



Teresa of Avila

Kate O'Brien, Brother Hermenegild TOSF

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Let no reader suppose that in the few pages here set before him he will find either the life or, miraculously trapped, the spirit of Teresa of Avila. The present attempt is a portrait, or rather, it is notes for a portrait; it is an apology not for Teresa but for this writer's constant admiration of her. Teresa's mortal life, the vessel which contained her, withheld a residue when her flame had left it. This residue is a dust very rich in unusual elements. But to build back with it to what it was four hundred years ago, when the life of a human soul informed it, can only be impressionistic work. Since therefore all statement, all surmise set out henceforward here will be quite sincerely arbitrary, that is to say, freely developed from one writer's long reflection on a markedly individual and dangerous fellow creature, it will be best if the writer pass without delay from the third to the first person singular. I write of Teresa of Avila by choice which is passionate, arbitrary, personal. No one need agree with anything I have to say - but they must not, either, be hurt thereby. I am free here to speak freely about a great woman. But I am not writing of the canonized saint. I propose to examine Teresa, not by the rules of canonization, but for what she was - saint or not - a woman of genius. Women of genius are few. If there have been some female stars in science, medicine or the plastic arts, I must be forgiven if I ignore them here, where I pursue only the idea of genius expressed in the word, and in action arising from the power of the word. Reducing then, for purposes of convenience, our discussion of genius in woman to her power in and because of words - which is the most probable way for the expressive to reach the inexpressive - and searching for examples of it we find very few. We know or can argue the reasons - but there is not space to dispute them here. That dying Europe is thick incrustated with the glories of male intelligence and may presently vanish before woman has had time or chance to make her possible impression on a superb, doomed effort - that is clear enough. But, before catastrophe cracks in all our dreaming faces, let us enumerate our precious things and people. Let us say our personal says. I say, with great regret, that within the two thousand or so years that my very poorly trained vision can take in, genius has hardly ever flowered in a woman. We can jump back beyond those two thousand years and boast of Sappho. But we have only fragments, rumours of her - and in any case we have to wait for a woman to match her until England and the nineteenth century. It is strange; all the variable, definable furies, styles and freedoms could pass over Europe - we could have Virgil, Lucretius, Dante, Ronsard, Shakespeare, Racine, Madame de La Fayette and Miss Jane Austen - but there was still no tracking down of a woman who could be called genius until Emily Bronte's burning shadow flung out. Not as broken, not as indefinable as Sappho's, but strangely sympathetic to her legend, and just as unsatisfactory. And they are the only female geniuses of our recorded knowledge in literature.

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