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Jean-Joseph Surin, *Into the Dark Night and Back: The Mystical Writings of Jean-Joseph Surin*, ed. Moshe Sluhovsky, trans. Patricia M. Ranum. Jesuit Studies 19. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019. viii, 550 pp. Bibliography and index. €175.00 EUR / \$210.00 USD (hardback). ISBN 9789004387652.

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Occasionally, this volume brought to mind an old 2003 episode of the irreverent animated show Southpark. In “Christian Rock Hard,” Cartman set up a Christian rockband by “tak[ing] regular old songs and add[ing] Jesus stuff to them.” This led to such such wonderful lyrics as “I want to walk hand-in-hand with Jesus on a private beach for two/I want him to nibble on my ear and say: ‘I’m here for you.’” The seventeenth-century mystic Jean-Joseph Surin was never quite that lyrical. There was no nibbling, but there was penetration in bed “as a sponge would be, by a liquor that came down from heaven” (p. 280). Surin had “savored and smelled” and even “tasted” God (p. 243). And, of course, Christ did talk to Surin, though sometimes rather terribly (p. 190), and Surin used “the tender names that only the crazy wife can say” in return (p. 251).

The Southpark comparison may appear facetious or disrespectful. It is meant to be. It seems important at the outset of this review to raise the question of how Jean-Joseph Surin’s struggle to recount his mystical experiences *should* be read. What posture should the twenty-first-century academic take when engaging with these brilliantly translated yet still wordy and opaque writings? How much sympathy or empathy should one extend to the French mystic? Those questions are worth raising because, while the Society of Jesus may have been adorned with many bigger-than-life eccentrics—men such as Jean Hardouin, who believed most of classical antiquity had been forged by medieval monks, and Jerónimo Román de la Higuera, who did a lot of the forging—none is stranger than Jean-Joseph Surin (1600-1665), the Jesuit who attempted to build the foundations of Christianity on the testimony of demons. “Even theology ... admits that it has no more powerful and ordinary argument than ... the argument about demonic possession” (p. 289; also p. 134). A claim as bold as this one can only emerge from personal experiences that many of his contemporaries, including his fellow Jesuits, struggled to sympathize with, let alone give much credence. Surin’s experiential worldview was Cartesian, if the evil demon had been real.

Although early letters included in this collection already hint at Surin’s mystical inclinations, the key events that shaped his life and reshaped his soul into an apparent battlefield between the demonic and divine were the dramatic mass possessions at the Ursuline convent of Loudun in the 1630s. Surin played a seminal role in the dispossession of the young abbess Jeanne des

Anges. Although tormented by four demons as well as sexually explicit visions, she would later become a mystic in her own right. While Surin was thus apparently successful, the experience left the exorcist himself possessed. “Paternal love” (p. 44) had prompted him to beg God to take over Jeanne’s burden. The butt of many a joke and frequently suicidal, Surin would spend eighteen years in a state of almost complete mutism. Then, having attained grace, he started to speak and write incessantly, in sentences that never seemed to end. Most of what Patricia M. Ranum has so helpfully assembled here stems from that period when the floodgates opened.

It is not just the strangeness of Surin’s life, writings, and alleged experiences, however, that poses a difficulty for modern readers, but also the subject matter itself. There have been growing calls, notably by the American historian Robert Orsi, for scholars to write histories with God or gods left *in*, histories that take the agency of the divine seriously.[1] The demonic has long posed a different yet related methodological problem, because where demonic possession is concerned, their apparent agency can hardly be overlooked. Caught between the Scylla of dismissing or judging their subjects of study (mental illness, anyone?) and the Charybdis of accepting demonic agency, they have presented possession as the performance of confessional scripts. Moshe Sluhovsky, who authored the introduction to Ranum’s impressive feat of translation and whose treatment of the phenomenon has been among the most sophisticated, ably situates Surin’s experiences within the wider crisis of Catholic mysticism.[2] Surin faced the difficulty not only of describing the ineffable, but also the growing suspicion of female or (seemingly) feminine spirituality. And yet, having read Surin’s writings, not only with sympathy but also at times from a Southparkian distance, I wondered whether, in addition to the Foucauldian approach advocated by Sluhovsky, older ones—namely *charlatanerie* and psychology—remain feasible. I was also left rather uncomfortable with the sympathy with which Sluhovsky showers Surin (‘it seems that Surin’s mind never ceased to converse with God’ (p. 15)), lest we forget that the entire episode also involved the execution of Urbain Grandier, the priest alleged to have been responsible for the nuns’ possession. The Capuchins who preceded the Jesuits had exorcised the firewood—to make sure that it would burn—and lit the flames. Surin later recounted with relish not only the priest’s execution but also the demons’ rejoicing that they were able to drag his soul down to hell (p. 35).

Ranum’s selection and organization of Surin’s texts is impressive. It imposes a mostly chronological coherence on the volume that also brings out a certain repetitiveness in Surin’s thinking that is worth exploring. The first treatise, *The Triumph of Divine Love over the Powers of Hell*, recounts the dispossession of the nuns of Loudun, and in particular Surin’s lodestar, Jeanne des Anges. The title of the tract already brings out the strong dualism that runs throughout his writings. The second treatise, *The Experimental Science of the Things of the Other Life*, recounts Surin’s time as a mute fallen from grace. Again, his own insistence on the superiority of his experiences is striking. (It is not surprising that earlier French versions labelled this an autobiography. After all, Jeanne also wrote one, as did St Teresa, their shared source of inspiration.) This is followed by Surin’s Spiritual Poems. Ranum makes a persuasive case that these poems should be read together as a single epic, yet I was not able to get much out of them, perhaps because without the spirit the letter is dead. A fascinating selection of Surin’s letters, originally edited by the great Michel de Certeau himself, concludes the volume.

None of the works included here appeared in Surin’s own lifetime, though some other, more orthodox ones did. Surin was often writing just for himself (see, for example, on p. 286), not only to give voice to his experiences but also to justify himself. He was well aware of what

people thought of him. They told it to his face when he could not respond. The *Experimental Science* in particular feels at times vindictive, especially when Surin makes a great show of his “delicious” (p. 267) obedience to his superiors, even though their orders “destroyed his soul” (p. 271). In the end, God proved them wrong and one command was revealed to be inspired by the devil. Surin was also “bored” by the exorcisms of others (p. 105), in order to vindicate his own unusual method of demon-whispering. The only person whose opinion mattered and who seems fully to escape censure is Jeanne des Anges. (He even once described her soul as tied to his. (p. 72)) Yet, even she troubled him by believing that his graces from God might have been demonic. Everything traces back to her, and to Surin’s decision to seek to dispossess her using a “new” technique, which involved speaking to her and her demons softly with sweet discourses, rather than forceful exorcisms. Surin took seriously the claim by one of Jeanne’s demons that he was “being forced to make a saint of her, and to serve God’s plans for men’s salvation” (p. 85), and late in life, when she had established herself as a mystic, he would bombard her with letters, often apparently unanswered (e.g. 491, 522), which offered spiritual advice but also beseeched her “good angel” (a very handsome eighteen-year-old) for advice. Surin was under a spell. The “vivacity” of Jeanne’s eyes during her possession was one of his “indubitable” proofs of the devil’s power (p. 156).

It is unfortunate, then, that Jeanne, at times, does come across as a charlatan, even in the very words Surin wrote, in essence, in their shared defence. If we approach the texts combined here with an open mind, we must take note of those instances—not exclusively, nor at the expense of other approaches, and certainly not in a “gotcha” manner—but as part of one possible reading of events. Surin took seriously Jeanne’s warning that he “would have trouble from something [he] least expected,” advice that is frankly unworthy of a fortune cookie (p. 471). Surin’s claims that the demons could obey even his voiceless commands seem rather undermined given that some of these orders he only “remembered” when the devils had to explain them, “having forgotten about it” (p. 49). The insistence of Jeanne’s last demons that they would only depart at two particularly public altars, including the grave of Francis de Sales, seems a desperate attempt to stage a final show. When superiors objected, the abbess reported that, upon further reflection, her demons decided that they could leave without the spectacle. (Let us pass over the alleged miracles evinced by her body, including the holy names that miraculously appeared on Jeanne’s hand with great regularity. One sceptical visitor in 1645, Balthasar de Monconys, took the nun unawares and managed to rub off part of the M of Mary’s miraculous name, suggesting it had been a human pen rather than a divine one that crafted those letters.[3])

These same texts also furnish some fascinating material for studies of Surin’s psyche. His claims of having two souls recur throughout the volume and provide fodder for psychoanalysis. It is almost amusing to read that the devils for several months “imprinted” on Surin the heresy of Manichaeism (p. 180), as the whole book strongly evinces a continuous struggle between good and evil. Surin needs the evil and the havoc demons caused as camouflage for and proof of the divine graces he was also experiencing. This dualism continues even after the supposed and supposedly divinely inspired turning point in his condition, and one wonders whether, despite his protestations, it ever went away. Surin even attempted one more suicide (on St Teresa’s feast day) but was no longer agile enough to get himself onto the windowsill to make the jump (p. 479). Particularly striking in the emotional dynamic between the abbess and her exorcist, from which all this stemmed, is her devil’s boast, reported by Surin in a contemporary letter, “that he is my master, which I have nothing to contradict” (p. 461) and the prediction that “I

will cause you to become stupid.” (p. 462). And of course, Surin did become stupid, and he would encourage his female correspondents, late in life, “to become a bit stupid” as well (p. 481).

There are other approaches, then, in addition to that outlined by Sluhovsky in his introduction, that scholars might want to take to this text in their efforts to understand Loudun and its aftermath. In fact, they may want to keep all of those on the table at the same time, as “scripts” alone certainly will not do the trick. Michel de Certeau’s sophisticated reading of Jeanne des Anges as “aspir[ing] to become authentic” kept these different modes of historical argument in productive tension with each other.[4] Re-reading that now fifty-year-old study for this review, I remained in awe at how fresh and persuasive Certeau’s reconstruction of this psychodrama still feels. Yet, it is by no means the final word. Patricia Ranum has done scholars of early modern religion a considerable service by assembling Surin’s writings and rendering them in clearer prose than their author likely intended or deserved. Still, the textual apparatus could have been more expansive. References to, say, the *Ritual* (*Rituale Romanum*, p. 40) and the Star of the Sea (the Virgin Mary, p. 54) could have been explicated. At key junctions, it would also have been helpful to contrast Surin’s account with those of others, including Jeanne des Anges herself. Walter Montague’s visit to Loudun (on p. 138) is also described, for instance, by one of his travel companions, Thomas Killigrew (who, despite initial scepticism, was fully persuaded by Jeanne’s performance).[5] Such cross-references would have helped guide further research, yet this volume still points the way. It is a remarkable achievement which deserves a place on many graduate and even undergraduate reading lists. There is a lot of reading still to do.

NOTES

[1] Robert A. Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

[2] Moshe Sluhovsky, *Believe Not Every Spirit: Possession, Mysticism, and Discernment in Early Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). For Foucault’s influence on Sluhovsky, see also the latter’s *Becoming a New Self: Practices of Belief in Early Modern Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

[3] *Journal des voyages de Monsieur de Monconys* (Lyon: Horace Boissat and George Remeus, 1665), part I, 8.

[4] Michel de Certeau, *The Possession at Loudun*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000 [original ed. 1970]), 226.

[5] J. Lough and D.E.L. Crane, eds, “Thomas Killigrew and the Possessed Nuns of Loudun: The Text of a Letter of 1635,” *Durham University Journal*, vol. 78, no. 2, (1986): 259–68.

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