modern period, but it is not the sole conception of the body found in this culture. For instance, many theologians insist on a conception of the body and soul as in harmony, conceived as an indissoluble unity, and this is the position shared by the Catholic Church (see e.g. https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P1B.HTM) (4/12/2023).

³⁹ J. Ponzio, *Obliteration, Ostension, Ostentation: The Visibility of the Sacred Body in Catholic Culture*, «Signata», 14 (2023), <https://journals.openedition.org/signata/4380> (4/12/2023).

first is the regime of «obliteration», which takes place when the inside of the sacred body is perceivable to the observer but deprived of iconicity (for instance, in the case of hollow colossuses such as the statue of Saint Charles Borromeo in Arona or the dressable statues of the Virgin, the body of which is often a rough wooden structure with no realistic features depicting the human body). The second is the regime of «ostension», in which the inside of the sacred character is perceivable to different degrees (for instance, martyrological iconography often displays inner parts of the body such as muscles and organs). The third is the regime of «ostentation» which consists in a marked form of ostension, appearing for instance when traditional and stereotyped religious iconography is stressed to such an extent as to challenge a given culture's accepted moral and aesthetic threshold.

Comparing these theories about the visual representation of the insides of sacred characters' bodies to the verbal representations analyzed here reveals significant similarities between the two. The rhetorics of reticence can surely be related to a verbal and narrative form of the regime of ostension: viewed from this perspective, this strategy appears as a – more or less effective – way of being able to describe and narrate stigmata and the other exceptional phenomena surrounding mystics without being accused of «ostentation». Invisible stigmata and the narration of the facts surrounding their reception and 'activation' can be interpreted as a form of «obliteration»: the inside of the mystic's body is not evoked in the verbal text, but the wound is described as part of a set of actions, a primarily spiritual experience that involves the body. Specifically, the body is involved by feeling pain and moving in synchrony with the elements comprising the vision (as with the enactment of the Passion), but its insides remain covered; the skin is not pierced and the sacred body maintains its integrity.

In the case of late modern and contemporary mystics, photographs and videos also provide further grounds for comparing verbal and visual representations of stigmata and related phenomena. In this case as well, similarities can be identified. For instance, a visual example of the rhetoric of allusion and dissimulation are the famous pictures of Theresa Neumann that portray her with her head and shoulders covered in a white veil stained with blood: this veil alludes to her stigmata even while simultaneously hiding them from the viewer's direct gaze. The main factor in this visual kind of rhetoric of reticence is the color of the veil: if the real intention was to hide the stigmata, it would make more sense to portray the mystic with a black cloth, thus rendering the stains almost or wholly invisible. It is the choice of a white veil that makes the allusion

effective, because the chromatic contrast between the white cloth and the red blood stains works as an indexical sign that fires the viewer's curiosity and imagination. Similarly, the photographs of Saint Pio of Pietrelcina wearing gloves covering but at the same time alluding to his stigmata have become nearly a cultural icon, at least in Italy⁴⁰.

Semiotics has devoted substantial attention to studying the mechanisms of veiling, for instance by investigating the clothing system, the veil in religious traditions, and strategies for regulating the visibility of relics inside reliquaries⁴¹. This analysis of a corpus of hagiographic texts has shown that veiling mechanisms are also used in verbal representations of stigmata and other phenomena connected to the field of sacredness, a field which by definition entails the kind of ineffability and irrepresentability that makes it part of the regime of secrecy and silence. The main mechanisms found in the corpus considered here are the rhetoric of reticence and the narrativization of the «sufferings of love»⁴², which are signs of the union between body and soul, flesh and divine, inside and outside: narrativization is perhaps the most effective strategy to render the synthetic⁴³ nature of these signs.

⁴⁰ See on this subject Francesco Galofaro's essay in this volume.

⁴¹ See for instance Volli, *Figure del desiderio; Il sistema del velo / Système du voile. trasparenze e opacità nell'arte moderna e contemporanea / Transparence et opacité dans l'art moderne et contemporain*, a cura di M. Leone, Roma, Aracne, 2016; Id., *Wrapping Transcendence. The Semiotics of Reliquaries, Signs and Society*, II (2014), S1 (Supplement 1) <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/674314> (4/12/2023).

⁴² De Certeau, *La fable mystique*, p. 6.

⁴³ I use this term to allude to the dialectical and logical relationship of thesis-antithesis-synthesis.