THE MANUSCRIPTS OF PERE ALBE MANUENSIS

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The Jesuit historian Pere Albe Manuensis met Bernadette Soubrious in 1864, six years after her visions near Lourdes. He had been sent to write the official account of the events uninflected by the rumours and mythologising that had grown around them. His method would be to merge the Catholic tradition of testimony-gathering with the latest techniques of positivist, scientific history.

Manuensis was a scholar, cautious of the laity's miracle tales and keen to distinguish between local superstition and genuine supernatural intervention. Bernadette, in her conviction, simplicity and earnestness, seems to have assuaged such doubts. The scholarly and compendious work Manuensis produced thus now reads with an extraordinary combination of scepticism and faith, positivism and providentialism.

The account – the unpublished manuscripts and notebooks for which are held at the *Archives de la Grotte* in Lourdes – is also a methodological amalgamation. The earlier parts are rigorously descriptive, with carefully transcribed testimonies and little critical analysis. The later notes, however, are increasingly speculative and prognostic. In striving to affirm the divinity of Bernadette's experience, Manuensis seems to have realised its vulnerability; his scattered and often enigmatic later notes propose quasi-scientific correctives to what the priest describes as 'an eschatological crisis of belief'[1], which Bernadette and her story had only served to illuminate.

The Site

Manuensis describes the Pyrenean landscape of Bernadette's vision as one sacralized by both Christian and pre-Christian beliefs; of 'doves, gentle wolves, bouquets placed at the base of menhirs, magical incantations mixed into Latin prayers, trees and fountains that heal'[2].

There is some detail on the apparition site itself. The Grotto of Massabielle (named after the rocky outcrop, or '*masse vielle*' above it) opened onto the Gave de Pau river that ran close by the village of Lourdes. The area around the Grotto had been common land, and thus a place for grazing pigs and scavenging. There were rumours of the cave being haunted. Manuensis describes it as 'uneven, of irregular height with an oval cavity in which a wild rose bush grows'[3], adding approximate dimensions and a reproduction of a photograph taken before the miracles (see fig. (a)).

Bernadette's Experience

Manuensis interviewed Bernadette several times, over a number of years. That her story remained so consistent contributed to his belief in its veracity.

She described how, on the 11th February 1858, she had been out collecting firewood by the river. She had seen a soft light coming from a niche in the Grotto and a beautiful, smiling child in white that seemed to beckon to her. No one else saw or

[1] *Archives Manuensis*, Volume II, p11
[2] *AM*, VI, p5
[3] ibid, p7

heard anything.

She returned the next day, and the next. On the third visit the apparition said to her in the local dialect, 'Boulet aoue ra gracia de bie aci penden quinze dias?' ['Would you have the goodness to come here for fifteen days?'][4].

News of the visions spread along with rumours that it might be the Virgin, although Bernardette never identified it as such. She was interogated by the local gendarmes, who suspected a child's prank. They forbid her to go back to the Grotto lest it cause a public disturbance. She ignored their warnings, and as the gendarmes feared, more and more people came to watch Bernadette in her trance, first women and the poor but later beorgois men: tax collectors, the clergy.

Then the instructions came. On the 24th of February the white girl asked for penitence and prayers for the conversion of sinners. Three days later, by which date 800 people from Lourdes and the surrounding villages had come to watch, the apparition said to her, 'Go and tell the priests to come here on procession and build a chapel'[5]. Bernadette relayed this to the priests, who said that if the girl in white wanted a chapel, she would say who she was and make the wild rose bush in the Grotto blossom (the Virgin had dried the laundry of the infant Jesus on a hawthorn hedge, which had miraculously made it bloom).

Bernadette went back the next day and asked this of the apparition, but nothing happened. Dispirited, three weeks passed before she returned to the Grotto. This time – the last the apparition would appear to Bernadette - the white girl said, 'Que soy era Immaculada Councepciou' ['I am the Immaculate Conception'][6]. A marginal note by Manuensis wonders if the bizarre phrasing might have root in a 'misheard sermon'; another queries its coincidence with the day of the Annunciation. Such queries remain marginalia, however, Manuensis perhaps uncertain as to how to figure them into a credulist's account.

The Oculist Witnesses

Emphasising that the 'poor, illiterate and insignificant'[7] Bernadette was the only one who had *seen* anything at all, Manuensis speculates on what it was the *witnesses* had seen - what were they witness *to*? From the interviews he conducted 20 years after the visions (a year before Bernadette's death of tuberculosis), it is clear that what Bernadette had *said* during the apparitions constituted relatively little of the miraculous effect. It was her manner and body, the *evidence of her appearance*, that was scrutinized by the community of witnesses for a glimpse of the vision at second hand. The unending commentary on her body in ecstacy – 'the nature of her trance, the movement of her hands, the quality of her tears', as Manuensis writes it - was an attempt to articulate what Manuensis acknowledges was 'beyond' language[8].

Some referred to her immobility and translucent pallor, describing her body as 'like a waxy surface, ready to take impressions'. Others saw Bernadette as the mirror of the divine apparition; that her body involuntarily represented what she was seeing.[9]

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[4] ibid, p20 (the translations are my own)
[5] ibid, p22
[6] ibid, p25
[7] *AM*, VII, p40
[8] *AM*, VI, pp96-97
[9] Furthermore, such sacramental mimesis extended to the crowd, which began to copy her movements. Witnesses saw in Bernadette sadness and joy, and in return experienced 'pleasure and fear at the same time' (*AM*, VI, p98). Manuensis had seen this effect before: the divine spreading by mimesis from its ineffable starting point to manifestation by an entire throng. In his writings on the 'gift of tongues' (A. MANUENSIS, *Observationes theologico-exegeticae de dono linguarum*, Basle, 1860 - a typically Manuensisian integration of biblical exegeses and

One woman had seen in her face 'nothing repugnant, nothing grimacing, it was a beautiful sight' and said that she was 'an angel of prayer, reflecting in her face all the raptures of heaven'. Another witness saw that 'she must have started to recite the first decade of the rosary, when her prayer seemed momentarily interupted, giving way to a smile (to which nothing can be compared) that spread over the face of the blessed girl'[10]. Witnesses went so far as to see her *manifesting* what she was experiencing: 'If you had seen her face during the apparition, you would have said, "Here is a true virgin"'[11]. Manuensis points out that, notwithstanding the use of the conditional and the transferal of agency to the interviewer, the sense of 'here' is indeterminate: it can be taken both as refering to Bernadette and to the locale. In the former sense it can be read as: "she must surely be *a* virgin"; in the latter as: "*the* Virgin is here". Taking the latter sense, those who saw Bernadette '*face-to-face'* made sense of her appearance by seeing her vision *in her,* rather than extrapolating the images to which she attested as figments of the Grotto itself.

Manuensis notes the apophatic register of some of the witnesses' comments: there was '*nothing* repugnant … *nothing* grimacing' about her, her smile was something 'to which *nothing* can be compared'. Such negation might be an attempt to preserve the visionary's alterity[12] (i.e., by saying what it is, we make it what we want it to be; by saying what it is not, we let it stand as what it is). But these are exceptions; as Manuensis disparingly (self-incriminatingly?) asks himself, 'who does not want to claim that beatitude for themselves? Who trusts the poor, illiterate juvenile to manifest the divine?'[13]

Cures

It is here, at the outset of the second manuscript, that the Manuensis archives startle. Observations become half-formed questions. A note reads with uncharacteristic irony: 'How can they - we - hope to pull off the old scenic effects, the *coups de theatre*

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taxonomic catalogue of contemporaneous testimonies), he had observed how such charismata seemed to originate not only in the Biblical texts regarding the pentecost story but in others who spoke in tongues during a service. Rather than undermining its veracity, to Manuensis this was in accord with the prosyletising purpose of the gift, as it had been described by St Luke. Manuenis makes a speculative link between glossolalia's interpersonal and intra-utterance repetitions and the repetitions of Hebrew poetry, e.g. Ecclesiastes 3 1 – 8.

Much of '*Observationes...*', like his study of Bernadette's experience, is concerned with the problem of *validation*. He recalls the story of the Corinthians, who, led by an undisciplined religious spirit (*pneuma*) rather than by the understanding (*nous*) of the Spirit of God, produced a potentially blasphemous inarticulate gabble. Although an undisciplined spirit endangered its validity, the gift could not be willed - individuals must wait for the experience to occur rather than produce it themselves. The necessary trance or 'inebriated' state of the speaker could, paradoxically, deny understanding of the experience that necessitated it: 'If I pray in a tongue, my spirit [*pneuma*] prayeth, but my understanding [*nous*] is without fruit'.

He had seen that the interpretation, the very validity of glossolaly required an effort of will, a belief, on behalf of the listeners. To unbelievers glossolalia gave 'the impression of the marvellous'; perhaps it recalled to their minds the ravings of pagan hierophants: 'If . . . all speak with tongues, and there come in unlearned persons or infidels, will they not say that you are mad?'

[10] *AM*, VI, p228

[11] ibid, p229

[12] Here Manuensis predicts Emmanuel Levinas's use of the term, as the image of one's encounter with the other. For Levinas, if I 'make sense' of the other according to my own system of thought or as a means to my own ends, I kill its otherness. Thus in the face-to-face encounter one becomes aware of their radical, transcendent otherness, their alterity. In Levinas's view, this is a trace of God: every face-to-face encounter is potentially a religious experience 'in its refusal to be contained' (*Totality and Infinity*, p194).

[13] *AM*, VII, p23

that were the pride of our former ring masters?'[14] - which seems to be an acknowledgement of both a clerical involvement in the vision's orchestration and of the enlightment rationality that threatened such visions. Two crucial notes propose possible cures:

> '1. Bypass the need for belief by employing the person's involuntary physiognomic response – just as the Spirit quickened the body of the Church - no will would be needed to see a miniature figure, repeating itself, flickering marvellously in a wheel
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> 2. Activate the residual [illegible] in unlearned persons or infidels by triangulating a point at which something is *more than what it is*; the point could be found at the intersection of lines from each corner of a [illegible] room: '*here* is a true Virgin'.'[15]

Manuensis was clearly acquainted with the 'phantasmagoric' machines such as the zoetrope, to which he seems to be refering in the first note, that were entrancing the metropolitans in the 1850s (but which would have been unknown to rural peasants like Bernadette). He was aware that to see such 'visions' demanded no conviction, let alone piety[16]. The second note stands as a realisation that after the Grotto, *any* space, consecrated or not, man-made or not, could be *sacramental*: a place where, if it was contrived so, a glass of water could *be* a tree as much as wine could *be* blood.

The notes propose a solution to, and at the same time an extention of, the irrational ecstatic world which, for many French historians, was a world that should have been killed off by the Revolution (that it had not died is evidenced by a photograph of the Grotto taken well into the 20th century (fig 2)). Manuensis's sketched proposals seem, in apparent resignation, to admit a secular-scientific course of treatment, a conduit for belief *per se*. Attention to Bernadette's *witnesses*, however, indicates a conviction that it is in the *face of an other* – not in optics or architecture - that redemptive vision lies; a possibility revealed to the pious Jesuit of horizontal, rather than vertical, communion.

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[14] ibid, p25

[15] ibid, pp26-27

[16] One proximate addendum refers to a scholar who 'taught in the private Humanistic school of the former Jesuit Franz van den Enden' and 'became a very skillful grinder of lenses' for telescopes and microscopes. Manuensis seems to make a causal link between the scholar's 'denial of the immortality of the soul' and 'rejection of the notion of a providential God' with his interest in optics and mathematical physics. It is hard to gauge the tone of the note that the scholar died at an early age of respiratory problems induced by the glass dust. There is even what looks like verse: 'undisturbed by fame', that 'reflection / of dreams in the dream of another / mirror', the solitary scholar 'polish[es] the lenses time and again' (*AM*, VII, p25a).