

## Interior Waters: An Audio Essay on Acoustics, Poetics, and Carmelite Mystics

### 1. [INTRODUCTION]

Hello. We're here on a big flat rock in a little river just outside where I live, in a valley between the mountains in Catalunya. It's usually quite a calm river, but it's been an unusually stormy wet season, and this is how it sounds like after fifty days of nonstop rain. The stream has been radically transformed by the flood; they say it never flowed so fiercely, at least not that anyone around here can remember.

It's a bright spring day, the birds and insects are enjoying some newly grown leaves. You might hear a car every now and then passing on the road up above us; otherwise, not much is going on.

I've brought you here to take a five-century leap back in time: the year is 1562, beneath the vast and pitiless skies of Castile, at the very heart of the Iberian peninsula. The land stretches wide and dry, a scorched and golden plain dotted with hissing thorns and gnarled olive trees, creaking in the wind. On the dusty path winding between the hills, the parched ground cracks beneath the hooves of a weary mule and the wheels of its groaning cart. The unforgiving sun bakes the hard soil, and the silence is never total—it hums with distant bleats of sheep, the low jangle of bells, and the sigh of simmering dust.

In the midst of this barren wilderness stands the city of Ávila, a stony fortress of faith, encircled by high medieval walls that seem hewn from the bones of the land itself. Its towers pierce the sky like solemn sentinels, and within its ramparts, time moves slowly, burdened by the weight of the Church, the Crown, and the ever-watchful eyes of the Inquisition.

It is here that in that very year, a monastic order was born: thirteen nuns, fighting against the foundations of the Catholic authorities, barricaded themselves in a little country house and set out for a new spiritual journey. They sung, they listened, they wrote, they contemplated. They were led by their fellow nun and foundress, Teresa de Jesús: an avid listener, reader, writer and mystic. As it turns out from listening intently to her writings, Teresa developed a special way of understanding the world through voices and sound. She commanded her spiritual daughters to open their internal ears, and listen not only with the ears of the body, but also with the ears of the soul.

So I've brought you here for a little venture into the sonic world of this Carmelite mystic, Teresa de Jesús. Teresa is quite famous for her intensely intimate relationship with God, and when I say God I am—of course—referring to the God of the Judeo-Catholic tradition; So you see, Teresa experienced extremely vivid ecstatic states while praying to this God, sometimes to the point of complete paralysis; the people around her even testified how she used to levitate off the floor in the middle of the chapel. I especially like her testimony of the very first time she heard a divine voice calling to her. Here's what she writes in her autobiography "*Libro de la vida*," about one day when she tried to pray:

One time when I was in great distress, [...] I heard a very soft voice speaking to me, like tucked inside a whistle. My hair stood on end, for it filled me with dread and I wanted to understand what it was telling me; but I couldn't, because it passed so quickly. When my fear was gone, [...] I was left with such peace and joy and interior delight, that I marveled that just hearing a voice (which I heard with the ears of the body and without understanding a word) has such a great effect in the soul.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Estava una vez con grandísima pena [...] oí que me hablaba una voz muy suave, como metida en un silbo. Yo me espelucé toda, que me hizo temor y quisiera entender lo que me decía; mas no pude, que pasó muy en breve. Pasado mi temor, [...] quedé con un sosiego y gozo y deleite interior, que yo me espanté que sólo oír una voz (que esto oílo con los oídos corporales y sin entender palabra) hiciese tanta operación en el alma." Teresa de Jesús, *Libro de la Vida*, en *Obras Completas*, ed. Efrén de la Madre de Dios, Otger Steggink. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1967), 39:3. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes by Teresa throughout this work are from this edition. Translations are by the author, in occasional consultation with *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Ávila*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodríguez, 3 vols (Washington, D.C.: ICS, 1976–1985).

While you might have heard about Santa Teresa and her visions as an important figure in 16th-century Spanish spirituality, the reformer of the Carmelite order, or the author of famous mystical guides like *Las moradas del castillo interior*, what most people don't know is how important were sound and voices in her spiritual practice. This is exactly what I hope to give you a little taste of in what is to follow.

Come to think of it, I never actually introduced myself. Actually, you know what, maybe it doesn't matter that much. Like an anonymous Carmelite nun once told me, the most important part of a bush of roses are the roots hidden deep in the dark moisture of mud; no one ever sees how they operate, but they are a great deal of what nourishes the plant and keeps it growing. Not that I claim such importance to myself; but let's just say I'm yet another link in the chain of avid listeners who have tried to open some space to contemplate about how we perceive the world through sounds, and through their poetics.

A mysterious coincidence brought me to the writings of this 16th-century nun. Since I come from the world of sound and music myself, when I read her words something was pulling me into their sonic dimension. I was drawn to her descriptions of voices and auditory experiences. Teresa clearly testified that in her prayer—

In no way can I use the senses, so much that if it wasn't for hearing—and not in order to understand—no other sense is of any avail.<sup>2</sup>

So, in her ecstatic states of prayer, all senses are off except for hearing. Such testimonies reflect how hearing for Teresa is a means to make sense of the world, like she said—not in order to understand, but only to get closer to what is the purpose of most mystics—a union with the divine.

Now, I realize that words like 'divine', or 'soul', sound like the kind of things humans have been arguing about for ages, but trying to understand them is as useless as trying to catch water with your hands. We also can't go into detail right now about Teresa's mystical discourse; but let me just say, for the sake of our short venture, that she highlighted individual sensory experience—and particularly interesting for us, auditory experience—over the learned scholastic approach promoted by male Church authorities. In short, you'll have to trust me on this, but I believe Teresa made meaning through hearing. I know this because it sparkles out of her words—verbal representations of auditory experiences. If we try listening to these words, we might hear a snippet of the Carmelite sonic universe.

Okay, before I get too carried away here—because I can already hear some of you thinking, 'Here comes another ode to a levitating nun'—let me just say: yes, I know, this might sound a little over enchanted. The truth is that exotifying female mystics is quite fashionable these days—after all, who can resist the secrets of holy ecstasy? Of a 500-year-old corpse and her decomposed heart relic? In fact, while I'm recording this, the Vatican parades the very corpse of Santa Teresa after a round of holy inspection. I guess they needed to make sure she's still worthy of the hype. But anyway, maybe this trend is exactly why it's worth checking what a 16<sup>th</sup>-century nun can teach us about our own attention, well into this noisy century. If this sounds like a feminist ode to embodied knowledge, well, Teresa used to say "*no somos ángeles, sino tenemos cuerpo*"—we are not angels, for we have a body. That mummified dismembered body of hers is an artefact of a lifetime of embodied knowledge. And hey, if Teresa could apologize for lacking intellectual understanding of divine mysteries because she was, well, a woman in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, I figure I can at least give myself permission to fumble around a bit too.

Now, being a defiant nun in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was no easy task: Teresa's confessors made her document all her spiritual experiences, to make sure they're not the work of the devil. Here's an example of what she experienced while trying to write *The Interior Castle*:

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<sup>2</sup> "En ninguna cosa puedo usar de las potencias y sentidos, tanto que, si no es oír—y eso no para entender—, otra cosa no aprovecha." Teresa de Jesús, *Cuentas de conciencia*, 1:1.

As I write this, I'm thinking about what is happening in my head—that great noise inside it, [...] which made it nearly impossible for me to follow the instruction I was given to write these words. It seems as if many mighty rivers are gushing through it, and on another part these waters are tumbling down, [and there are] many little birds and whistles; and not in the ears, but in the upper part of the head, where they say is the uppermost part of the soul.<sup>3</sup>

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If you're still wondering why I brought you *here*, well then, partly because I come here every day to listen, to clear away the noise going on inside *my* head, and to obsessively record the shifts in the water flow. But also, because water is a vibrating metaphor in Teresa's Carmelite mystical idiom. Take, for example this quote:

I can't find anything more appropriate to explain some spiritual things than water; and that's because I know so little and my [limited] brains doesn't help, and I am such a good friend of this element, that I have observed it with more attention than other things.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, while listening to Teresa's descriptions, I discovered this water metaphor, as a recurring motif she keeps going back to.<sup>5</sup> Here's an example:

"[T]he delight that God gives is just a single drop of water from the great flowing river He is preparing for us".<sup>6</sup>

In her four stages of prayer, she compares the soul to a gardener who struggles to give water to his parched soil. So the first stage is the tedious work of drawing water from a deep well. The second is by turning a waterwheel in a system of aqueducts. But the real shift happens in the third stage: when the garden is entirely watered by the flow of a mighty river, when the ground all around it is soaked and the lucky gardener can really start delighting on the spiritual joys of his garden. We'll get to the fourth stage later.

## 2. [VOICE, NOW AND THEN]

Teresa had, like I said, quite an intimate relationship with her God, who used to talk to her in different ways, and I became obsessed with how His voice sounded like to her ears.<sup>7</sup>

I couldn't help but ask myself, in what way did she really hear this voice?

Maybe it's a good idea to say something about the perception of the voice in Teresa's time. For medieval and early modern listeners, the voice wasn't yet so attached to identity, as we perceive it now, thanks to 19th century psychoanalysis. In modern perception, we talk about the "internal voice" as a sort of representation of our instinct, we often think of the voice as something that signifies someone's subjective, coherent identity. But in 16th-century Spain, and specifically for a nun, her voice didn't have to be considered *hers* at all—it could belong to others, expressing the words of God, saints, or the devil; not to mention the collective voice of the nuns as a community, as an order, the voice of the Church, or the King... Consider the fact that the 'self' that *we've* come to take for granted over the past couple of centuries was actually scattered over multiple voices, and could even exist in the gaps between them, so that identity wasn't a fixed thing called 'self' but more a shifting interplay of different voices. And this whole discussion might become even more confusing when we realise there could be several ways to even *understand* this word, "voice": are we talking about a physical, acoustic voice? An inner voice, like, the voice in your head

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<sup>3</sup> Escribiendo esto estoy considerando lo que pasa en mi cabeza del gran ruido de ella, que dije al principio, por donde se me hizo casi imposible poder hacer lo que me mandaban de escribir. No parece sino que están en ella muchos ríos caudalosos y por otra parte que estas aguas se despeñan, muchos pajarillos y silbos, y no en los oídos, sino en lo superior de la cabeza, adonde dicen que está lo superior del alma." Teresa de Jesús, *Moradas del castillo interior*, Moradas IV, 1:10.

<sup>4</sup> "Que no me hallo cosa más a propósito para declarar algunas de espíritu que esto de agua; y es, como sé poco y el ingenio no ayuda y soy tan amiga de este elemento, que le he mirado con más advertencia que otras cosas". Moradas V, 2:2.

<sup>5</sup> Water metaphors are prominent in many mystical writings, Judeo-Catholic and beyond. See e.g. John Arblaster, "Flowing from the Wild Sea and Back to the Sea: Water Metaphors and Mystical Union in the Late Medieval Low Countries," *The Journal of Religion* 98, no. 2 (2018): 169–91.

<sup>6</sup> "[Los deleites] que da el Señor [son] sola una gota de agua del gran río caudaloso que nos está aparejado." *Vida*, 27:12.

<sup>7</sup> An example: "[E]sta voz tan dulce que se deshace la pobre alma en no hacer luego lo que manda; y así—como digo—es más trabajo que no lo oír." Moradas II, 1:2.

sort of voice? A memory of a voice heard in the past, or an imagined voice? Or, the voice as a metaphor to other things, like agency, and, again, identity?

And what about the hearing of the voice, how could that have been perceived in pre-modern Spain? In the 16th century, following ancient and medieval concepts, many Catholics believed that in parallel to the five external senses, there exists another set, of five internal senses.<sup>8</sup> So if your physical hearing gets the sounds in the acoustic, material world, you also have another pair of ears within your soul, which can perceive spiritual sounds. When Teresa is hearing divine voices, it happens through these interior ears:

It seems to me that anyone wishing to deceive others in saying they understand something of God that is actually from themselves, it will not be hard for them to say that they hear it with the ears of the body; and indeed it is true, that I never thought that there was another way of hearing nor understanding until I saw it for myself.<sup>9</sup>

So Teresa offers us another way of hearing (which funnily enough, hadn't occurred to her until she, well, "saw" it for herself). So this hearing clearly doesn't pass through the auditory apparatus known to us from the body, but happens in some deep, secret place:

There is another way in which God speaks to the soul, and I have, to myself, a great certainty that it comes from Him. [...] this occurs so deep in the soul, and it seems to you very clear that you hear these words of the Lord Himself with the ears of the soul, and [He says them] so secretly.<sup>10</sup>

So spiritual knowledge for her can be accessed not through the the ears of the body—*los oídos corporales*, but the ears of the soul—*los oídos del alma*. When describing the ecstatic experience, she observes that

[T]he soul seems to possess other ears with which it hears, through which [God] makes it listen, so that it isn't distracted.<sup>11</sup>

Hearing with no distractions, wouldn't that be great? So... what if there's also an interior river that flows inside the soul, and that you need to sharpen that extra pair of ears to listen to it from the inside?

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### 3. [RIVER AS NOISE]

Now, before we plunge a bit deeper into the poetics of these restless waters (that Teresa knew very well), I want to reconnect us to our present time, and share some thoughts on listening to the cacophony of reality. Some people have claimed that we can train our consciousness to perceive the sonic continuum all around us. That's not an easy task, when you consider the world we live in, constantly saturated with sonic overload. The information that our auditory cortex receives is far too much for the brain to be able to process. In fact, not all the vibrations we register even reach our conscious awareness—for that we need to add the element of active attention. To deal with this, our attention has pretty much narrowed down to only what our brain deems valuable, while the rest is filtered out as trash. Composer Pauline Oliveros was bothered by this back in the 1990's, and wrote about how human attention has become disconnected from its surroundings: if my awareness of all sounds around me is reduced to only what I "need" to hear, I become detached from the rest. Oliveros advocated for our ability to train our awareness,

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<sup>8</sup> In Psalm 84:9, we find the verse: "*Audiam quid loquatur in me Dominus Deus.*" Unlike the Hebrew original, "אֶשְׁמָעָה מִה' יְדִבֵּר, הָאֵל יְהוָה" (literally, "I will hear what He shall speak, the God Yhwh"), Jerome's Christian translation emphasizes inner hearing: I will hear what the Lord God will speak *in me*. Another example is Saint Augustine, who narrates his *Confessions* not with words uttered by his bodily voice, but with "the words of the soul and the cry of thought, which your ear, O Lord, understands" (neque id ago verbis carnis et vocibus, sed verbis animae et clamore cogitationis, quem novit auris tua), Augustine, *Confessiones*, ed. L. Verheijen, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, 27 (Turnhout, 1981), 155 (X.2 [2]); and imagines God speaking to his inner ear, penetrating his very deafness (ibid., 268 (XIII.29 [44])). For further discussion see Elizabeth Sears, "The Iconography of Auditory Perception in the Early Middle Ages: On Psalm Illustration and Psalm Exegesis," in Charles Burnett, Michael Fend, Penelope Gouk (Eds.), *The Second Sense: Studies in Hearing and Musical Judgement from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century* (London: Warburg Institute, 1991), 27-30.

<sup>9</sup> "Paréceme que quien quisiese engañar a los otros diciendo que entienden de Dios lo que es de sí, que poco le cuesta decir que lo oye con los oídos corporales; y es así cierto con verdad, que jamás pensé había otra manera de oír ni entender hasta que lo vi por mí." *Vida*, 25:9.

<sup>10</sup> "Otra manera hay como habla el Señor a el alma, que yo tengo para mí ser muy cierto de su parte [...] Es tan en lo íntimo del alma y parécete tan claro oír aquellas palabras con los oídos del alma a el mismo Señor, y tan en secreto." *Moradas VI*, 3:12.

<sup>11</sup> "[T]hus, as one sometimes understands without speaking, so it is here, that God and the soul understand each other simply because His Majesty wishes the soul to understand Him, without any other artifice." ("[Q]ue allá parece tiene el alma otros oídos con que oye, y que la hace escuchar, y que no se divierta [...] así como allá sin hablar se entiende, así es acá, que se entiende Dios y el alma con sólo querer Su Majestad que lo entienda, sin otro artificio.") *Vida*, 27: 8,10.

and she was inspired by Eastern mystical traditions to develop a practice called Deep Listening to expand receptivity to the entire “sonic space-time continuum”.<sup>12</sup> The goal of it is to awaken active engagement and amplify one’s awareness of the soundscape that surrounds her—as well as the one inside her—at the acoustic, biological, and mental levels. With practice, noise could become an object of attention, contemplation and even imitation.

If we return to our river, could we use the noise of the water as an object of contemplation, and like Teresa, listen for this noisy river that flows in the soul?

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Imagine yourself in a river, recording it from a more distant perspective and then you zero in on a certain part of the water flow by gradually moving the mic towards it, until you are so close that you can only hear this one water gesture. Then you move equally close to other flow formations and explore the fabulous variety of individual water voices that make up the sum total of the river sound at that location where you are recording.<sup>13</sup>

Before technology got fancy enough to produce and play artificial noise, rivers were nature’s version of white noise. That quote I read before was by Hildegard Westerkamp, sound artist and pioneer of field recording music. What she’s talking about might refer to a methodology of field recording and layered listening through technological means; but it may also guide us in that little excursion of ours through the other kind of water-noises—not the natural, but the metaphoric ones: those I’ve found in the mystical writings of the Castilian Carmelites. We might find a connection here between Westerkamp’s close-miking to individual water-voices of a physical river—one that you get pretty wet if you step into—and the mental listening of our barefoot Carmelite, Teresa de Jesús, who was attuned to divine water-voices in the roaring river of her soul. Remember that gardener who struggles to water the garden of his spiritual path to divine unity? After he’s passed the hard work of pulling water from the well, turning the waterwheel, and finally enjoying the soaked land around the riverbed, he reaches the fourth stage of prayer. All the first three involved some amount of work—even the water from the river has to be directed to the garden somehow. But in the fourth stage, the gardener has to do nothing at all: it’s that unexpected rain that falls down from the sky, a bit like the wet season here that I was telling you about. Teresa describes it as a heavenly water that comes when the gardener is least expecting it,<sup>14</sup>

seeing myself soaked with water that, without pain, poured forth with such force and speed that it seemed that this cloud in the sky was throwing it out of itself.<sup>15</sup>

That’s pretty damn intense, isn’t it? I could very well relate to this sensation of a cloud that bursts open, tears the sky apart, we’ve had thunders here last month that sounded like they’d break down the foundations of the house. This is not a gentle rain nourishing a garden; it’s a crashing force that can drown the whole thing. It reminds me of a panic attack I once had next to a magnificent waterfall, feeling this raw violent force... d’you know that feeling of complete surrender to the elements, when you’re suddenly aware of your utter fragility, and at the same time of being absolutely inseparable from the forces of the world? There’s a kind of fierce grace in that overflow, a terrifying presence to which you must surrender.

This, Teresa explains, is called the prayer of Union, that moment when the divine and the soul become one and the external senses of the body, hearing included, are completely useless; you just float bathed in a pool of your own tears without any idea when and how you shed them, when God speaks to you and

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<sup>12</sup> See for example Pauline Oliveros, *Deep listening: A composer’s sound practice* (New York: IUniverse, 2005); “Auralizing in the Sonosphere: A Vocabulary for Inner Sound and Sounding,” *Journal of Visual Culture*, 10/2 (2011).

<sup>13</sup> Hildegard Westerkamp, interview in Cathy Lane and Agnus Carlyle, *In the Field: The Art of Field Recording* (Axminster, Devon, Uniformbooks, 2013), 87.

<sup>14</sup> “[L]et us speak of this heavenly water that in its abundance soaks and saturates this entire garden: if the Lord were always to give it when there is need, the gardener would evidently have it easy. [...] This water from heaven often comes when the gardener is least expecting it.” (“Digamos ahora de esta agua celestial, que llueve muchas veces con tanta abundancia, que casi anega el huerto todo. Y si el Señor es servido de darla cuando hay necesidad, sin ningún trabajo nuestro, claro está que el hortelano poco ha de hacer. [...] Esta agua de cielo viene muchas veces cuando menos lo piensa el hortelano.”) *Vida*, 18:9.

<sup>15</sup> “[V]erme llena de agua que sin pena destilava con tanto ímpetu y presteza que parece lo echava de sí aquella nuve del Cielo.” *Vida*, 19:1.

says, “it is no longer the soul that lives but I.”<sup>16</sup> The soundtrack of this union happens to be the loudest white noise that could possibly exist: when water falls into itself. Rain falling from the sky into a river, or a spring, or the sea, where all is made of water. So you see, that thing we call ‘noise’ can either wreck your attention, or keep it together...

#### 4. [RÍOS SONOROSOS]

Now that we’ve washed a bit in the rain of mystical union, I want you to listen what another Carmelite mystic has to say about all this, to get some perspective. San Juan de la Cruz, who was Santa Teresa’s collaborator early on. He also became quite a famous poet: you may have heard about *La Noche Oscura del Alma*, a poem he wrote while he was imprisoned in Toledo by the inquisition in the 1570’s.<sup>17</sup> Anyway, for our case, we turn to another poem called *El Cántico Espiritual*—a sort of sanjuanista version of the *Song of Songs*. I want to read you a few lines from stanza number 14:

Mi amado, las montañas,  
Los valles solitarios nemorosos,  
Las ínsulas extrañas,  
Los ríos sonorosos,  
El silbe de los aires amorosos

My Beloved is the mountains,  
The solitary wooden valleys,  
The strange islands,  
The sonorous rivers,  
The whisper of the amorous breezes.

La noche sosegada  
En par de los lavantes del aurora,  
La musica callada,  
La soledad sonora,  
La cena que recrea y enamora.<sup>18</sup>

The quiet night  
Paired with the rising of the dawn,  
The silent music,  
The resonant solitude,  
The supper that recreates and enamours.

The speaker in the poem is the soul, who writes to her beloved God, as a bride to her groom. After completing the poem, Fray Juan goes on to write a commentary on his own poetics. He wanted to explain it to Ana de Jesús, a young Carmelite novice in the first steps of her spiritual journey. In this commentary, he tries to teach her—or in our terms, mansplain to her about the various ways to understand the voice of God. In a torrent of watery and vocal quotes from the Scriptures, one particular expression grabs my ear: *Los ríos sonorosos*. This word, *sonorosos*, is obviously a sort of onomatopoeia: it captures the very sonorosity of the elements. Rivers, in the plural. They are roaring, rushing, gushing, foaming, gurgling.

It’s an extended form of the adjective *sonoro*, so Juan here uses a sort of acoustic poetics to harness the full sonic potential of the letter “s”. Here’s what he writes about it in his commentary:

This voice, or this sonorous sound of these rivers described here by the soul, is a swelling so abundant that it swells [the soul] with goodness, and a power so powerful that it possesses it, so that it no longer seems to be merely the sound of rivers, but the roar of the mightiest thunders [...] from which we learn that God is an infinite voice—and when He communicates with the soul in this manner, it creates the effect of a colossal voice.<sup>19</sup>

Notice how Juan emphasizes the multiplicity: the voice of God is composed of an infinite number of voices. It’s also interesting how he chooses the word “sound” (*sonido*) rather than “voice” (*voz*), which brings out yet another facet of the multiplicity of God’s voice. He later explains that God can speak in a different voice to each soul, depending on its unique capacity and level of understanding.

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<sup>16</sup> *Vida*, 18:14.

<sup>17</sup> The poetry of Juan de la Cruz has been widely appropriated in popular culture. A recent example is Rosalía’s 2017 song “Aunque es de noche,” based on the poem “Qué bien sé yo la fonte,” also written during his imprisonment in Toledo and reported to have been included in the notebook with which he escaped prison on the night of August 14-15, 1978, along with “El Cántico espiritual.”

<sup>18</sup> San Juan de la Cruz, “El Cántico Espiritual,” in *Vida y obras de San Juan de la Cruz* (Madrid: la editorial Catolica, 1964), st. 14, my translation.

<sup>19</sup> “Esta voz o esto sonoro sonido de estos ríos que aquí dice el alma, es un henchimiento tan abundante que la hinche de bienes, y un poder tan poderoso que la posee, que no solo le parecen sonido de ríos, sino aun poderosísimos truenos [...] De donde es de saber que Dios es voz infinita, y comunicándose al alma en la manera dicha, hácele efecto de inmensa voz.” Juan de la Cruz, “El Cántico Espiritual”, Canción 14 y 15, 10.

Then, Juan does something very characteristic of any good theology student: quoting from the Scriptures, and reminding us of some of the famous biblical iterations of this metaphor of the divine voice as the voice of many waters.

From the prophet Ezekiel's description:

And, behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east: and his voice like the voice of many waters: and the earth shined with his glory.<sup>20</sup>

Or Ezekiel's vision of the heavenly beasts:

And I heard the sound of their wings, like the voice of many waters, as the voice of the Almighty, and when they walk, there is the voice of an uproar, as the noise of a host.<sup>21</sup>

Or the iconic scene from John's Apocalypse:

And I heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of great thunder: and I heard the voice of harpers playing their harps. And they sang as it were a new song.<sup>22</sup>

Or a bit later on:

And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.<sup>23</sup>

Let me add to this list my personal favorite from the Psalms, which Juan doesn't actually quote, but probably should:

The rivers have lifted up, O Lord, the rivers have lifted up their voice; the rivers lift up their crashing waves; more than the voices of many waters, mightier than the breakers of the sea.<sup>24</sup>

So, again: the divine voice is not a singular sound; it is a multitude. The roaring force of the elements is contained in the divine sound, pouring its way out of the scriptures.<sup>25</sup>

## 5. [SHIFTING TO SOUND ART]

Fray Juan started off as a young protégé of Santa Teresa who later became her accomplice and a prolific mystic in his own right, although he continued to be inspired by her ideas; and we've already seen how Teresa liked explaining mystical things using water metaphors.

It turns out she's not the only one: some sound artists quite like them too. Listen to this little exercise by Pauline Oliveros:

By a river or a stream, listen for the key tones in the rushing waters. Allow your voice to blend with the sounds that you hear.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ezekiel 43:2. I have re-translated the Biblical verses after consulting several versions.

<sup>21</sup> Ezekiel 1:24.

<sup>22</sup> Rev. 14:2.

<sup>23</sup> Rev. 19:6.

<sup>24</sup> Ps. 93:3-4. Another one could have been: "And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace; and his voice as the sound of many waters." [Rev. 1:15]; "The voice of the Lord is upon the waters: the God of glory thundereth: the Lord is upon many waters." Ps. 29:3.

<sup>25</sup> This imagery of the sound of many waters also appears in one of Saint Teresa's disciples, María de San José (Salazar's *Libro de recreaciones*). During one of their shared recreational hours depicted in this work, the nuns observe a fellow nun humming to herself in a dreamy fashion in the garden, her gaze turned toward the heavens. While observing her, they listen to the sounds of the trees and the flowing water, and one nun "remembers the prophet's words: Our Lord, your voice is like the sound of many waters." As a learned woman (Teresa affectionately called her "my scholar" [*mi letrera*]), María knew the source of this quotation; unlike San Juan, who wrote according to the conventions of learned theologians, she saw no need to cite the verses directly; her book was intended for recitation among the younger nuns under her care, most of whom could not read Latin (or read at all). While vernacular versions of scripture were forbidden at the time, they were common in earlier periods and often influenced how texts were understood and retold. For example, Spanish versions of this expression variously read *voz de muchas aguas/sonido de muchas aguas*, each emphasizing either the physical/anthropomorphic aspect of God (voice, *voz*) or the disembodied sonority (sound, *sonido*). María's modern Carmelite editor spares us the need to search through scripture, noting in a footnote that María could have cited various sources, including the examples above.

<sup>26</sup> Oliveros, "The River Meditation" (1976), *Deep Listening Pieces*, 34.

We spoke earlier of her listening practice—this was one of those exercises that Oliveros left us. I’ve been trying that lately in my own river. I wonder what voice she’s referring to... it’s no easy task to isolate a single tone, or even a water-movement in a rushing stream: Hildegard Westerkamp was definitely teasing us in suggesting this. But the plumbing tubery of our perception has more than one direction. As Oliveros offers, we could try to hear ourselves within the great multitude of the whole.

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Wait a minute. I thought I’d started with a venture into Teresa of Avila’s mystical sonic experience; but after bathing in these water metaphors I realize that Teresa was actually my segue into the Voice of Many Waters. If we think about this concept, it has a double function in Teresa’s world. On one hand, the many waters are used to describe the divine voice—which would be interesting on its own, to try and analyze how God sounds like to the listening nun; but also—on the other hand—these waters are actually a metaphor of the noisy rivers flowing inside her, which, come to think of it, is practically the noise that prevents her from being able to concentrate and hear the divine sound. So there’s a strange paradox: while Teresa tries to write down what’s happening inside her mind—as she was ordered to by her superiors—the cacophony clattering inside that same mind is what makes it hard for her to complete the very task of describing that noise itself.

Could it be that I went through the same paradoxical process? Trying to use the voices of the river to talk about the voices of the Carmelites, but ended up distracted by those same voices I was trying to listen to?

Or Maybe, in the undercurrents of the river, flutters the vocal multiplicity of citation: sacred verses and the words of mystics and sound artists allow this text—and me who utters it—to speak in more than one voice... to speak in the voice of many; or as Oliveros’ puts it in another one of her exercises:

Listen inwardly to the sound of your voice. Listen inwardly as if there were many of you.<sup>27</sup>

Might this dubious metaphor of water currents as a multitude of voices—which we’ve inherited from scripture and appropriated yet again for the umpteenth time—help us distinguish the noise of voices outside from the ones within? Where is the valve that opens the flow from outside to inside and back again? And is it true, as Teresa said, that all of this is just a single drop of water from the great flowing river prepared for us?

If I wanted proof that (for Catholic mystics) God’s voice is the voice of many waters, I could have just opened the Bible. But by tuning into that Carmelite wave through the filter of listening practices, I am beginning to learn something about my own perception, here and now: in this river I’m sitting in, and in the one that flows within me.

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<sup>27</sup> “Sex Change” (1985), *ibid.*, 36.



This is the first version of what will hopefully become a series of publically available essays, as part of “The Voice of Many Waters” project portfolio. While I am responsible for the research, script, field recordings, sound design, and mix, I am grateful to: Eyal Lally Bitton, for additional collaborative field recordings, input in the mix and processing, and a wellspring of resourceful partnership; my band Wackelkontakt (Marco Milevski, Bitton, and myself)—from whom I have incorporated snippets of our track “Change The Outcome” (from *Change The Process*, Jauneorange & Orthodox Records, October 2024), which features a rendition of Hildegard von Bingen’s “O Virtus Sapientiae”; my supervisors John Arblaster and Frank Agsteribbe, and IWP coach Joost Vanmaele; Harri Hudspith, Aisha Pagnes, and Danielle Zini, who lent a generous ear and offered invaluable comments; and finally, Sergi Castella Martinez and the team at CERCCA (Centre for Aesthetics, Religion, and Contemporary Culture, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona) for inviting me to perform an early live version of this essay at the depth of the Convent de Sant Agustí, below sea level.

Tomer Damsky, Tordera river, June 2025

