

## TRANSLATIONS OF THE ECSTASY OF ST. TERESA OF AVILA

This paper explores the issues raised by subsequent translations<sup>1</sup> of Teresa of Avila's mystical experience commonly known as the ecstasy or transverberation<sup>2</sup> and discusses the interpretations of Teresa's account of her transverberation through the eyes of the Roman Baroque<sup>3</sup> sculptor Gianlorenzo Bernini(1598-1680), the French modern structuralist<sup>4</sup> psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan(1901-1981), and the contemporary French/American artist Louise Bourgeois(1911- 2010 ).

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<sup>1</sup>In the article *Ecstatic Aesthetics*, Mieke Bal discusses the meaning of translation; "Translation: *traducere*. To conduct through, pass beyond, to the other side of a division or difference." Therefore translation should be viewed as liberation, transformation, and renewal, as a supplementation that produces the original rather than being subservient to it."(Farago,2003,6)

<sup>2</sup> Transverberation is a term generally taken to mean 'to strike or pierce through'. The word is not found in the Oxford English Dictionary and is used primarily in conjunction with St. Teresa. (Zaleski, 2005, 175)

Grace Jantzen with reference to Dionysius writes, " This is what is meant by 'ecstasy': it comes from the Greek *ekstasis*, which literally means 'standing outside oneself'. The intellect proceeds as far as it is able, step by step on the secret pathway of negation, until at last it has negated everything, including negation itself. It can then go no farther, its state is ecstatic in the sense of standing outside itself, transcending itself, just as the negations of God's names point to the transcendent reality of God. Of course, when it reaches this point, human language has also been surpassed." (1995,106)

Teresa in her own writings struggles to define the event and her definitions are at times contradictory and confusing. She writes that "I wish I could explain, with the help of God, wherein union differs from rapture, or from transport, or from flight of spirit, as they speak or from a trance, which are all one. I mean, that all these are only different names for that one and the same thing, which is also called ecstasy." (Zimmerman, 1997,159)

Teresa does not define the event as an ecstasy but rather a 'vision'. Teresa describes ecstasy as, "... no sense of anything but enjoyment, without any knowledge of what is being enjoyed. ...All the senses are taken up with this joy so that none of them is free to act in any way, either outwardly or inwardly." (Warma, 1984,509)

In her *Autobiography* Teresa refers to the occasion of the piercing of her heart as a true impulse and a vision, while in her *Spiritual Relations* she calls it a prayer. Teresa writes, "Another type of prayer quite frequent is a kind of wound in which it seems as though an arrow is thrust into the heart, or into the soul itself. Thus the wound causes a severe pain which makes the soul moan; yet, the pain is so delightful the soul would never want it to go away. This pain is not in the senses, nor is the sore a physical one; but the pain lies in the interior depth of the soul without resemblance to bodily pain..." (Avila, 1976,359)

<sup>3</sup> Baroque refers broadly to an art movement (1600-1750) that was born in Italy and adopted in France, Germany, Netherlands and Spain. The word 'baroque' has its origins in Spain and is the term used to describe a misshapen pearl. Baroque painters, sculptors and architects expressed emotion, movement, tension and drama in their works. Shape, volume and decoration are often exaggerated along with strong contrasts between light and shadow. The term 'baroque' was coined by late 19<sup>th</sup> century critics of the movement. ( Baroque, Art History, 14/10/2007)

<sup>4</sup> Structuralism is a theory of humankind in which all elements of human culture, language and society are thought to be parts of a system of signs. Ferdinand de Saussure was the originator of 20<sup>th</sup> century linguistic structuralism. (*Structuralism*, 16/10/2007)

## Teresa of Avila

St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) was the founder of the Discalced Carmelite Order during the time of the Counter-Reformation<sup>5</sup> in Spain, and a mystic. Throughout her vocation she founded 32 convents and monasteries and produced numerous literary works.<sup>6</sup> She was canonized in 1622 and designated Doctor of the Church in 1970 by Pope Paul IV.

F. C. Happold describes a 'true mystic' in the following passage:

In the true mystic there is an extension of normal consciousness, a release of latent powers and a widening of vision, so that aspects of truth unplumbed by the rational intellect are revealed to him. Both in feeling and thought he apprehends an immanence of the temporal in the eternal and the eternal in the temporal. In the religious mystic there is a direct experience of the Presence of God. Though he may not be able to describe it in words, though he may not be able to logically demonstrate its validity, to the mystic his experience is fully and absolutely valid and is surrounded with complete certainty. He has been 'there', he has 'seen' and he 'knows'. (1990, 19)

## Teresa's Transverberation

Teresa's legacy could be seen as her reforms, and her life of everyday practicality and intense spirituality. In *The Book of Her Life* Teresa recorded many of her supernatural visions, trances, raptures and locutions and late in life she wrote *Interior Castle* as an allegorical hand book<sup>7</sup> on Christian spirituality with allusions to her own extraordinary

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<sup>5</sup> This term refers to the reforms instigated within Roman Catholicism following the Council of Trent (1545-63).

Facing the threat of Luther's 'purification' effort, Pope Paul III had moved to counteract the Reformers' criticisms of corruption and loss of spirituality or 'holiness' in the Church by convoking the bishops to review and standardize Roman Catholic doctrines and liturgical practices. (Call, 1997,34)

<sup>6</sup> The Discalced or barefoot order differed from the existing Carmelite orders by reinforcing the vows of poverty, enclosure, contemplation. "Discalced Carmelite spirituality has five common features or themes: 1) of perfection involving love and self-abnegation; 2) the acknowledgement of common and extraordinary ways to perfection; 3) the use of images and terms taken from Teresa of Avila; 4) the use of images and terms taken from John of the Cross; 5) the attempting at creating a mystical systematic theology." (Pereira and Fastiggi, 2006, 231)

The following is a list of major works written by Teresa, all were published posthumously: *The Book of her Life* (Autobiography 1562-1565); *The Way of Perfection* (1565-1566); *The Interior Castle* (1577); *The Book of Her Foundations* (1560-1581); *Meditations on the Song of Songs* (1567-1575); *Spiritual Testimonies* (1560-1581). (Houston, 2006,12)

<sup>7</sup> *The Interior Castle* was specifically addressed to the Discalced Carmelite nuns. Teresa writes, "I was told by the person who commanded me to write that, as the nuns of these convents of Our Lady of Carmel need someone to solve their difficulties concerning prayer, and as (or so it seemed to him) women best understand each other's language, and also in view of their love for me, anything I might say would be particularly useful to them." (Peers, 2004,xxix)

mystical experiences.<sup>8</sup> Her writings are heralded as masterpieces of mystical theology.<sup>9</sup> However perhaps Teresa's most enduring legacy is her account of her mystical experience, called the transverberation. While praying in her cell Teresa received a vision of an angel, who pierced her heart with a flaming arrow.<sup>10</sup> Teresa writes,

Our Lord was pleased that I should have at times a vision of this kind: I saw an angel close by me, on my left side, in bodily form. This I am not accustomed to see, unless very rarely. Though I have visions of angels frequently, yet I see them only by an intellectual vision, such as I have spoken before. It was our Lord's will that in this vision I should see the angel in this wise. He was not large, but small of stature, and most beautiful- his face burning, as if he were one the highest angels, who seem to be all of fire; they must be those whom we call cherubim. Their names they never tell me; but I see very well that there is in heaven so great a difference between one angel and another, and between these and others, that I cannot explain it. I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God. The pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it, even a large one. It is a caressing of love so sweet which now takes place between the soul and God, that I pray God of His goodness to make him experience it who may think that I am lying. During the days that this lasted I went about as if beside myself. I wished to see or speak with no one, but only cherish my pain, which was to me a greater bliss than all created things could give me. (Zimmerman, 1997, 267)

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<sup>8</sup> William Johnston writes, "That Teresa was a consummate mystic no one doubts. But was she also a mystical theologian? Assuredly she was not a scholastic theologian, though she did learn some scholastic theology from her directors. But if by mystical theologian we mean one who reflects theologically on mystical experience, then we cannot easily refuse the title of mystical theologian to Teresa. For she was constantly reflecting on mystical experience, both her own and that of others; and she wrote prolifically about it." (1995,67)

<sup>9</sup> "Teresa's primary importance in this era of Christian spirituality was her ability not only to rewrite her own life but in effect to rewrite charismatic experience so that it would fit within the parameters of Tridentine Catholicism. She responded to the challenge posed by distrust and repression of mystical experience by developing new resources for Catholic spiritual reform. Her mystical works argued quite forcefully that charismatic experience did not have to be viewed as a potential danger to the institutional church, but could instead be an important source of Roman Catholic identity."(Ahlgren,1996,31)

<sup>10</sup> The actual dates and location of the transverberation are uncertain. Some historians note that she was praying in her cell, others that she was praying in the chapel. Dates vary between 1557 and 1560. Teresa alludes to having had this vision more than once and that it was experienced over a period of days. The Saint's heart is preserved at the convent of Carmelite nuns at Alba de Tormes. The heart is of "a brown-greyish colour, of full natural length, but rather shrunk in width. The chief wound distinctly visible, is horizontal, about an inch and a half in length; it looks as if it had been inflicted with a knife, but formerly distinct traces of burning could be seen. There are several minor wounds in different parts." (Zimmerman, 1997,267)

With the aid of endorsement from the Roman Catholic Church assisted by Bernini's iconic translation this reported experience eventually became synonymous with the Saint herself.<sup>11</sup>

### Translation of the Mystical

Christian mysticism has a dual status, as an essential mystery of faith and as an interiority, which defies the reductive narrative of the Church thereby, posing a threat to the fundamental principles of hierarchy and summit. (Hussey,2000,4) Psychologist William James (1842-1910) refers to the four hallmarks of the interior mystical experience: ineffability,<sup>12</sup> noetic quality<sup>13</sup>, transiency, and passivity. (Johnston, 1978, 34) Teresa's mystical account of the piercing of her heart fulfils James's criteria and also contains a sense of oneness, timelessness, and a loss of self or ego. <sup>14</sup>(Happold, 1970, 46) What sets apart Teresa's recorded experience is that the sweet agony reportedly brought on by the piercing transcends the spiritual/intellectual realm and enters into the corporeal. In this sense Teresa's experience extends the 'sense of oneness' to a dissolving of the boundaries between what is seen by the intellect and what is physically experienced.

"Mystical experience cannot, by definition be 'expressed', because in this view, it is always already an after effect. It comes after the shattering of language, and it is situated in a void, which requires a new mode of 'speaking'..." (Bal, 2003, 13)Despite the ineffable qualities associated with Teresa's own interpretation of the transverberation, her literary images have inspired numerous subsequent translations through the eyes of poets, painters, sculptors,

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<sup>11</sup> Carmelites celebrate the feast of the piercing of Teresa's heart (transverberation) on August 27th.

<sup>12</sup> In *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides states, "It must be clearly understood that when of those who have attained to any of the aforementioned degrees of perfection wishes to tell, by word of mouth or in writing, anything of the mysteries which he has grasped, it is not possible for him to expound clearly and systematically whatever he has comprehended, as he would have done in any other science which has an established method of instruction. When he tried to teach others, he has to contend with the same difficulty which face him in his own study, namely, that matters become clear for a moment and then recede into obscurity. It appears that this is the nature of the subject, be one's share of it large or small. For this reason when any metaphysician and theologian, in possession of some Truth, intends to impart of his science, he will not do so except in similes and riddles." (1995,44)

<sup>13</sup> Teresa writes, "God implants Himself in the interior of that soul in such a way that, when it returns to itself, it cannot possibly doubt that God has been in it and it has been in God; so firmly does this truth remain with it that, although for years God may never grant it that favour again, it can neither forget it nor doubt that it has receive it." (Peers, 2004, 86)

<sup>14</sup> Arthur Bradley writes, "This assertion of a fundamental non-contradiction or identity between self and other is always present in Christian mysticism but I would argue that it reaches its apex with the so-called 'experiential' mysticism of the medieval and renaissance mystics. Julian of Norwich, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross describe how the self must be negated, detached or annihilated in order to reach its true centre or ground as a soul which exists in a non-differentiated union with God. Michael De Certeau writes of St. Teresa: "I is another".(Partridge, 2003,261)

psychoanalysts and psychiatrists.<sup>15</sup> All have been challenged by the hallmarks of mysticism and its interiority and have demonstrated a unique fascination with the physicality of the experience as chronicled by Teresa.

Translation is multi-layered. The first layer is the experience itself, being a transfer of divine love into the ecstasy of the human being as well as the spiritual into the corporeal. (Bal, 2003, 14) The second layer is the recording of the experience by the recipient.<sup>16</sup> Subsequent layers are the responses of third parties who discover the account of the experience directly or indirectly. This paper discusses Bernini's translation of Teresa's words into a three dimensional work of art, Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical interpretation which relies on the iconic image being seen through the concept of *Jouissance*, and Louise Bourgeois' post-modern view of the Baroque as evidenced in Bernini's Teresa.

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<sup>15</sup> English poet, Richard Crashaw (1613-49) wrote, A Hymn to the Name and Honor of the Admirable St. Teresa; Jan Jiri Dietrich (1752) painted The Ecstasy of St. Teresa; Baroque Sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598- 1680) recreated Teresa's ecstasy in marble; French 20<sup>th</sup>c. psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) interpreted Teresa's experience in terms of *jouissance*; Psychoanalyst Carl Jung (1875-1961) hypothesized that Teresa's images were the primary expression of her inner experiences (Welch, 1982, 3); French psychologist and neurologist Jean Martin Charcot (1825-1893) diagnosed Teresa as 'undeniably hysteric' (Mazzoni, 1996, 37).

<sup>16</sup> George Pattison in the article, *Reflections on Mysticism after Modernity*, quotes Cupitt when he asserts that, "the strange ways in which mystics use language are therefore part of an attempt 'to recreate religious freedom and a spirit of levity, within a tradition that has become a cruel and alienating power-structure.'... The mystics are not to be seen as fumbling desperately for words, but, in a sense, as virtuosi of language, drawing attention to the inconsistencies of the given cultural- linguistic systems that define the given religious landscape and projecting new and unrealised possibilities for the future." (2002, 193-194)

THE ECSTASY OF ST. TERESA, Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria,  
della Vittoria, Rome

by Gianlorenzo Bernini (1647)



Figure 1 (Schama, 2006,115)

*“While content and language form a certain unity in the original like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelopes its content like a royal ample folds”.*

*Walter Benjamin (Bal,2003)*

Bernini's iconic 'flaming folds', are the life-source within his sculptural interpretation of Teresa's transverberation, and they are enveloped within the language of the experience itself, i.e. the account of a mystic in the midst of the Spanish Counter Reformation and in the language of the Baroque. Bernini symbolizes the 'oneness' associated with mystical experience by 'melting away' the distinctions between architecture, painting and art. Robert Petersson (1970, 47) writes,

Therefore the perception of Bernini's *Teresa* and its chapel matrix is a mixed collection of responses, some fragmentary, some well formed, which by combining and re-combining sort themselves out until, at least for the time being, the viewer's experience of the work is completed. The process is particularly rich because in executing the chapel Bernini has brought several arts into play.....In Bernini's chapel, the earliest major example of such artistic fusion, distinctions of media all but melt away. By deliberate intention, only the sculpture is not directly and totally absorbed into the singleness of architecture, reliefs, painting and decoration.

Bernini believed that every work of art needed to be informed by a *concetto* or literary theme, and form '*un bel composto*' or a beautiful whole. (Lavin, 1980, 13) In the Cornaro Chapel, Bernini's *Teresa* is not just a translation of Teresa's account of her vision, an account which Teresa herself could not precisely deliver: he is setting her entire life within the context of the church (the bride of Christ) and the Holy Sacraments. The entry into the Chapel and the journey to the left transept, past the altar rail to where the past generations of the Cornaro family viewed the sculptural transverberation from galleried boxes can be interpreted as a metaphor of the seven mansions of prayer in Teresa's *Interior Castle*.<sup>18</sup> As Bernini united sculpture, architecture and painting he united Teresa's life, writings and mystical experiences.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Gianlorenzo Bernini (1598-1680) was the genius of the Baroque, his fame and technique surpassing that of Michelangelo's. The reforms within Roman Catholicism instigated by the Council of Trent heavily endorsed the use of Baroque art, with its emphasis on femininity and fluidity, to convey a softer, more intimate and accessible relationship between man and the Divine. The miraculous lives of the saints provided living proof of God's continued endorsement of the Roman Catholic Church. Pope Urban VIII promoted religious and political messages through the patronage of awe-inspiring art, rather than focus on the revolutionary reforms that were associated with the invention of the printing press. (Brown, 2004, 386)

<sup>18</sup> "*The Interior Castle*, as a document of religious experience, is describing a series of conversions or transformations. The call of God moved Teresa into the unknown, into the anti-structure with its liminal experiences." (Welsh, 1982, 25)

<sup>19</sup> Irving Lavin (1980, 14) states, " Yet, never before and never after did Bernini use this particular combination of architecture, sculpture and painting- because, as I hope to show, the fusion of arts had a very specific purpose and meaning in the *Teresa* chapel."

But Bernini's sculpture does not depict the piercing, only its after-effects. The backward drapes of the folds of the angel tell the viewer that the arrow has been withdrawn; Teresa is now beyond herself, burning, and in a state of ecstasy. Mieke Bal writes, "the word ecstasy expresses extreme intensity but also etymologically, at least, decentering." (2003, 15) Bernini did not ignore the concept of decentering in his composition as one views Teresa's 'S' shaped pose and the way in which she appears to be held in place by the angel's hand that gingerly holds the hem of her habit, as if it might be the only part of her not on fire. The folds have no obvious centre of gravity. Bernini translated the untranslatable by transforming the marble folds of Teresa's habit into the flames of divine love that simultaneously consume and transform her.<sup>20</sup>

Classical critics of Bernini's works claimed that his sculptures were 'emotionally overloaded' and his attempts to imitate cloth and flesh betrayed the integrity of the stone. (Schama, 2006, 82) By transforming Teresa from an elderly, homely nun into a classic beauty on fire with a raw sensual energy one could argue that Bernini had taken translational liberties and focused only on the superficial. Irving Lavin writes, "Whether or not Teresa was hysterical or Bernini vulgar, the group evinces a physical eroticism that well-meaning apologists do wrong to deny". (1980, 121) Zaehner argues in the following passage, that Christian mysticism and sexuality<sup>21</sup> are inseparable.

There is no point at all in blinking the fact that raptures of the theistic mystic are closely akin to the transports of sexual union, the soul playing the part of the female and God appearing as the male. There is nothing surprising in this, for if man is made in the image of God, then it would be natural that God's love would be reflected in human love, and that the love of man and woman should reflect the love of God for the soul....for just as the human body knows no sensation comparable in sheer joyful intensity to that which the sexual act procures for a man and a woman in love, so must the mystical experience of the soul in the embrace of God be utterly beyond all spiritual joys. (1957,151)

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<sup>20</sup> Gilles Deleuze (2006,139) writes, "When folds of clothing spill out of painting, it is Bernini who endows them with sublime form in sculpture, when marble seizes and bears to infinity folds that cannot be explained by the body, but by a spiritual adventure that can set the body ablaze. His is not an art of structures but of textures."

<sup>21</sup> Psychological research into the triggers of mystical religious experience undertaken by Hood and Hall in 1980 confirmed that individuals use similar gender-based descriptions to describe both mystical and erotic experiences. Females described both erotic and mystical experiences in receptive terms, but males described only their sexual experiences in agentive terms. Research suggests that the compatibility of erotic and mystical experiences for females is aided by masculine imagery common in the Christian tradition, which facilitates congruent expression of eroticism and mysticism for females but inhibits it for males. (Spilka, 2003,330)



In his sculpture Bernini was uniting the vision of the transverberation with the ecstasy witnessed at Teresa's death as evidence of her divine nuptials to Christ, the marriage metaphor symbolising complete oneness and loss of self. Bernini was essentially incorporating the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> mansions of prayer in Teresa's *Interior Castle* into his sculpture.<sup>22</sup> Bernini viewed Teresa's whole-body experience as one of spousal prayer loaded with *eros* or 'passion' in the Greek sense of the word;<sup>23</sup> Teresa's writings and reforms being the products of this passion. This paper argues that Bernini's physical depiction of Teresa in ecstasy is an extension of Bernini's understanding of the drama of holistic mystical passion rather than a literal or 'bad' translation of the text.<sup>24</sup>

With the coming of the Age of Enlightenment and its focus on reason, Bernini's work could no longer be interpreted as a serious statement of Roman Catholic doctrine<sup>25</sup>. Through the interpretative eyes of psychoanalysts, psychiatrists and feminists Bernini's Teresa, with its overt emotional and sexual connotations, found celebrity again during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, rather than reviving the ecstatic mysticism associated with the love of

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<sup>22</sup> The state of the soul in the 6<sup>th</sup> Mansions according to Teresa; "The soul, then, has these yearnings and tears and sighs, together with the strong impulses which have already been described. They all seem to arise from love, and are accompanied by great emotion, but they are all as nothing by comparison with this other, for they are like a smouldering fire, the heat of which is quite bearable, though it causes pain. While the soul is in this condition, and interiorly burning, it often happens that a mere fleeting thought of some kind or some remark which the soul hears about death's long tarrying, deals it, as it were, a blow, or, as one might say, wounds it with an arrow of fire. I do not mean that there actually is such an arrow....." (Peers, 2004,198)

The state of the soul in the 7<sup>th</sup> Mansions according to Teresa; "These effects God bestows, together with all those other good effects already described in the above- mentioned degrees of prayer, when the soul approaches Him, and He also gives the soul that kiss for which the Bride besought Him; for I understand it to be in this Mansion that that petition is fulfilled. Here to this wounded heart are given waters in abundance. Here the soul delights in the tabernacle of God."(ibid,228)

<sup>23</sup> Contemporary Carmelite nun, Tessa Bielecki writes "We need to distinguish between eros and eroticism. Eros, great-souled desire for oneness, is the beginning of mysticism. Eroticness, a preoccupation with genitality is a deflection of real erotic energy and the end of any mystical possibility." (1994,48)

<sup>24</sup> Simon Schama writes, "But there is not visual innuendo: what we are looking at could hardly be less sly or furtive, and this startling candour precludes a snigger rather than provokes it. Staring is mandatory. Teresa's levitations in Spain, after all, were not solitary happenings. Witnesses from within and without the convent beheld the disturbing, exhilarating mystery, and in the Cornaro Chapel Bernini has used all his showmanship to ensure she makes an unforgettable spectacle of herself." (2006,117)

<sup>25</sup> Bernini's "urge to use all the means of illusion in the theatre as well as in religious imagery, to try and transport the individual into another reality, seems ultimately connected with the polarity between self-reliance and authority, reason and faith, which afflicted western man seriously for the first time in the seventeenth century: it was the road of escape for those who began to doubt." ( Wittkower, 1997,160)

Christ; Bernini's translation of Teresa provided modern thinkers, analysts and artists with the perfect archetype with which to delve deeper into the human psyche.<sup>26</sup>

### Jacques Lacan<sup>27</sup>

Jacques Lacan provided a psychoanalytical translation of Bernini's marble effigy. In his 1972 lecture entitled, *God and T/he Woman's Jouissance*,<sup>28</sup> Lacan interpreted Bernini's Teresa within his concept of *jouissance*. Lacan's translation can be viewed as one of image-concept-word. It is a counter to Bernini's word-image translation and to Teresa's body-word translation.

In his well known lecture, Lacan discusses mysticism;<sup>29</sup>

Mysticism isn't everything that isn't politics. It is something serious, about which several people inform us - most often women, or bright people like Saint John of

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<sup>26</sup> Christina Mazzoni writes, "The controversy generated by Teresa of Avila during and after the nineteenth century has tended to focus on GianLorenzo Bernini's famously ambiguous sculpture *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa* (1652), upon which many sets of clinical eyes have gazed with retrospective medicalizing (or sexually titillating) intent." (1996,38)

<sup>27</sup> Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) was a French structuralist psychoanalyst. The Seminars of Lacan were a major influence on Modern French philosophical thought. Some of Lacan's major concepts were: The Mirror Stage; Other/other; The three orders- imaginary, symbolic, real; Desire, Jouissance. (Lacan, 10/10/07)

Arthur Bradley asks, "What then is the relationship between Christian mysticism and modern French thought? It is important to start by stressing the basic and irreconcilable differences between the two...The heterodox direction of continental philosophy often brings into conflict with the doctrinal orthodoxies." (2003, 259)

<sup>28</sup> The French word *Jouissance* means enjoyment but it has sexual connotations. In his Seminar 'The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, (1959-1960) Lacan developed his concept of the opposition of *jouissance* and pleasure. The pleasure principle, according to Lacan, functions as a limit to enjoyment: it is the law that commands the subject to 'enjoy as little as possible'. At the same time the subject constantly attempts to transgress the prohibitions imposed on his enjoyment, to go beyond the pleasure principle. Yet the result of transgressing the pleasure principle, according to Lacan, is not pleasure but pain, since there is only a certain amount of pleasure that the subject can bear. Beyond this limit, pleasure becomes pain, and this 'painful principle' is what Lacan calls *jouissance*. (Evans, 30/09/07)

Lacan viewed 'woman' as not whole. He claimed, "that there is no such thing as *The Woman* since of her essence..she is not all... and it is this lack of wholeness that determines her experience of *jouissance* that is other." (Mazzoni, 1996, 45)

<sup>29</sup> Copleston describes how an agnostic like Lacan views mysticism: "Consider the type of agnostic who would like to believe in God and who does not stand, as it were, entirely outside religion, in the sense of having, as some would put it, no religious sense, but who regards the world as ambiguous, as pointing in some aspects beyond itself but of being of such a nature in other respects that belief in a transcendent source, at any rate if conceived as a person and good God, is unwarranted.... Such a person, it seems to me, would probably be considering mysticism not simply as an isolated set of phenomena but rather as one factor among others which should be taken into account in forming an overall view of reality. In other words, he or she would be reflecting on mysticism as an element in a cumulative argument, as one of a number of converging lines of thought." (1982,213)

the Cross.....they get the idea or sense that there must be a *jouissance* that is beyond. Those are the ones we call mystics.... it's like for Saint Teresa – you need but go to Rome and see the statue by Bernini to immediately understand that she's *que'elle jouit*. There's no doubt about it. What is her *jouissance* from? It is clear that the essential testimony of the mystics consists in saying that they experience it but know nothing about it. (Miller, 1998,76)

Lacan's offensive translation <sup>30</sup>based on his iconographic and clinical analysis ignores the narrative, contextual and spiritual dimensions of Bernini's sculpture and is "an inaccurate transmission of an unessential content".(Bal, 2003,16) In response to Lacan's theory, Grace Jantzen in her article, "*Power, Gender and Ecstasy*" writes, "And with that Lacan links together mysticism, God, female sexuality and ignorance on the one hand, and masculinity, rationality, and the scientific gaze on the other." (1997, 386)

Lacan replaced the ineffable qualities of Teresa's mystical experience and Bernini's sculpture with the ineffable psychological qualities of *Jouissance and The Woman*.<sup>31</sup> Mazzoni writes,

Lacan remarks that this *jouissance* does not come to all women; yet even those who experience it are unable to articulate it, because it does not enter the symbolic realm. Thus, all that woman can say is that she feels it; she knows when it comes, but that is all she knows about it. Woman's sexuality as such cannot be spoken about. It is a pleasure bound to remain other; it is the ultimate limit of Lacan's verbal theories. (1996,45)

In Lacan's interpretation, the flaming folds of Teresa's robes are no longer a metaphor for divine love but rather the chaos associated with 'inarticulate ecstasy and irrationality'.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Zaehner writes, "To drive home the close parallel between the sexual act and the mystical union with God may seem blasphemous today. Yet the blasphemy is not in the comparison, but in the degrading of the one act of which man is capable that makes him like God both in the intensity of his union with his partner and in the fact that by this union he is a co-creator with God. All the higher religions recognize that the sexual act as something holy; hence their condemnation of adultery and fornication... because they are a desecration of a holy thing, and a misuse of what is most godlike in man." (1957, 152)

<sup>31</sup> Ecstasy and the "surpassing of language must not be read in the modern sense of undergoing a psychological experience which is ineffable, or cannot be put into words, but rather in the patristic sense of recognising that God is the one who is beyond all words, all human language and constructs."(Jantzen, 1995,106)

<sup>32</sup> "Among Christian mystics, Saint Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), because of her prolonged illness and the sensuality permeating her writings, has traditionally been the 'privileged' target of the hysteria-mysticism interpretive tug-of-war. She is the quintessential mystical (and thus, for some, erotically predisposed) woman..."(Mazzoni, 1996,37)

(Jantzen, 1997, 387) The ‘oneness’ of holy marriage <sup>33</sup>alluded to by Bernini has been replaced by the incompleteness inherent in *T/he Woman*. <sup>34</sup>

Lacan’s concept of *jouissance* reverted Teresa’s public mystical experiences, and the public nature of Bernini’s theatrical sculpture within the Cornaro chapel, into an intensely interior, personal, gender exclusive, non-transformative, incomplete experience, loaded with eroticism released of its 19<sup>th</sup> c. attachments of guilt and shame. Grace Jantzen writes,

One wonders how much Lacan really wanted to understand about either women or mysticism if all he did was fix his voyeuristic gaze on a stone statue fashioned by the primary architect of early modern Rome, the centre of religious patriarchy in the west. Maybe Lacan preferred not to know. But what would have happened if, instead of going to Rome, Lacan had gone to Teresa’s Convent of the Incarnation outside the walls of Avila, lowered his gaze and listened to the nuns say their office, sat under the olive trees in the courtyard and pondered Teresa’s writings? Would he still have configured mysticism with an inarticulate excess of women’s sexuality? Who would scrutinize whom? (1997, 386)

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<sup>33</sup> Zaehner writes, “The marriage service, indeed, speaks of matrimony as the symbol of the divine, not, as psychologists hold, the divine of the human. (1957, 151)

<sup>34</sup> Concerning the concept of the subject; Lacan sites the subject within the lack of an Imaginary psychological unity or completeness.(Bradley, 2003,260)

FEMME MAISON, by Louise Bourgeois, 1983



Figure 2(Morris, 2007, 139)

*The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognised and is never to be seen again. For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably.*  
Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (Bal, 2003,5)

Louise Bourgeois <sup>35</sup>

This work has been included in the paper to briefly illustrate how far removed a third party translation can be from its original historical and mystical context. Bourgeois, who views herself as a Baroque artist<sup>36</sup> created a sculpture in 1983 entitled, *Femme Maison*. Throughout her career Bourgeois produced many works under this generic title. The art works form a genre not a series. (Bal, 2003, 10) In this work, Bourgeois translates the concept of the Baroque, by referring to Bernini's statue of St. Teresa as the exemplary of the Baroque.<sup>37</sup> The work of Bourgeois is an image -genre - image translation through the eyes of art history and feminism with any mystical references being an accidental by-product of the translation. "I do, I undo, I redo," is Bourgeois' mantra. (Morris, 2007, 11) Mieke Bal argues that,

Bourgeois addresses, dialectically, polemically and respectfully, the way Bernini attempted to represent Teresa's ecstasy ec-statically. Without in the least imitating Bernini, she, like him, supplements his work ec-statically. More precisely, she examines through this sculpture the way the seventeenth century artist attempted to translate the *transfiguration*-itself a form of translation, in the sense of metamorphosis.... (2003,12)

Bourgeois makes no attempt to 'read' Bernini's image as Lacan did, but rather metamorphizes Bernini's original fusion of architecture and sculpture. However, are St. Teresa and Bernini still visible in this metamorphosis or are they the necessary casualties of the process as the worm and cocoon are to the butterfly? This paper argues that St. Teresa's testimony and Bernini's interpretation of it are irretrievably lost in the decentred, gravity laden, anxiety-ridden feminine folds of Bourgeois' post-modern Baroque translation. Elements of the transcendental or human are hard to find. *Femme Maison* is a work of art

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<sup>35</sup> Artist and sculptor Louise Bourgeois, was born in France in 1911 and immigrated to New York in 1938. At the age of 95, she is one of the world's leading contemporary artists. Over a long career Bourgeois has worked in dialogue with most of the major avant-garde artistic movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from Surrealism to Conceptual art. She does not slot easily into any given art category. Her experimental artworks are inspired by her own memories, experiences, thoughts and emotions and reveal deep feminist psychoanalytic theories. *Femme Maison* has been a major theme throughout her life and many of Bourgeois' artworks hold this title, the works however do not create a series but rather a genre. (Morris, 2007,9)

The Tate Modern is currently holding a retrospective of her work from October 2007-January 2008.

<sup>36</sup> For Bourgeois, "Baroque describes a kind of supercharged art that unlike the Baroque of old, happily and deliberately refuses to join or to be part of any cult, religion or social class. The work contains its own declaration of independence and at the same time plays with the notion of engaging its audience on both a credible and psychosexual level. If this is not quite Baroque, her [Bourgeois'] approach is not quite Postmodernist either..."(Castro, 10/10/2007)

<sup>37</sup> It is interesting that Bourgeois grammatically omits 'la' from title of *Femme Maison*. Bourgeois once said, "The French are so articulate...I am suspicious of words. They do not interest me, they do not satisfy me...I distrust the Lacans and Bossuets because '*ils se gargarisent avec les mots*' [they gargle with their own words]". (Morris, 2007,294)

informed by a movement, rather than a spiritual ‘*conchetto*’, and its form is only an example of a genre rather than ‘*un bel composto*’. Bernini and the Roman Catholic Church employed the medium of the Baroque to re-create pre-reformation Christianity in a post-reformation world; in the age of post-modernity, Bourgeois has translated the medium of the Baroque into the message itself.<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

Bernini, through his virtuoso artistic skills has kept St. Teresa and her ecstasy alive for centuries. One could argue that the strength of this iconic image of St. Teresa has over time superseded that of Teresa’s original writings, and many have mistakenly taken Bernini’s interpretation as being on par with Teresa’s original translation. Mieke Bal writes, “although sculpture is not a set of words, iconographic analysis treats it as if it were just that.” (2003, 9) Lacan and Bourgeois have fallen into the trap of only analytically and artistically interpreting Bernini’s work, rather than focusing on Teresa’s writings which emphasized Christ-centred practicality, prayer, compassion, piety, reform, and humility over and above mystical experience and have therefore created incomplete translations.

How then should Teresa be translated? If kept within the confines of the Counter – Reformation Teresa remains a museum- piece: if she is contemporised into the 21st century she becomes the victim of current pre-occupations. Both translations prevent souls, in Teresa’s words, from ever leaving, “...the outer court of the castle. A place occupied by the guards; they are not interested in entering it, and have no idea what there is in that wonderful place, or who dwells in it, or even how many rooms it has.” (Peers, 2004, 6)

Rowan Williams writes,

So Teresa’s interest as a chronicler of the dramatic phenomena of ‘mysticism’ is a fruitful source of misunderstanding for the modern reader. The strangeness and the drama are part of a movement whose culmination is the almost prosaic apostolate of the seventh mansions- though we should not forget that this is a prose fired by intensities of love and commitment far beyond the ordinary. Behind the competent practicality of the person living in union is a continuing experience (so Teresa sees it) of living on the edge of ecstasy, undergoing moments of piercing intimacy and seeing into the heart of theological mysteries. ...To be actively in the world and at the same time wholly exposed to the reality of God is something most of us cannot imagine: we use activity as a defence against exposure to God; or we use the claims of God (as we

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<sup>38</sup> Theodor Adorno’s sentiment that, “Today the alienation inherent in the consistency of artistic technique itself forms the content of the artwork.” is realised in *Femme Maison*. (2006,102)

see them) as a defence against the risks of action and apostolic faithfulness in a 'world of flames'. That life which fuses these inseparably together is Christ's. (1991, 162)

The greatest mistranslation of Teresa's mystical experience would be to keep her locked on Bernini's pedestal, as an object of beauty, inaccessible and unchallenged, the very antithesis of Teresa's life, faith and writings. Ecstatic truth, as experienced by Teresa, can only be realised and translated through the honest introspection of one's own unique and personal relationship with Christ.

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