

## THE NAMES OF GOD IN SAINT TERESA

Jon M. Strolle

Teresa of Avila's writings create a number of difficulties for study from the point of view of literary onomastics, and mainly it is a question of the literariness of her biography and mystical treatises, or of her other religious commentaries, chronicles, and letters. Her writings are all intimate documents. They belong to the interior walls of her life, within the convent, in the relations she had with friends to whom she continued to write, within the bonds that were constructed between her confessors and herself, and ultimately, within the private and privileged realm where she could find God. Her two masterpieces are her Life and the Interior Castle or Dwellings. In between these two poles stretches a good variety of work which includes instructions to her nuns on prayer and the preparation for it, on practical ways of solving problems among people, the telling of how she founded the various convents, and many letters that show her fiery and consoling temperament side by side. Teresa shunned the belletristic world, while confessing a childhood predilection for such frivolous things as romances of chivalry. Throughout her life she professed not to write from other impulses save her superiors' demands and her felt need to inform and to teach

those nuns who were in her charge as founder of the Order of Discalced Carmelites. Even her poetry lacks the lyric intensity of purely personal experience and shows rather a desire to teach by all the means of expression she found she could use.

All her works reflect the need to be as clear as is possible concerning her own experiences with God's grace and love in the form of prayer, meditation, mystical rapture, and ecstasy. Her clarity had to depend on a direct, uncomplicated expression that was sufficient in itself. Once her thoughts were set down, she did very little rewriting, and in most cases did none at all. In the various versions of some of her works, the Way of Perfection, for example, one may see that she did indeed strive for stylistic improvement. The improvement, however, usually meant removing either a clumsily constructed phrase or, more telling, the elimination of a personal note that had slipped through on the first writing.<sup>1</sup> It is the latter trait that characterizes most of her writing. One reads about Teresa and sees her thoughts and feelings as the product of flesh and blood rather than speculations from an abstract source. In other attempted improvements whatever was achieved in clarity usually was lost in spontaneity. What has come down to us, then, is a collection of documents that show her efforts at organizing, clarifying, and capturing with simple and complex images the great world of her experiences; on the human side with

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fellow nuns, priests, confessors, prelates, sponsors and backers of convents, and even with kings; and in the divine sphere, her experiences of the various manifestations of God. The easy and necessary answer is that her work has literary qualities of construction, metaphor, and rhetoric but that is predominately non-literary in intent and achievement. She is a writer rather than an author.

The names she applies to God may be centered around three foci for presentation here: The first nuclear concept is that of God's Sovereignty, second the Humanity of Christ, and third the special affinities of intimacy between the soul of the believer and God, Espousal. On the latter topic, names are the least satisfactory, for although they provide suggestive points from which to view the mystical relationship they contain only a small portion of it and can conclude nothing about that which by its nature is infinite and ineffable.

One step back before beginning an examination of the areas indicated. The most frequent reference in Saint Teresa's writings is simply to Dios, to God. In proportion she uses no other term as often as this one. In comparison the references to Jesus Christ are a fraction. Neither are there frequent references to the Trinity, yet her belief in the latter and devotion to the former are

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unquestioned. If the notion of a mantra could be extracted from her writings, Dios would most likely be the word she would use for the quiet prayer of recollected, interior meditation. Like so much of what she did and wrote it is fundamental, simple, and essential.

Her acquaintance with the ecclesiastical rhetoric of her day--and through it even the Ciceronian elegance of Antonio de Guevara, a direct ancestor of English euphuism--had taught her the value of a convincing exhortative style, both in conducting the affairs of her Order and presentation of her religious ideas to her brothers and sisters. She pleaded and called for guidance invoking the Divine Name, and in such a rhetorical mood she speaks of God as Majesty, as Lord, King, Sovereign, Emperor and other variations on the theme of the supreme position in a hierarchical order to which she and all others should be obedient.<sup>2</sup>

One example among the constant references to the Kingship and Lordship of God reveals the lack of satisfaction with which she viewed her efforts to show the relation of such majesty to the soul's search for God. In a section from Chapter Two of the Seventh Dwelling of the Interior Castle, she illustrates how one of God's sovereign names may serve another purpose. She begins, "I want to give you a comparison or two. Please God that they be such that they say something, but if such be not the case, I know I tell the truth in what I say. The King is in his palace, and there are many wars in

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his kingdom and many painful things, but he does not leave his post for these reasons. Thus it is here (in the soul's interior) although in those other dwellings there is much tumult and there are poisonous beasts and it is noisy, no one goes into that dwelling who leaves it; not even what one hears, although it causes pain, is enough to upset the dwelling and take away its peace because passions are now conquered so that they are afraid to enter since they would leave overcome. All our body aches, but if the head is healthy, because the body aches the head will not also ache. I'm laughing at these comparisons for they don't please me, but I know no others. Think what you will, what I have said, that is true."

Her stepping off point is a name, King, with biblical pedigree, and this is worked through a comparison which in the end is not satisfying. The author's dissatisfaction is noted, but she feels the need to assure us of the truth of what she intended once more. Rather than leaving the failed comparison out, however, Teresa lets it stand as a suggestion of the difficulty of the topic and of her struggle to write about it.

The Kingship names serve to illustrate how her diplomatic strategies contributed to her success with all ranks and kinds of people. Many commentators have noted her particular success in founding a new religious Order at a time when it was very dangerous to suggest any change in the established modes of religious

life. One of the major difficulties she faced in formulating her reforms was the clear risk of being associated with the heretical groups and practices that truly did abound in 16th century Spain (and which provide the defense for the Inquisition's apologists). Quietism, Illuminism and other styles claimed for their adherents a direct communication with God. As some of these appealed to the pleasures, they readily found followers who eventually were controlled by the severity of inquisitional punishment. Yet Teresa's devotion to a purified asceticism made her position clear; she would not encourage further drift and rejected throughout her life all efforts to loosen the discipline that she herself had instituted in the founding statutes of the new Discalced Carmelites.

In addition, Saint Teresa was of a family of Jewish ancestry-- a fact well known at the time but later kept from "pious minds" according to a twentieth-century biographer in Spain. This disadvantage combined with her reforming zeal made her work double precarious and hard. The success she achieved was in part assignable to her diplomatic tact as well as to her great energy and, of course, faith in God's grace. Her clear and useful diplomatic insights are in part revealed in her careful attention to the kingship of God. Alongside her comprehension of God's majesty, one ought to recognize as well her insistence on the humility of the follower and subject who wishes to serve this most exalted king and Emperor. The latter title, Emperor, is quite fitting to a culture such as that of

Spain whose royal and imperial master Charles was still of recent, revered memory.

The grand scale of sovereignty forms the framework of her notions of God, but the substance is filled with other more personal images and views of how God is manifested to His faithful. The greatest of these images and one which is a main topic of her autobiography, her Life, is that called the Humanity of Christ, a name she gives to the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. Her adjectives usually stress the most sacred nature of this manifestations of God, and she pours much of her argument and illustration into defending her understanding and feeling for the overpowering visions she had of God in human form. At the same time these visions caused her great trouble with authorities and with her own conscience. She knew that what she saw was true and could ill follow the prescriptions of her confessor who required that she make every effort including gestures in order to ward off what he thought must surely be a satanic spirit. The suspicions of the priest were natural for Spain had many nuns, monks, and other religious practitioners who were regularly revealed as frauds after attracting great popular followings. It was impossible to authenticate such direct and personal experience of God. The conflict that came from the clash between the decisions of her superiors and the voice of the higher authority who spoke in her visions, visions per-

ceived with the eyes of the soul rather than those of the body, was resolved with difficulty. While fulfilling her vows of obedience, she maintained the truth of what she saw.

Teresa persisted in speaking of her visions all the while lamenting her poor imagination and acknowledging the problems of truth in anyone's personal, unexamined experiences. For reassurance, perhaps, the name used for her vision, the Humanity of Christ, is more often qualified by an absolute superlative, most Sacred, than is any other name. The extent to which she justified this particular vision fits with the apologetic nature of much of the Book of her Life. It was written at a time when she was less confident in her mission and in her power to relate that mission to others than she would be by the time of writing the Interior Castle, for instance. Nevertheless, she insisted on the truth of her visions and refused to deny any portion of them even through her confessors only reluctantly and cautiously came to accept them as authentic.

The names which appear in her descriptions of these visions point out the human features of God. She writes, "Christ is a very good friend because we look on him as Man, and we see in him weaknesses and sorrows, and he is a companion..." Other references stress the role of the Son, the corporeal features of Christ's Passion, and the presence of God in the Host and in the Sacrament of Communion. Her terminology is certainly heartfelt and exuberant but it is also conventional. She sets her individual stamp by the selection of terms

and forms of address that build an intimacy with God and Christ, a closeness built on the tender love of God for the creature's soul rather than on awe of distant majesty alone. Conscious first of God's sovereignty, Teresa was led through her visions of Christ's humanity to the stage named by the third focal point of this presentation, Espousal or mystical union.

God, Lord, and Husband, Dios y Senor y Esposo, the brides of Christ all ought to seek communion with their celestial Master (or is it Teacher) celestial Maestro, through prayer and contemplation and quiet. No one may pretend to mystical union other than to prepare the way, the final gift will come at the pleasure of the Giver, of the True Lover. In her poetry the love terms intensify, but also reveal their traditional origins. It is here one may see what Denis de Rougemont in Love in the Western World understands as her participation in a long cultural tradition of love imagery that was probably overinterpreted in the first applications of psychoanalysis to such extraordinary lives as hers. Sexual frustrations are not the only source of love symbols. But the names in themselves, no matter how intimate, do not approach the intensity of feeling she wants others to understand. And thus she turns to her comparisons, and these, when taken in the expansive, protean fashion with which she lets them develop fill in what is only begun with a name.

The mystical process is not reduced by Saint Teresa to one single formula nor to a single way of fixed steps and prayers. She

is not nearly so precise as her contemporary St. Ignatius of Loyola whose Spiritual Exercises describe his chosen route in quite close detail. In her works there are two elaborate images--really series of tangentially related and interwoven metaphors that march along an irregular trajectory from the first to the last point, disharmonious if taken and compared in isolation, effective and informing when absorbed in their totality. The two sets belong to the masterworks, the Life and the Interior Castle. That of the Life is the earlier, no so fully drawn, yet the clearer and less encumbered by the polish of style or the doubts and hesitations of advanced knowledge and experience.<sup>3</sup> In the first the mystical love of God is assumed to be comparable to water, and with this basis Teresa begins to build her scene. But this is water tied to another image--that of the Garden, to which she will later add the Gardener who may be both the soul and God. She begins,

It seems to me that one may water a garden in four ways, either by getting the water from the well, which means a great effort for us, or by means of a chain, pump and baskets, which is done with a wheel (I myself have drawn water that way several times): this means less work than the other way, and one also gets more water; or directly from a river or a brook; this kind of irrigation is still much better, because the earth is better filled with water, need not be watered too often and makes much less work for the gardener; or by means of much rain so that our Lord waters the garden without any effort of course and this is incomparably much better than anything mentioned before.

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From this original suggestion of an allegory she builds and rebuilds her image as she takes herself, her confessors, and her nuns on a clarifying excursion of the mystic paths. The garden, first conceived as an orchard becomes a flower garden, the water of the rain may be the Lord's tears that also fall on the Garden that he cultivates so that he is himself the gardener. The preparatory stages have always been easier to suggest. When she comes to the highest levels the water imagery is no longer adequate and she builds a rapid series of images based on fire, heat, the flight of an eagle, a bird in a nest, all that the soul could feel during the ascent or release from the actual ecstatic rapture; then she returns again to the waters that swallow and engulf.

Since the evocative images cited above were not adequate to convey her perceptions of the higher states of mystical experience, she simply began to build outward from her starting place. Rather than restricting her view only to the water similes they became a point of reckoning to which she could return when additional commentary had to be made. Seen only in the context of a literary exercise of expansion it is confusion; seen in the light of her struggles to find expression she is a remarkable success, if each image is taken only for what it individually adds to the sense of the whole experience.

The second series of images is centered on a different idea:

that of the Interior Castle. Evident in the finely worked architecture of her mystical habitat, her capacity for self-expression parallels the development of her spiritual progress. Nonetheless, her religious essays are still purely essays: attempts to trap with simile and metaphor the soul's journey to the presence of God. The Dwellings envisioned the soul as a castle with multiple rings of structures, the most exterior are also the most exposed to the world and to the assaults of the satanic evils that lurk there in the metaphorical forms of preying, clawing beasts. The soul should have a crystalline transparency but the outer rooms are beclouded and covered with the soot and filth of sin. Once past the purification of the first stages, into which and from which the soul may move with relative ease, the journey inward slows and the images swirl in a logic dictated by the strongly visual sense that permeates her writings. The dove is metamorphosed into the butterfly to capture one more sense of rapture and rechanged later into a dove again. The architectural design of her soul's dwelling may be forgotten for the moment as she makes the difficult transition from the accessible areas to the interior rooms where God's grace more than the worshiper's desire determines progress. At the end of her searches of the castle of the soul she again has recourse to symbolic betrothal and marriage imagery and finds what best fits her sense in the image of two united candle flames that may be one for

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a moment but retain their individual identities when parted again.

Rather than the indistinguishable waters of the sea that crowned her quest for an adequate comparison in her Life, here she found a sense of light that incorporated both the unity and separation from God that prompted the poetic lines expressing her mortal sorrow at not dying, "I die because I do not die." The more elaborate arrangement of the Interior Castle, the finer quality of her imagery there, does not mean that she entered a world of letters and obeyed rhetorical canons of equanimity, proportion, and order. These qualities are hers but only when her work is taken totally and not subjected to incomplete analyses dependent on exterior abstractions that do not fit the undulating flow of her ideas from concept to image.

Another arrangement for the names of God might well be found--using the soul as primary perspective, for example; but I do not think that the general conclusions about how these names frame, support, and suggest her intense and complex relation with God will alter. She is conventional in most cases, but within her conventionality she persists in voicing the personal attachment of her humble soul to the greatness, the humanity, and the love which for her was God. She had an open, forceful life balanced with meditation and quiet retreat. Her names for God show the desire to begin rather than to conclude. A name may too easily set limits,

and it would be unlike her to accept any other than those God  
alone defined

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Américo Castro, Teresa la santa y otros ensayos (Madrid, Alfaguara, 1972), p. 25.

<sup>2</sup>A partial listing of the names illustrative of the categories I have chosen would be as follows.

Sovereignty

Señor  
 Su Majestad  
 Divina Majestad  
 Señor de mi alma  
 Emperador  
 Emperador y Señor nuestro  
 Rey  
 Rey eterno  
 Soberano Rey  
 Gran Rey y Emperador  
 Verdadero Juez  
 Señor del cielo y de la tierra  
 Rey todopoderoso  
 Señor del mundo  
 Sol de Justicia  
 Rey de Gloria  
 Grandeza y Majestad mía

Humanity

Cristo  
 Jesucristo  
 Jesús y Señor mio  
 Humanidad del Señor  
 Bondad infinita de mi Dios  
 Humanidad de Cristo  
 Humanidad sacratísima  
 Sacratísima Humanidad de Cristo  
 Jesucristo, Bien nuestro  
 Buen Pastor  
 Crucificado  
 El bien Jesús  
 Guía  
 Camino  
 Luz  
 Jesucristo, Hijo de la Virgen  
 Buen Jesús  
 Bondad y humanidad grande de Dios

Notes, cont'dEspousal

Dios y Esposo

Nuestro Esposo

Amado

Cazador

Hermosura

Dulce Amor

Querido

Cordero

Zagal, Hijo de Dios omnipotente

<sup>3</sup>The following translation and comments are based on material discussed in Helmut Hatzfeld, Santa Teresa of Avila (New York: Twayne, 1969), p. 25 ff.

## G A R C I A L O R C A R E V I E W

Already in its fifth year of publication, this journal is of special interest to all literature professors. Federico García Lorca, now a renowned international dramatic and poetic figure is a continuum in scholarship, in addition to Folklore and Comparative Literature. John Devlin states in "García Lorca's basic affirmation in POET IN NEW YORK" (Studies in Honor of Samuel Montefiore Waxman, edited by Herbert H. Golden, Boston University Press, 1969, pp. 131-140), "Lorca's reputation is unquestionably secure as one of the truly creative artists of modern times." In SERIALS REVIEW (The Pierian Press Inc., Ann Arbor, January/June, 1976, II:2 pp. 24-25), M.R. Llorens states "This journal will most likely join the ranks of ANALES CERVANTINOS (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Instituto Miguel de Cervantes, 1951 -), ANALES GALDOSIANOS (Austin: The University of Texas, 1966 -), CUADERNOS DE LA CATEDRA MIGUEL DE UNAMUNO (Universidad de Salamanca, 1948 -) and others of this nature."

The articles represent contributions from scholars devoting a great share of their time to García Lorca study. An interesting feature of this new bi-lingual journal is its interest and coverage of the international bibliography and scholarship on García Lorca, as shown in "Lorca in Turkish" by Talat S. Halman, "Federico García Lorca in Italy: a selected bibliography of criticism." by Beno Weiss (II:1), and "Federico García Lorca in Portuguese". by Victor Rojas (IV:1). This journal also features the Proceedings of the Seminar on García Lorca at the Modern Language Association meetings, which have been held since 1972. Subscribers can look forward to a very interesting 1977 issue.

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