

Hearing Voices, Making Noise: Listening to Angela of Foligno's *Memorial*

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This essay thinks through questions of text and voice within the *Memorial* of Angela of Foligno. As a work that was dictated, transcribed, and translated simultaneously, the *Memorial* offers multiple openings onto the continuing presence of vocality in a written work. I want to consider the concept of voice and how it can be particularly useful for examining the *Memorial* as a polyphonic text, and also as a particular method for tracing the negotiations of language, gender, and power that coalesce in and around the narrative. Beginning with an explication of the context, the analysis will then delve into the inscription of the voice in the piece's multilayered production and the role of sound in transgressing gendered power structures.

In thirteenth century Italy, the emergence of mendicant orders like the Franciscans and Dominicans marked a larger shift in popular religious activity. There was an upsurge of groups that operated in the gap between secular and religious life. This produced a renegotiation of church authority that sought to both regulate and utilize these new forms of devotion. Women occupied a crucial role in the development of these movements that allowed them to “preach or practice their vocation outside convents” (Cedillo 68). Known as Tertiaries in Southern Europe, members of this Third Order were “neither strictly religious nor altogether secular”: usually living at home but performing daily prayers, fasting, and service to the poor (Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno*, 6-7). Attempting to channel this suspiciously unmediated and female faith, religious authorities began to translate hagiographies into vernacular, emphasizing “dedication to the sacraments and respect for the clergy who administered them” (Cedillo 68). Despite this, the moving boundary between

blasphemy and orthodoxy was often challenged by new voices searching for words to express their direct experiences of the divine.

Angela of Foligno was born in Umbria, a region in central Italy, in the mid-thirteenth century. Likely well off, she was married and living with her family when she experienced a conversion in 1285. By 1291, her family had died, and she sold her possessions, maintaining her house and a female servant referenced as M. in the text. She joined The Third Order of St. Francis and during a pilgrimage to nearby Assisi experienced the voice of the Holy Spirit. While in the basilica of St. Francis, the voice left her and she cried out over and over again, attracting the attention of Brother A., a relative and Franciscan friar. At first forbidding her from returning to Assisi, he later decided to speak with Angela to determine the authenticity and source of her experience—whether it was demonic or holy. Upon hearing more of Angela’s narrative, Brother A. became her scribe, producing a record of her voice and attesting to her sanctity despite reproaches from some of his fellow friars. This text, the *Memorial*, was dictated by Angela in vernacular and translated into Latin by Brother A. It is an “autobiography-diary” as Cristina Mazzone describes it, recounting Angela’s experiences from conversion through multiple *passi*, or steps of a spiritual journey (*Angela of Foligno* 3). Angela and Brother A. continued to meet, effectively diarizing the subsequent steps in the present as her experience developed. In 1296 it was approved by Cardinal Giacomo Colonna and eventually formed the first part of the *Liber beatae Angelae* whose second part, the *Instructiones*, is thought to be the work of various authors whose relationship to Angela is difficult to assess (Stróżyński 162).

Angela died in 1309, and her *Liber* was circulated, translated, and manipulated over time. There are twenty-seven surviving manuscripts offering a complex lineage of reproduction.¹ At the

¹ For an in depth analysis of the manuscripts and their paleography, see Stróżyński, “The Chronology” and Menestò, *Memoriale*, Section II “*La tradizione manoscritta*.”

end of her life, Angela became a spiritual mother to “a circle of Franciscans to whom the *Liber* refers to as her ‘sons’ and who played a crucial role in the creating of it” (Stróżyński 159). Angela was educated, could probably read, and though unable to write, clearly expressed herself while drawing on a range of circulating spiritual concepts including negative theology and Franciscan devotional practices. She engaged in dialogue about Latin words—their sound and meaning—based on Brother A.’s references to his consistent rereading of his translation back to her.² So how can we conceptualize Angela’s voice and its relation to the text? What does this mean for our presumed notions of the role of author and translator, and the role of listening in textual production?

Hearing Voices

Angela of Foligno’s voice reaches us through many filters, or sieves, as Brother A., her initial translator would say: “I knew that I was like a sieve or sifter which keeps the very large grains but not the fine and precious ones” (Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno* 38). This dynamic will be investigated, both at the level of translation, but also transcription from the medium of voice to text. As will be seen, there are parallels between the two. In the case of the *Memorial*, the spoken vernacular is translated into written Latin. There is an assumed hierarchy between Latin and vernacular, yet at many points this relationship is upset.

I was not able to grasp her divine words, except in a superficial way . . . One time when I was rereading to her, so that she could check whether I had written well, her response was that my words were “dry and without any flavor.” (38)

Here, the primacy of the vernacular over Latin to narrate the “precious experience” of the soul is asserted (39). It is also of particular note that Angela describes his transcription as “dry and without any flavor” since one of her most repeated descriptions of divine experience is through the word

² “Then after I reread this she said, ‘But truly this was said more pleasantly than what you now are saying; I barely recognize what you are saying’” (Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno* 72).

“sweetness”.³ In this reversal, Angela’s spoken vernacular becomes the true language of God, the Latin transcription lacking this sensual connection. Despite its shortcomings however, Latin still functions as the language of power and church authority, as Angela was surely aware. We can both read her admonishing to Brother A. as a strategic display of control over her voice, and as a form of defense against possible accusations of blasphemy; her words have been altered. What this also creates is a reversal of their initial roles as penitent and confessor (Cervigni 343). While Brother A. initially believes “some evil spirit might be behind all this,” he quickly determines that she possesses “divine secrets” (Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno* 38). In fact, it is he who notes, “sometimes before our meeting, I would make a confession of my sins” (39).

The renegotiation of power presented in the *Memorial* is intimately tied to language. As Michel de Certeau writes in his work on sixteenth century Christian mysticism, bilingualism “modified the very use of language...[and] shattered an identity” (*The Mystic Fable* 116). The presence in both Angela and Brother A. of multiple languages allows the dialogue to occur and also shapes the account itself. By undertaking the simultaneous project of transcription and translation, Brother A. and Angela undergo a shift in gendered power roles that results in the explicit primacy of voice and the vernacular despite their absence from the text. Even this absence, however, is not complete. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper, the *Memorial* is “often grammatically and syntactically incorrect and open to many vernacular intrusions” (Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno* 10). Brother A. preserves Angela’s vernacular expressions when he cannot “come up with an adequate Latin equivalent” (Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria* 179). The vocal vernacular continues to echo in the text. From this we can see the uniqueness of the collaborative project. It is neither an accurate recording of Angela’s voice, nor an exacting, Latin hagiography.

³ A sweetness not always limited to taste, but distinctly sensory. See Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno* 30, 41, 44, 53, 55.

The issue of transcription must also contend with the delicate balance between blasphemy and orthodoxy, and the lives of later manuscripts. Subsequent reproductions and redactions of the *Memorial* were by no means identical to earlier versions. In a shorter redaction disseminated in Northern Europe, the scribes edited out the “more controversial passages...making it more of a moral-ascetical than a mystical text” (Stróżyński 164). The reasoning was clearly that it did not line up with the orthodoxy of the specific Church authorities in that later time and place. Despite the initial approval of a Cardinal, the legacy of the *Memorial* was by no means guaranteed to remain unchallenged.

Even during the writing of the original version, the question of ecclesial approval provides a remarkable subtext. While Brother A. is careful to both humbly acknowledge his defects and defend the work as truth, he seems to have encountered resistance within his own community. He writes that it was sometimes particularly difficult to record Angela’s experiences, as “the other brothers were gossiping because I was writing while sitting next to her in church.” Due to their “gossiping”, Brother A. is “troubled and anxious...omitting much that I knew was worth writing, due to my haste” (Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno* 39). The other brothers’ external actions shape the content and structure of the autobiography by their disapproval. Despite this struggle within his own community over what is orthodox and what is blasphemous, Brother A. continues to write and invest his time in Angela’s account. He encounters even more resistance when the brothers gossip, “so much that my guardian strictly forbade me to write, and the minister even reprimanded me. But they did not know what I was writing – and how good it was” (39). The subversive nature of the *Memorial* is brought into sharp relief, despite its later acceptance as holy. These passages serve to emphasize the shifting nature of orthodoxy in thirteenth century Italy, and the movement that collaborative, bilingual texts inserted into categories of approval.

The awareness and tension between truth and blasphemy is also evident in Angela's words themselves. One could read this again as a strategy to protect against accusations of heresy, but it also serves as the rhetorical device that leads to her continually closer contact with God.

And so when I return from seeing God's secrets, it is with confidence and detachment that I speak words about them; but these words are external to those ineffable divine powers which are produced in my soul, and come nowhere near to describing them. My speaking about them damages them; that is why I say that I blaspheme. (75)

The blasphemy that Angela speaks of here is less concerned with ecclesial approval and more with her own process and experience. It at once protects her words from being considered direct descriptions of divinity, while also enhancing the aura of ineffability so important to her later understanding of God.⁴ Because her language moves beyond "commonly accepted parameters of piety and devotion", the marking of language as "blasphemy" becomes a way of maintaining authority and power (Mazzoni, *The Voices*, 234). While Brother A. is faithfully present for her narrative, Angela crucially withholds the fullness of her experience, which cannot be spoken. In parallel to the relation of linguistic authority between Angela and Brother A., the communication between God and Angela is inherently incomplete in its translation into words.

The process of writing described and traced in the *Memorial* displays many effects of the different communities involved in shaping the narrative. It takes into account the local community of brothers as well as a larger religious community that participated in both Angela's choices and later editing of the text. In the next section, beginning from a close reading of the uses and instances of voice within the text, I will show the importance of the voice and sound in general within Angela's narrative.

Making Noise

⁴ For a detailed analysis of the role of "blasphemy" in the *Memoriale*, see Mazzoni, *Saint Hysteria* 182-183.

While one can think about voice and text as separate opposing mediums, it is perhaps more useful to think about their mutual construction and interdependence. In this vein, the *Memorial*, as a product of multiple circuits of dialogue, textual and vocal, is particularly interesting and appropriate to discuss. I am inspired by the thinking of Adriana Cavarero who articulates this aim: “to feel how the principle of sound organizes the text and, at the same time, disorganizes language’s claim to control the entire process of signification” (132). Departing from this challenge to attend to sound, I would like to analyze a crucial episode in Angela’s autobiography: her waking experience of a divine voice during her trip to the Church of St. Francis in Assisi. The *First Supplementary Step* describes the events that lead to Brother A. becoming Angela’s scribe, and Angela’s subsequent narration and development as a mystic.

While the initial part of the *Memorial* contains increasingly heightened experiences of the divine, it is for the most part lacking in divine voices. Yet voices become crucial to Angela’s experience of God during her ongoing narrative in the supplementary steps. It is on the way to Assisi that Angela hears, for the first time, the voice of the Holy Spirit. She has been consistently praying to St. Francis to “ask God that she might experience Christ . . . that God would let her be truly poor and remain poor for the rest of her life” (Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno* 40). That this journey is full of prayers is meaningful since prayer, as a form of inner speech that voices desire, is always necessarily expectant of a reply. The inner voice of prayer is ultimately a dialogue with the divine, though it is often assumed to be one sided. Yet during this journey, Angela hears a voice in response.

And when she came to a crossroads between Spello and the ascent to Assisi, there, at the intersection of three roads the following words were said to her, “You petitioned my servant Francis, but I did not want to send any messenger. I am the Holy Spirit; I have come to give you a consolation, which you have never tasted before.” (40)

The voice responds that “He” has decided to not send a messenger, but to speak directly to Angela. The placement and image of the crossroads, the intersection of three roads in fact, imbues the scene with the power of the Trinity. And yet it is not a vision that visits Angela, as was typical of mystics at the time, it is a voice.⁵

The voice continues, “I will come with you, inside you, all the way to the Church of Saint Francis; no one else will notice” (40). Here, the interiority of the listening experience is brought to the foreground. The voice speaks to Angela alone. This raises questions of the efficacy of thinking about the voice as only material sound. It is an inner voice, equivalent to the directed, silent voice of prayer. The Holy Spirit also tells her, “I want to speak with you continuously on this journey, and you will not be able to do anything but listen” (40). The voice then tells her how much He loves her, calling her “daughter” and “sweet bride”. While emphasizing that Angela is a passive listener, she in fact does ‘speak back’ after the flattery makes her doubt the voice’s true source. Angela’s “soul said to Him, ‘If you were truly the Holy Spirit, you wouldn’t say such things” (41). But she cannot escape His words and she feels an “ineffable divine sweetness” (41). Interestingly, it is through both this “sweetness” and a dramatic reversal where all her “sins and vices were brought back to [her] memory” (41), that Angela determines to partially trust the voice. Without these parallel feelings of intense joy and shame, the voice’s source is dangerously ambiguous. This highlights an important point that, for Angela, voices are always accompanied by affect. A voice that does not provoke other sensations, memories, or feelings is distrusted.

The voice that Angela experiences, “transcends the spatial arrangement that opposes top and bottom...reach[ing] across barriers” (Certeau, *The Mystic Fable* 34). As such, it makes sense for Angela to doubt that the voice is telling the truth; that it belongs to who it says it is. At the

⁵ See Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno* 40, nt. 38.

same time, it is this ‘crossing’ of the voice that “authorizes in advance the transgression” that will occur in the Church of St. Francis (34). In the context of the *Memorial*, this divine dialogue with the Holy Spirit initiates Angela’s contact with Brother A., prompting the collaboration to begin and legitimizing Angela’s further experiences. It is noteworthy that the instances of divine voices slowly fall away during Angela’s progressive interactions with God. The last step of the *Memorial* is a strikingly expressive transcription of Angela’s own voice and her understanding of the divine.

To return to Angela’s dialogue with the Holy Spirit, the voice accompanies her all the way to the Church of St. Francis, where she enters and sees a stained-glass window of “St. Francis depicted in the arms of Christ” (Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno* 43). The Holy Spirit tells her, “I will hold you this closely, even closer than the eyes of the body can see” (43). Here, one can see the overlap of meditative visual practices and the voice promising a closeness beyond the realm of the visible, and even beyond the proximity of St. Francis with Christ. In response, Angela looks, “so as to see Him with the eyes of my body and of my mind” (43). Her technique is specifically hybrid, despite what the Holy Spirit has said, pointing to Angela’s insistent practices that overcome the division between mind and body.⁶ Here the scribe interrupts the narrative to ask Angela what she saw, and she replies, “I saw something complete, an immense majesty, which I don’t know how to put into words, but it seemed to me to be the All Good” (43). This is remarkable because it reflects much of her later, more elaborate attempts to describe the experience of God as the “All-Good”. Yet it is so brief we must question whether this was due to the act of writing, which Brother A. describes as difficult due to a number of factors, or because of the relative newness to the process that both he and Angela began at this time.

⁶ See Mazzoni, *Angela of Foligno*, “Interpretive Essay” 90.

When the voice of the Holy Spirit leaves her in the church, as He had promised to do, Angela's demeanor abruptly shifts and interior experience becomes exterior experience.

Then after that departure I began to screech and cry out in a loud voice; shamelessly I kept screeching and shouting, 'Love unknown, why do you leave me?' And I could not say anything else. I kept shouting without shame, 'Love unknown, why, why, why?!' However, these words were covered by my screams and were not expressed intelligibly. (43)

This cry, incoherent to those present, is nevertheless full of meaning and importance to Angela's narrative. She herself maintains the words she shouts despite their being "covered" by screams to the point of unintelligibility. The transgression of sound and space, especially in the interior of a church (we can imagine the reverberations), prompts Brother A. to forbid her from ever returning, and yet it also provokes his interest. What do we make of this turning point in Angela's life, this brief burst of noise? Despite the fact that she had already experienced a conversion and undergone ascetic and devotional practices for the past six years, her cry in the Church of St. Francis marks her transition from private devotion to a public voice that is heard by a larger community. The very unintelligibility makes the cry disturbing and alluring at the same time.

If we agree that this moment of unknown sound is crucial; that the shameless cry is the precondition for the *Memorial*, where does this lead us? It is certainly an astonishing leap of faith, whether or not we believe that Angela "could not say anything else." The dramatic, public display of screeching makes her both vulnerable and powerful. The cry is not devoid of meaning, but rather exceeds and precedes it. Cavarero borrows from Julia Kristeva's concept of the "semiotic *chora*" to explain how the "vocalic practice of the semiotic...ends up being indispensable to the phonematic system of language" (133). Phonematic here refers to the process by which variable sounds are reduced to ones specifically used for language. The cry, as a unreduced sound outside language, exists in this "semiotic *chora*". In her narration however, Angela can have it both ways. She is able to reveal the meaning of her cry; the hidden, "covered" truth. Her cry is a question; it

is “words that become sounds again” (Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* 163). As a vocal manifestation outside the system of language, Angela’s screams open up a space for her voice to begin to speak.

Angela’s cry is a moment of beginning, a potential energy, altering the boundaries of expressivity. I believe the *Memorial* pushes us to think about how we narrate and conceptualize the relationship between voice and negotiations of language, gender, and power. Because Angela’s and all mystic practices concern what De Certeau calls “the possibility of hearing and of making oneself heard” (Certeau, *The Mystic Fable* 12), Angela’s voice continues to be affecting, echoing questions we have not yet resolved. What is the role of the voice within and around language? What is the relation of our thoughts to our voice and our voice to a text? Can we think and write without hearing voices, and is it ever only our own voice we hear? How do we express the inexpressible or create spaces for it to become a possibility? The *Memorial* grapples with all these questions, offering the voice as an instrument for disruption and transgression that we can still hear today.

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