

Guillermina Willet

Wandering Knight of Love

The Travels of Saint Teresa of Avila

One day I heard some lines of poetry written by a woman. I immediately perceived a strong personality, with a passionate and dreaming nature. Miguel de Unamuno called her "the wandering knight of love", comparing her to Don Quixote, since Teresa, as this incredible woman was called, rejected rationalism because to love God was sufficient knowledge. A religious man of her era called her "the restless female", and quite rightly, since Teresa was a woman of action, which she demonstrated by participating in the Catholic Reformation with her tireless work changing the Spanish Carmelite Order.

These acknowledgements increased my interest in Teresa, and my desire to try to adapt her poetry for theatre. The lines had resonated deeply in me; conflicts and dialogue revealed themselves in the form of visions. I decided to create a poetic-musical recital with this material: at times mute, at times chattering emotionally and other times speaking with great simplicity of God in the way her poetry dictated. I would pass through all the states of mystical love: search, union, separation and death as rites of passage to eternity. Finally I ended up playing in the company of a string trio that interpreted music by Corelli, Bach and Escobar.

The process had taken me towards a baroque expression, where everything appeared as an intense dream of richly dressed people speaking all possible languages: with allegories, symbols, choirs and sounds. Within this universe I was especially interested in the relationship between woman, dream and theatre in epic and lyrical contexts. Teresa was the heroine, the theatre was the world in which she lived, and dream was the language she used to express herself which she also knew how to make concrete by travelling in different ways. As a child and adolescent she read novels about the lives of saints and knights, and she planned the frustrated journey to the country of the Moors with her brother. As a young person she ran away from her father's home choosing instead a religious life. As an experienced

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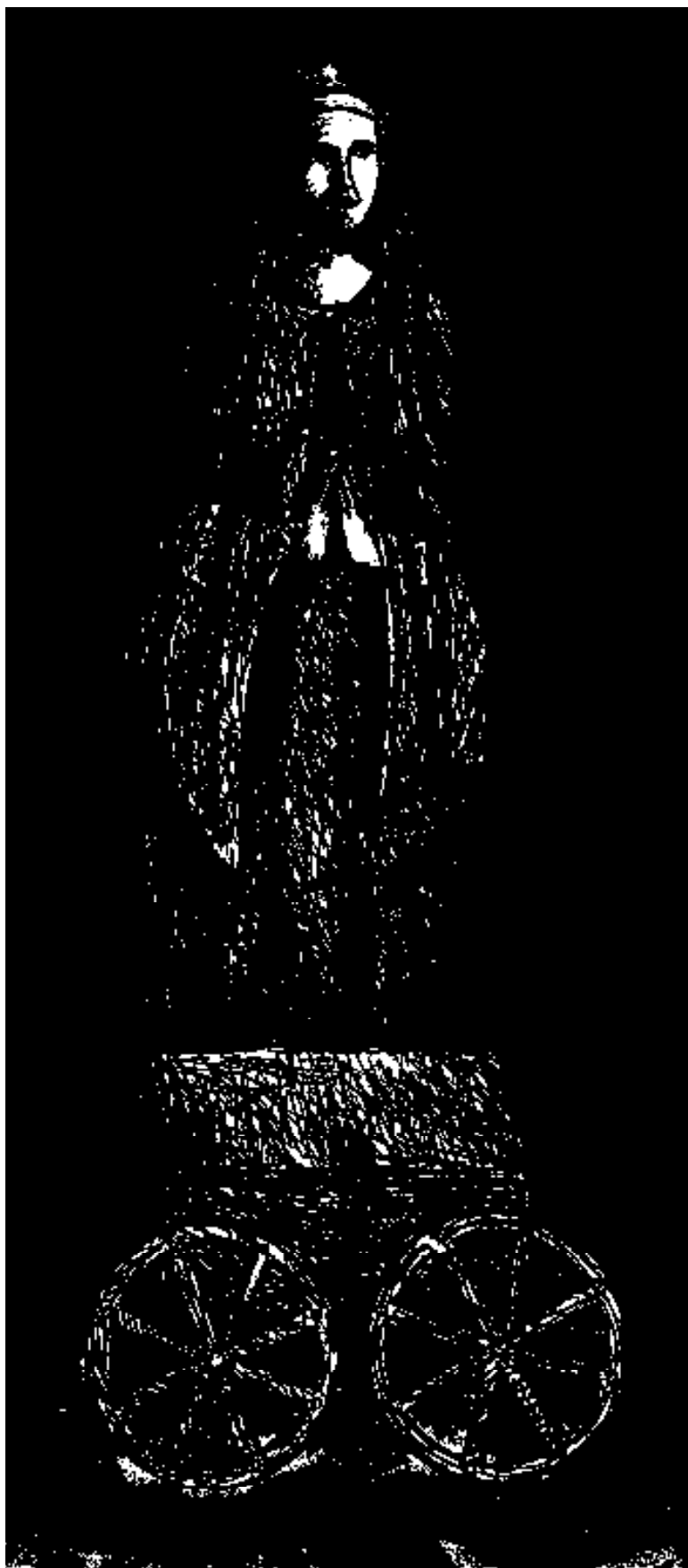
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Writing about the significance of the word travel in Teresa of Avila's life and works, Nigg Walter (1985, p. 68) says:

They are signs of a Christian life. Journeys as adventures happen also within the human being who overcomes the many difficulties of life only when armed with the faith and courage that Saint Teresa of Avila had. In fact The Book of Life and The Foundations show an itinerary of experiences, an intimate diary and at the same time a travel book of a woman who knew how to combine inner contemplation with social action moving within intimate sacred and profane areas with the same ease.

Of the ecstatic journeys perhaps the best known are those experienced by Teresa in everyday situations: she could enter into ecstasy by listening to a song, as happened in the convent of Salamanca, in the church or the kitchen. These experiences of union with God were not describable on a rational level and could only be narrated in sensual terms that fluctuate between pleasure and pain, travelling beyond oneself.

Death was a persistent theme in her literary work, reflecting a world that she conceived as an existence devoured by time, as life being devoured by death. Death is sought for and remembered in her poetry, a symbol present in her cutlery and the objects on her desk. The strong theatricality of Teresa's work emerged in the theatre of images that so amazed me in *The Book of Life* and her lyrics. At the same time a vision of existence and a struggle of opposite forces revealed that infinite obstacles and conflicts infringe on the human



Saint Teresa of Avila

condition, on sensuality, making communication with God more difficult. Her vision detached itself from rationality and even from the Christian conception of the female sex and her natural inclination towards sin.

Following these indications, as a dramaturg and virtual director, I find myself giving form to the allegories, the music and the rituals that Teresa reveals in the three ages of *The Book of Life* and *The Foundations*. These three moments allow me to look at a great heroic poem, at the dialogue of a heroine with God, during which the author narrates, learns and perfects herself in the art of travel. It is clear to me that my heroine will travel in a carriage that can function as an inner space, body or cell, as is convenient for an itinerant theatre. When all resources to overcome the inner and exterior obstacles have run out, she will also use humour as a form of dramatic action. I am also studying elements of religious and profane baroque theatre that may give me scenic suggestions. Some allegorical characters such as the Soul, San José, a Dove, Pegasus, a Cherub, Patience and others that are distant in real time, are already dialoguing with Teresa. All of them will talk of the conflict in the life of a woman who loved God in spite of her condition, and of the most incredible obstacles she had to overcome.

Translated from Brazilian by Julia Varley

Teresa de Avila, *Obras Completas* (Complete Works), Madrid, Universidad de Salamanca, 1962

Teresa de Avila, *Obras completas*, Brazil, Edições do Carmelo, 2000

Gan, *El lugar en el espacio*, Caracas, 1999

Anatole Rosenfeld, *O teatro épico*, São Paulo, Editora Perspectiva, 1997

Walter Nigg, *Teresa de Avila*, São Paulo, Edições Loyola, 1985

GUILLERMINA WILLET (Brazil) is an actor, director and producer whose main interests are dramaturgy and directing. She studied theatre in Venezuela and is now doing her Master's degree in Salvador, Bahia. She has collaborated with the journal *Theatron* and performed in various productions with the company Circo Damore.