

Sign, Symbol and Analogy: The semiotics of contemplation in Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle*

There are many ways to go deep within oneself in order to reach out to that which is the Divine in all of us. In *The Interior Castle*, Teresa of Avila speaks to us, from across centuries, of a journey. It is a journey traversing both space and time. It begins in dimly-lit rooms full of vermin and reptiles through which one must pass in order to lose one's earthly trappings and reach the stage of humility and love that is the necessary state souls must obtain to enter the inner chamber, which is filled with the light and love of God. It is a journey that, as a semiotic animal, she describes in words, but she uses these words to explain the unexplainable. She utilizes the analogy of a physical journey to emulate a spiritual path of union with the Divine. In doing so, she leaves us a roadmap, so to speak, for taking that journey ourselves. *The Interior Castle* is a guidebook to the soul that has come down to us in a concrete form, via the written words of a saint from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It uses a purely objective reality, conjured up with words, to illustrate a real state of being. This guidebook has withstood the test of centuries and has ongoing appeal to people of diverse belief systems throughout the world today. What is it about Teresa of Avila's words that have had such a widespread affect? What is the semiotics of contemplation?

Through the signs and means of the semiotic system of language, Teresa of Avila is able to take us on this voyage, over 400 years after writing this masterpiece. We are blessed to have her words as a means of transmitting divine truths to help us on our spiritual quest today. Yet it is via the fickle, retinue of our human language –

signs, symbols and analogies, that Teresa has to express the path she followed to union with the Divine. Our linguistic semiotic capabilities both free and restrain us. They free us when we speak of things from nature, from the world of *ens reales* on which they are based, but limit us when we try to communicate anything that comes from the supernatural realm of God. Signs enable us to read and to communicate the world around us, but their powers lessen when we turn to the supernatural world. Still they are a gift we can share and create with; so perhaps although limited, they are at the heart of what brings us closest to God.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....”<sup>i</sup> In the Christian Bible, God created the world by a linguistic fiat. Whether this passage from *The Gospel of John* is taken literally or not, our capacity with language is the only thing that separates us from the brute animals, making us what John Deely calls semiotic animals: the only animal capable of conscious communication via signs. We try to use our language to express to others our encounters with the Divine, but human language was created as a way of expressing the physical world, our rational minds and our emotional states to one another. Human language is based on the natural world. It is not the supernatural language of God. Yet, on occasion, one of us comes closer to expressing this experience with the Divine than others do, often through artwork, literature or poetry. Creative writing is the process of taking symbols that stand for sounds that make up a given language, placing them in order on a page, and, by doing so, creating a world of signs, which transport us to a place that didn't exist before it was written down on the page. Words are certainly at the heart of the journey Teresa so eloquently takes

us on in *The Interior Castle* She has created a vivid, living world with her words, leaving us a true, concrete form of divine contemplation.

Teresa writes of a journey through a castle, drawing through it a succinct analogy, which emulates the experience of traveling inwards, through prayer and contemplation, into the depths of the soul, a practice that places us in contact with God's immediate presence. Teresa's castle circles in on itself, leading us inward to a light-filled room at the center that is the experience itself. She describes for us, in what Jacques Maritain terms 'anoetic knowledge' or knowledge by analogy, the path one takes to this experience, but in a way that creates a concrete place inside ourselves where we, too, can follow her on the journey of the soul. Teresa of Avila creates a visual for us, a castle with very few trappings. The analogy she draws is simple, and in its simplicity lays its brilliance. It is a well thought out, beautifully crafted analogy, but it is a vague one. We are left to fill in the details of the rooms she creates for us to journey through. As with all other things divine, we must use our imaginations to fill them with form and color. Jacques Maritain, in his classic book, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, speaks of the use of language in describing the mystical experience:

[T]his communication is made to [the recipient of the mystical experience] in the signs of language and human concepts. And how could we understand Him otherwise? God speaks our language so as to be understood by us. These means of transmitting Divine truths are... as St. John of the Cross says, its *silvered exteriors*, by means of which the mind clings to the pure gold of Divine reality... no longer taken from the point of view of the things believed itself... but rather, from the point of view of the *signs or means* used by the believing mind...<sup>ii</sup>

The signs Teresa uses provide a shell within which to encompass the otherwise unexplainable. Because its details are so vague, her shell of a castle lends itself easily to being our own interior castle, making her experience a universally open one.

However, as Brooke Williams Deely notes, “The classics of mystical contemplation tell us that contemplative experience, the direct experience of the ground of being beyond the finite order of being, is beyond the capacity of language to conceptualize... The contemplative nonrational mode of knowing takes signs and symbols to be but signs and symbols, no more, no less, of an experience itself that is beyond language adequately to express.”<sup>iii</sup> Teresa of Avila uses language beautifully to create a rich journey for us to take, but, ultimately, as the journey is a spiritual one, language, itself, hinders her. Throughout *The Interior Castle* she expresses her frustration with words in and of themselves. Teresa writes, “How different is hearing and believing these words from understanding their truth in this way,” and, “This center of our soul... is something so difficult to explain... I do not know how to explain this center.”<sup>iv</sup> Language both aids and frustrates her at every turn. What Teresa of Avila’s *Interior Castle* does make clear is that it is a progressive movement of turning inwards that leads to her variety of contemplation. It is a movement inward, this searching for the soul, and is therefore so aptly illustrated in Teresa’s analogy concerning the journey towards the center of an interior castle, which is both the interior of a figurative castle and a literal self.

A castle is, for all practical purposes, a home. Teresa was a Carmelite nun, who has since been sainted and made a Doctor of the Catholic Church. In Carmelite teachings, you are your home and God dwells within. This indwelling of God is not

taken symbolically but rather literally. In his book, *I want to See God: A Practical Synthesis of Carmelite Spirituality*, Father Marie-Eugene of the Child Jesus, O.C.D., lays out the essentials of the Carmelite believe in an never-ending, spiraling relationship with God, from (A), to (C), then back to (A) He says, “The whole of Teresian spirituality is in this movement towards God present in the soul [as such:]... (A) The presence of God in the soul. This is its fundamental truth... (B) The progressive interiorization of the soul. This expresses its movement. (C) Profound union with God. This is its end... (A) God is present in the soul.”<sup>v</sup> This continues until it circles back on itself, like the circular castle Teresa employs in her apt analogy. Thus, an intimate interior with rooms spiraling inward is a perfect setting for the journey she takes us on. It is a particularly apt analogy for the task at hand. In the mental landscape that is our mind, the castle takes up space, depth and breadth, and has chambers we can wander through. Teresa, by using the symbol of the castle within our soul, has hit upon a brilliant solution to the problem of creating an analogy that truly works. The castle is in our interior. She has fabricated a visual set of it. It is a mental picture of our soul, lodged in our minds. We people it and wander through it, a sublime vehicle for our imaginations, within the interiorscape of our consciousness, the place where signs and symbols play most freely. This mental construct, however, works in an additional way: to read the book takes time, to wander through the castle takes fictive time, to contemplate the inner depths of the soul takes time. It is a multifunctional analogy created by and made into signs.

In the rich world that is *Interior Castle*, Teresa of Avila employs numerous symbols and analogies beyond the journey and the castle to bring her

work alive. The journey begins in the courtyard of the castle, filled with people still oblivious to their spiritual nature, hampered by mortal sin. After passing through the outer courtyard, one enters into the first dwelling place and makes one's way through the outer rooms. Teresa gives us a clear view of what these first rooms are like. "How miserable is the state of those poor rooms within the castle! How disturbed... are... the people who live in these rooms! among the custodians, the stewards, and the chief waiters, what blindness, what bad management!"<sup>vi</sup> In a brilliant use of metaphor, which takes us right into the world of a medieval castle, Teresa likens the agitated people in the rooms with the senses and the inept staff with the faculties. Beginning our voyage in the hustle and bustle of the outer fringes of the court, Teresa, with vivid, descriptive language, takes us through this dim, dirty chaos. After battling their demons successfully in the second dwelling place, the people can proceed forward into the rooms of the third dwelling places. She tells us that there are many people in these rooms. They practice charity and penance and do good works. They undergo personal trials with tenacity. But Teresa urges, "I should like us to use our reason to make ourselves dissatisfied with this way of serving God, always going step by step, for we'll never finish this journey." Indeed, many do stay in these rooms for the entirety of their life, satisfied with themselves but lacking the humility needed to push forward.

In the fourth dwelling place, Teresa draws a beautiful metaphor of two troughs of water, one being filled via aqueducts with water drawn from faraway, the other being filled by a fount of water coming from a natural, unending, abundant spring. The trough filled by the aqueducts is a metaphor for the consolations one

found in the previous rooms. The spring-fed trough is the spiritual delight encountered in these fourth dwelling places.

It seems that since that heavenly water begins to rise from this spring... that is deep within us, it swells and expands our whole interior being, producing ineffable blessings; nor does the soul even understand what is given to it there. It perceives a fragrance... as though there were in that interior depth a brazier giving off sweet-smelling perfumes. No light is seen, nor is the place seen where the brazier is; but the warmth and the fragrant fumes spread through the entire soul... See now that you understand me; no heat is felt, nor is there any scent of perfume, for the experience is more delicate than an experience of these things; but *I use the examples only so as to explain it to you.*<sup>vii</sup> [italics mine]

It is an exquisite simile that Teresa draws for us, but clearly she is frustrated by the limits of language in explaining the experience. She will rely more and more on analogy, simile and metaphor to explain these mystical experiences.

It is in the fifth dwelling places that the soul begins to experience union with God. Teresa writes that many, by various degrees, enter these dwelling places, which are full of hidden treasures buried within. No matter how slender they are, the little lizards of the imagination, intellect and memory can no longer enter into these rooms. All earthly trappings are abandoned as the soul experiences the prayer of union, which Teresa explains with the delightful symbol of a silkworm becoming a butterfly:

You must have already heard about His marvels manifested in the way silk originates, for only He could have invented something like that. The silkworms come from seeds about the size of little grains of pepper... When the warm weather comes and the leaves begin to appear on the mulberry tree, the seeds start to live... The worms nourish themselves on mulberry leaves until, having grown to full size, they settle on some twigs... Once this silkworm is grown... it begins to spin the silk and build the house wherein it will die... This house is Christ... His Majesty Himself, as

He does in this prayer of union, becomes the dwelling place we build for ourselves... When the soul is, in this prayer, truly dead to the world, a little white butterfly comes forth... How transformed the soul is when it comes out of this prayer after having been placed within the greatness of God... Truly I tell you that the soul doesn't recognize itself. Look at the difference there is between an ugly worm and a little white butterfly... Oh, now, to see the restlessness of this little butterfly, even though it has never been quieter and calmer in its life... And the difficulty is that it doesn't know where to alight and rest... it now has wings. How can it be happy walking step by step when it can fly?<sup>viii</sup>

Now begins the analogy of the journey within the journey. The little butterfly has many trials to go through on its way to the sixth dwelling places, which are right on the periphery of the King's light-filled inner chamber, the seventh dwelling place, where union with the Divine is achieved. In the end, it will reach the unceasing spring that floods the room of perpetual light.

As with the lovingly portrayed symbol of the silkworm butterfly, all the more spectacular for its non-scientific origins, all of Teresa's ways of linguistically communicating the journey to God are beautifully apt at expressing their analogies. Father Marie-Eugene succinctly notes, "The advance of the soul through the diverse mansions... is more than a symbol; it is a very precise one and rich in meaning."<sup>ix</sup> The analogies and symbols work with jewel-like precision to express this reality within the limited concept of the symbols we call language, that which allows us as semiotic animals to communicate such heady stuff. Teresa of Avila brings the interior world to life like no other has done before her or since. The skill with which she has brought the heady language of contemplation down to earth is what still speaks to numerous generations of peoples, all over the globe, today.

The interior of *The Interior Castle* is like a spiraling semiosis of contemplation, which leads one into the depths of the soul. Yet at the heart of it all, this description of the interior journey is nothing more than words on a page. Without a reader, a terminus, the relationship begun by Teresa's mind and placed thereby on a page, goes nowhere. The interior castle itself is a symbol brought forth from her mind and beautifully embellished with her power of imagination. She has created, as John Deely calls it, a purely objective reality and made it real for us, but in order to read as a true path towards contemplation and union with the Divine it must be read. In the world of analogies that stand for the supernatural, it is real, but her symbol is real in other ways, as well. Something that is imagined is not real to anyone but the imaginer, unless it is written down and read by others, at which point it becomes 'real' in a two-fold manner. For those who read it, it becomes a part of their inner world of "musement", as Pierce called it, which expresses a way to a physical state, the state of contemplation. Thus its end state is "real" (as it exists for the reader as a route to an obtainable physical state), but it stems from a purely objective reality in the reader's mind. At the same time, there is the physical object that the book has become. What is a book besides symbols written on a page that signify something mentally to a certain population of people? Something they can read, understand, internalize and, if there is wisdom in it, choose to hand down over generations.

So it is that Teresa of Avila creates a world out of signs, symbols and analogies, thereby creating a purely objective reality that speaks of another purely objective reality, which serves as a road map to a physical state of being. She does so

by drawing analogies from everyday signs that we can all relate to that are taken from the natural world. She creates the analogy of the journey within the journey and sets our imaginations free on its path. Capturing this ephemeral experience and transmitting it to others by way of words is a rare and difficult thing. Teresa manages to pull off. It is truly momentous that she is able to map out the route towards the beatific vision in everyday words, using signs, symbols and analogies, for all to understand and follow, if they so chose. She does it all with eloquence, wisdom and grace.

Endnotes:

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<sup>3</sup> Bishop Richard Challoner, ed. *The Holy Bible: Douay-Rheims Version*. “The Old Testament”, Genesis 3: 19. first published by the English College at Douay: A.D. 1609. Baronius Press: MMIX.

<sup>4</sup> Cardinal Ratzinger, Joseph, Interdicasterial Commision. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Part 3, Section 2, Chapter 2, Article 8:VI, 2500-2501. Liberia Editrice Vaticana, Citta Del Vaticano: 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Maritain, Jacques. Gerald B. Phelan, trans. *The Degrees of Knowledge*. p. 266. University of Notre Dame Press. Notre Dame, Indiana: 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Deely, Brooke. “Feminism, Postmodernism, and Mystical Contemplation”. *Semiotics 1999*. Eds: Deely, Simpkins and Spinks. Peter Lang Publishing, New York: 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. *The Interior Castle*, VII:1, p. 427.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Saint Teresa of Avila. *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Volume Two*. “The Interior Castle, VII:2”. p. 430.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Saint Teresa of Avila. *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Volume Two*. “The Interior Castle, VII:2”. p. 433.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Saint Teresa of Avila. *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Volume Two*. “The Interior Castle, VII:2”. p. 433.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Saint Teresa of Avila. *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Volume Two*. “The Way of Perfection: xviii”. P. 140

<sup>12</sup> Cardinal Ratzinger, Joseph, Interdicasterial Commision. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Part 1, Section 2, Chapter 3, Article 12:II, 1027-1028. Liberia Editrice Vaticana, Citta Del Vaticano: 1997.

<sup>13</sup> P. Marie-Eugene, O.C.D. *I want to See God: A Practical Synthesis of Carmelite Spirituality*. Volume 1, p. 17-18. Translation: Sister M. Verda Clare, C.S.C. Reprinted with the permission of FIDES/Claretian, by Christian Classics. Notre Dame, IN:1953.

<sup>14</sup> P. Marie-Eugene, O.C.D. *I want to See God: A Practical Synthesis of Carmelite Spirituality*. Volume 1, p. 23. Translation: Sister M. Verda Clare, C.S.C. Reprinted with the permission of FIDES/Claretian, by Christian Classics. Notre Dame, IN:1953.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Saint Teresa of Avila. *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Volume Two*. “The Interior Castle, VII:1”. p. 429.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Saint Teresa of Avila. *The Collected Works Of St. Teresa of Avila: Volume Two*. “The Interior Castle” I:2, p. 289.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Saint Teresa of Avila. *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Volume Two*. “The Interior Castle, I:2, p. 290.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. Saint Teresa of Avila. *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Volume Two*. “The Interior Castle, I:2, p. 291.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Saint Teresa of Avila. *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Volume Two*. “The Interior Castle, III:1, p. 304.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Saint Teresa of Avila. *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Volume Two*. “The Interior Castle, III:2, p. 313.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Saint Teresa of Avila. *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Volume Two*. “The Interior Castle, IV:1, p. 319.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Saint Teresa of Avila. *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Volume Two*. “The Interior Castle, IV:1, pp. 324-325.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. Saint Teresa of Avila. *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, Volume Two*. “The Interior Castle, V:2, pp. 341-344.

<sup>24</sup> P. Marie-Eugene, O.C.D. *I want to See God: A Practical Synthesis of Carmelite Spirituality*. Volume 1, p. 23. Translation: Sister M. Verda Clare, C.S.C. Reprinted with the permission of FIDES/Claretian, by Christian Classics. Notre Dame, IN:1953.