"Celle qui ment" (The One Who Lies) Angela of Foligno

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For searing intensity, boldness of expression, and evocative power the *Book* of Angela of Foligno, late thirteenth century Italian mystic, is probably unmatched in the annals of Christian mystical literature.[1] The story of Angela's dramatic love affair with the crucified Christ, the "suffering" (*passionatus*) Godman, the narrative of how she is transformed and led into the ineffable recesses of the Trinitarian life, is recorded in the *Memorial*, the first part of her *Book*, which she dictated to her scribe and confessor Brother A (whom a later tradition was to name Arnaldo). After her immersion in the fathomless depths of the Trinity, Angela emerged as a spiritual mother gathering around her a network of disciples. Her teachings in the form of letters and exhortations, as well as accounts of further

[1]For the critical edition of Angela's *Book*, see Ludget Thier and Abelle Calufetti, eds., *Il libro della Beata Angela da Foligno*, Rome, 1983. For an introduction and an English translation, see Paul Lachance, O.F.M., *Angela of Foligno: Complete Works*, New York, 1993; for a commentary on her text see, Idem., *Il percorso spirituale di Angelo da Foligno secondo il Memoriale di Fr. A.* trans., G. Gracis Bonaconsa, Milan, 1991. For an Italian translation, see Sergio Andreoli, *Il libro della Beata Angela da Foligno* Cinisiello Balsamo; for an insightful introduction and anthology, see G. Pozzi, *Angela da Foligno: Il libro dell'esperienza*, Milan, 1992. English selections of the writings of Angela are taken from my rendition in the Paulist Press edition. All translation from foreign languages including those from the script of *Celle qui ment* (Paris, 1984) are my own.

visionary moments, and her Testament, are recorded in the second part of her *Book*, the so-called *Instructions*. She was to be "entrusted with sons and daughters," she was told, "on this side of the sea and beyond it."

As with so many mystics, especially medieval ones, almost nothing is known about the details and external circumstance of Angela's life. In all likelihood she was born in 1248 (within twenty years of the death of Francis of Assisi); her birthplace was Foligno, a few miles from Assisi. We do know from her *Book* that she was well-to-do; that she was married and had several sons; and that, early in her conversion to a life of penance, all the members of her immediate household—her husband, sons, and mother—died , which she initially experienced as a blessing. Francis of Assisi was her model—"the mirror of holiness"—who inspired her journey. He appeared to her at several key moments of her story, and at one point he told her: "You are the only one born of me." Early in her conversion she entered the Franciscan Third Order and subsequently she made several pilgrimages to Assisi, one of which was to ask St. Francis for "the grace to make her become, and remain to the end, truly poor." We also know that Angela had a companion, Masazuola, to whom she confided many of the secrets of her inner life. And the date of her death, January 4, 1309, is well documented. But virtually all the remaining information we have about her must be deduced or inferred from her *Book*. If especially the first part, the *Memorial*, affords us breathtaking vistas into her inner world, and the second part, the *Instructions*, shows us a view of her outer existence and the dates that mark her life story, who Angela was, and even what she saw, eludes total visibility and elucidation—like a mountain top shrouded by a sea of clouds.

The first steps of Angela's itinerary as recorded in the *Memorial* are marked by remorse and bitter wailing over the misspent and frivolous years prior to her conversion. Gradually, a new-found love emerges to consciousness. The crucified Christ manifests himself to her in visions of increasing intensity and sensual immediacy. He shows her, for instance, each of the wounds he suffered on the cross, how his beard, eyebrows, and hair had been plucked out. He invites her to kiss the wounds of his side, lay cheek to cheek with him in the tomb, to caress him; and he leads her to share the despair and agony of his abandonment on the cross.

Totally transformed by the excessive love which she is receiving, Angela, in the final steps of her journey, is plunged, "inabyssated" (*inabyssasse)*, in the fathomless depths of the Trinitarian life. Words fail more

and more—they lie—they cannot describe the ineffability of what she experiences: "My words blaspheme and make hash of what they should express." Totally stilled in the divine darkness of God, Angela is led to a two-fold awareness: the deep abysses of God and her own abysmal nothingness; and how these two coincide. On her deathbed she utters a long wailing cry: "O unknown nothingness! O unknown nothingness! (*O nihil incognitum! O nihil incognitum!*), Angela of Foligno: the saint of the double abyss.

Her scribe, Arnaldo, acknowledged many times the difficulty of his task, that much of what he had heard from her was beyond his understanding and his ability to report accurately. One time when he reread his text to "Christ's faithful one," as he habitually called Angela, she protested that what he has written fell far short of the meaning she was trying to convey and his words were "dry and without any savor." Nonetheless, both concurred that what was written in her *Book* contained nothing false or superfluous.

As with so many mystical texts, the transmission of Angela's *Book* followed a tortuous journey. The earliest manuscript, for instance, was lost, and copies underwent several reorderings in either the Latin or the vernacular versions. Very early the text went underground. It was clearly regarded with suspicion, perhaps because of its ties with the Franciscan Spirituals under persecution; or perhaps because the vertiginous claims, made by a woman, transgressed the limits of what was acceptable to medieval theological discourse and thus, her *Book*, like the writings of her contemporaries Marguerite Porete and Hadewijch, was a target of the suspicions of the Inquisition. A strong indication that it was considered a dangerous book is the fact that one of the earliest manuscripts, the so-called Assisi codex (early fourteenth century) found in the Sacro Convento library in Assisi, was not kept in the public library, but under reserve in the "secret" library accessible to only a few. Three valuable codices are dated in the early fifteenth century and were found in Belgium, hinting perhaps, that the text circulated in Beguine circles. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, after nearly a century of almost absolute silence among Franciscans concerning Angela, her writings surface and gain recognition by the Observant Franciscans who regarded her as one of their heroines. The interest in Angela shown by these reform-minded Franciscans reaches a high point with the first definitely known printings of her *Book*, promoted by the

Spanish Franciscan (an Observant) Cardinal Francesco Ximenes; a Latin version in 1505, and a Spanish one in 1510. The Spanish version was probably the one that St. Teresa of Avila came into contact with and likely inspired her well-known lines: "I die because I do not die," almost the very words pronounced by Angela much earlier.[2]

In the seventeenth century in France, several saints and spiritual writers were acquainted with Angela's writings. St. Francis de Sales,[3] Fenelon,[4] Bossuet,[5] and Jean Jacques Olier frequently mention her in their works. Olier, the founder of the Society of St. Sulpice and a leader of the French School of spirituality, refers to her as the saint "who penetrated the double abyss, the depths of the passion of Christ and the heights of his divinity."[6]

Indeed, it is in French circles that Angela's influence is most notable, and perhaps no one has given greater impetus to the reading of her writings than the French philosopher Ernest Hello (1828-1885). In 1868, he published his translation of Angela's writings, *Le livre des visions et instructions de la bienheureuse Angèle de Foligno*. It enjoyed enormous success, going to as many as ten editions, the most recent one being that of the Editions du Seuil in 1991. What Hello tried to do, as he says in his preface, was to translate, not according to the letter of the text, but according to its spirit: "I have

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[2]Theresa's "I die because I do not die" is taken from her poem entitled, "Aspirations," in *Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. Adrian Cooney, O.C.D., ed. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D., Vol. 3 (1985), 373. For Angela's text: "For me to live is to die," see *Angela of Foligno*, 206.

[3]*Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales, Evêque de Genève et Docteur de l'Eglise, Edition Complêtes*, Annecy, (1982-1964), vol. 3, 108, 193, 295, 331; vol. 13, 314; vol. 14, 52: *Introduction à la vie dévote*, vol. 1 VIII.

[4]François de Salignac de la Mothe, *Les principales propositions du livre des maximes des Saints, justifièes par les expressions plus fortes des Saints Auteurs* (a work condemned by the church in the Quietiest controversy) in *Oeuvres*, Paris, 1852, vol. 3, 268, 272, 273, 279, 366.

[5]Jacques Bénigne Bossuet, *Instructions sur les états d'oraison*, Treatise I, Book 9, in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 9, Parish, 1846, 1997; ibid., vol. 18, Parish: 1864, 562.

[6]Quoted by Ubald d'Alençon, in "La spiritualité franciscaine: les auteurs—la doctrine," in *Etudes Franciscaines*, 39 (1927), 290.

tried to bring to life in French what was alive in Latin. I have tried to make the French cry out what the soul cried out in Latin. I have tried to translate tears." In spite of its many imperfections, some due in part to the fact that he worked from an unreliable manuscript, likely that which Bolandus published in 1643, Hello's brilliant translation catapulted Angela into the consciousness of modern French culture. Countless thousands, both in ecclesial circles and outside them, came to know her through it.

The French novelist and playwright Georges Bernanos, for instance, was among those acquainted with Hello's version. In his *Dialogue des Carmelites*, the Carmelite Blanche, a major character in the play, repeats the oft-quoted lines from Angela's writings: "Ce n'est pas pour rire que je t'ai aimé" (My love for you has not been a hoax).[7] Georges Bataille, perhaps the most important contemporary philosopher to explore the nexus between mysticism and eroticism refers to Angela in his writings and in his series of poems under the general heading "L'Archangèlique;" there is one, "Le tombeau," in which he alludes to passages in Angela's final and most sublime step of her journey into God: "Love is a parody of non-love/non-love is the truth/in the absence of love everything is a lie/nothing exists which does not lie."[8] More recently, Angela's writings turn up in still more unexpected places, practically all originating from Hello's version. Prominent French feminists, Simone de Beauvoir,[9] Julia Kristeva,[10] and Luce Irigaray,[11] are intrigued by her and quote her in their writings.

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[7]*Dialogue des Carmélites*, in Bernanos, *Oeuvres Romanesques*, Paris, 1961, 1593.

[8]*Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3, Parish, 76. Reference to and quotations from Angela are also found in Ibid., *La somme athéologique*, 248-51, *L'expérience intérieur*, ibid., vol. 5, 7-189, 122-23; *Le coupable*, ibid., translated as *Guilty* by Bruce Boone, Venice, CA, 1988, 11, 12, 16.

[9]Simone de Beauvoir, "The Mystic," in *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 670-78.

[10]Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, 1982, 127.

[11]Irigaray's only quote (from Hello's version) from Angela is an epigraph ("The Word was made flesh in order to make me God") inserted before a chapter on mystic language ("La Mystèrique"), which , unless I am mistaken, teems with allusion to Angela's writings, in Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gilian C. Gill, Ithaca, NY, 1985, 191-202.

One day a friend handed Hello's *Livre des visions et instructions* to the gifted French actress Bérangère Bonvoisin and told her, "This book is for you." In an interview with a French reporter she discusses the genesis of *Celle qui ment*, the play about Angela she produced in collaboration with Philippe Clevenot: "At the beginning, I heard over the radio a psychoanalyst (Marie-Louis von Franz, a noted Jungian) who said: 'There are persons whom I do not try to cure, those ailing from the *mal absolu* (absolute sickness),' I tried to get her to tell me what she meant by *mal absolu* and she would not answer, but simple bade me: 'be courageous....'"[12]

This challenge heard over the radio coincided with Bonvoisin's reading of Angela's text and she comments as following on the impact the book had on her: "I read, I laughed, I cried, but I did not immediately think of producing a play."[13]

The startling revelations in Angela's *Book* struck an inner chord for Bonvoisin. What finally prompted her to write a play, she says, "was a certain kinship with Angela's own search, a certain affinity, a way of reading the world, a desire for the absolute. I find myself perhaps very near Angela's spirit in the extent that I never take decisions, they are taken for me. I wait and the grace, the miracle, always happens. The decision to write was not mine."[14]

"The grace, the miracle," *Celle qui ment*, was performed at the Theatre de la Bastille in Paris from March 15 to April 7, 1984, and again for a short run in Rouen that summer. It received immediate critical acclaim: "The most beautiful theatrical moment of the new season. A clear and profound transposition where artifice becomes truth. If the theatre is the art

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[12]English cannot convey the polyvalent meanings of "*mal absolu*." *Mal*: evil, pain, affliction, malady, something akin to Kierkegaard's "sickness unto death." In this same interview Bonvoisin comments: "I still do not know what the expression means. I admit being seduced by the juxtaposition of the two words, their possible secular and religious connotations, a little like when one says of an actor that he is performing in a state of grace." Interview by Anne Laurent, "*C'est pour toi*," *dit Angèle*, *Libération*, March 21, 1984.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid.

of suggestion, evocation, an awakener of images and emotions, then *Celle qui ment* holds firm to its promise" (*Le Figaro*).[15]

In the same interview with the French reporter referred to earlier, Bonvoisin further clarified what she had in mind in writing *Celle qui ment:*

> What interests me above all is everything which is hidden under the title I have given to the play. Angela seeks the truth of her life by evoking as precisely as possible what happened to her, what were the facts. The words used to describe the experience crumble and fall into ruin but she rectifies them repeatedly. She observes that if there is doubt, there is nonetheless certitude; if there is strength, there is also fragility... Angela is at the same time old and young, striving to be chaste, yet remaining sensual. It is exactly this "at the same time" that is the subject of the play. At no time do I mean: this is her life, this is her story. It is not a biography, rather, it is more a play about the impossibility of writing one.

Celle qui ment lasts not much more than an hour. On the stage, one is introduced to a summer night. A few flashes of fading fireworks light the heavens. From a corner comes another light from the open window of a nearby house and it illumines some of the spaces of a garden. Sounds are heard, contemporary sounds: the faint roar of an airplane, the squeals of children before bedtime; birds chirping, dogs barking. (The staging draws its inspiration from a text by Virginia Woolf ["The moment: A Summer Night"], an author who also struggled mightily to push back the night). In the half-light coming from the window of the house, and filtered through the leaves of a fig tree, the murmur of a voice emerges. A young man, Arnaldo, sandal-clad, casually dressed, moves forward. He speaks of the future still wide open before him. He is the one, note-book in hand, who, trembling, will take down what the "woman with the halo" will tell him. Another voice emerges out of the darkness. It is that of Angela. She is dressed in flat shoes, a plain skirt, a long gray shetland sweater. Her hair is graying and slightly disheveled. She is near the end of her life and wants to reweave the threads that made up the patterns of her past, to hear herself saying the unsayable. Both protagonists perch themselves on a rooftop. Angela is smoking a cigarette. The conversations begin: the task of production.

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[15]Jean Claude Carrière, *Comme des chats sur un toi, Le Figaro*, April 3, 1984.

The present recedes in the backdrop of darkness. Against herself, initially ("I cannot speak"), and yet, gradually, for herself, and for those who hear her, Angela strains inwardly to retrieve and reenact the sounds of the voice, the quality of feeling, the presence which had inhabited her: the pleasure ("*jouissance*"), and even more, "the effable joy" of the manifestations of the Other. Rapidly she retraces some of the eighteen steps which she says she needed to traverse before coming to an awareness of "the imperfection of her life." She lingers longer on certain moments which flash to consciousness, like so many signals from sunken islands. She speaks of being set ablaze by a love that is searing, deep, and true ("not a hoax"). She sees the face of the crucified one and he shows her the passion that he endured, the tortures he suffered, the plucking of his eyebrows and of the beard—all this and much more: "for her, for her, for her!" She hears the tender voice, the intimate exchanges; she experiences moments when, overwhelmed by that which exceeds, she swoons in ecstasy and collapses to the ground; she ascends and soars into the immensity of the divine darkness, "the mystery in reserve," where she sees "nothing and everything at the same time." In these dizzying heights, "the supreme obscurity of the immense darkness," her soul, she claims, "was ravished three times." Always there is more: a veritable exercise of an inflammation of desire.

For Angela each visitation of the Other is punctuated by variations of a theme that runs throughout *Celle qui ment*. Words are lacking, slip and fall, are shattered in the attempt to speak the unsayable. "The words that I use horrify me," she screams her torment, "do not believe me, do not believe me any longer. Everything I am telling you is a lie… I am called… the one who lies… Homicide is my name." All attempts to find language to describe that which comes from beyond are necessarily fallacious, for that which occurs does not arise from language even though it leaves its mark there. Words simultaneously create and destroy the path they take. Their functions of veiling and unveiling are integral to the attainment of "a state of emptiness," a void which nothing can fill or satisfy," which, Angela testifies, is essential to all true life.

In the intervals between the visitations and in response to the conflagration and the blazing glare to which she is exposed, Angela wails from the sufferings caused by the wrenchings from the illusory and the pangs of absence; sheds bitter tears of remorse, tears so hot that they burn her flesh; and cries out in torment from the awareness of her own

mendacity, that "her love her life, is a lie a hoax." Conversions, departures are nonetheless induced. She desires to become chaste ("a fire drew it out of me") and poor ("in order to be light and free"); to be stripped of all that could be an obstacle in her path, all that is superfluous: husband, sons, mother (their death was a "consolation"), everything that divides, all forms and representations; and she longs for death to come, the final dispossession.

And to what purpose these divestments, these departures from the realms of the known? To be led, humiliated, to the place of non-love and non-knowledge, the dark night which is also fire and flames. In that place which is also a non-place, a gulf opens, unfathomable, abyssal, wherein is conjoined the knowledge of the ineffable heights of the immensity of God and the knowledge of one's miseries and nothingness, both engendering one another in a cauldron of identification: "to be eternally leaning on the brink of the double abyss, that is my secret."

The eighteenth and final step indicated that the volcanic eruptions from the Other continue to be felt in Angela's life. The wounding is a permanent one. Nonetheless, she ends her narrative on a note of serenity. Rapt in a calm and tender vision, she sees the Virgin Mary, "the Queen," gently and regally depositing the child Jesus, eyes closed as if sleeping, in her arms. Suddenly, the child awakes and opens his eyes and looks at her. His winning glance totally overcomes and subdues her. After a pause Angela says: "It is late, it is time for everyone to rest" and she leaves the stage, fading back into the night.

Celle qui ment ends on a inconclusive note. The young friar, Arnaldo, who has been at Angela's side since the beginning observes: "These are the words of a woman who was saved from the shipwreck of this world. Is she dreaming?"

Celle qui ment is enigmatic. The discourse is limpid but remains elusive, resisting easy commentary. As indicated previously, it is the title of the play that organizes the entire discourse. What is central is a yearning for an inner transparency whereby a form of truth totally alien to ordinary experience can find expression. In this raid on the unspeakable every truth fades into an untruth. What is internalized and articulated are echoes of overlapping discursive materials searching for expression. In the thirteenth century Angela of Foligno had heard the voice of the ineffable and she screamed her incompetence to find words to express her inability to record

accurately what he heard her tell him. In the late nineteenth century, Hello took up the formidable task of transmission and he too felt imprisoned by human words in his attempt to express the sublime. The stunning but imperfect text he produced—eighteen steps, for instance, instead of the thirty in the authoritative version—recirculates in the Bonvoisin-Clevenot adaptation. In this instance, the text is adapted and recreated, to be sure, but at least for Angela's role it remains closely connected to Hello's rendition. Thus, chronological sequence (as in Hello) differs substantially from the critical and definitive version. The continuity and progress of the steps are not nearly as evident. The play is a montage, a resewing of past and present, much like a quilt whose patches are assembled differently. Some crucial events are missing, such as, for instance, Angela's harrowing experience and participation in Christ's abandonment on the cross. Because of an excess too impossible to bear? More significantly, there is not as much emphasis on Angela in the final stages of her life, the teacher of theologians, secure in the complete truth of her life and of all created reality, secure in the awareness of the rightful place of good and evil. Because of a certainty unable to be sustained? The discourse of *Celle qui ment*, then, is fragmentary, a partial portrait of the thirteenth-century Angela of Foligno, personal, intimate, and subjective: "A mixture of Paul Lèaud and Virginia Woolf," Bonvoisin acknowledges.[16] Nonetheless, the discourse rings with its own truth. It haunts and throbs like the colors of a Mirò painting piercing the space created.

The role of the young friar Arnaldo (performed by Nicolas Bonvoisin, Bérangere's real brother) differes significantly from his original counterpart. In the play he comes across as immature; he is more of an apprentice, where his medieval predecessor was a self-assured (at least initially) and religiously authorized voice. The text of his interventions is inspired in part by the writings of Virginia Woolf and Bernanos (cf. *Mouchette*) and only minimally by Hello's version. Like Angela in the play, he too has been stricken by the "mal absolu" ("it clings to one like the stubborn odor of seringas") but admits he has "never navigated" beyond the brink of the double abyss. He remains unsure, unable "to translate tears."

Bonvoisin's interpretation of Angela has as its matrix modernity, a time largely unmoored from the certainties of existing relations, including

[16]Laurent, *Libération* (cf. n. 12).

religious ones—a world by and large devoid of the experience of transcendence. Nonetheless, if it is the function of artistic discourse to bring about the emergence of the depth structures of belonging and of the self amid the ruins of collective discourse, then *Celle qui ment* succeeds admirably. Bonvoisin has had the courage (is it a grace?) to take a bold risk, the ("perverse?")[17] risk of fidelity to a desire. *Celle qui ment* shimmers with "an ardent absence" (Rilke).

[17]A quotation from Maurice Blanchot serves as an epigraph to the script: "The idea of a vocation (a fidelity) is the most perverse one which can trouble a free artist."