

**The Mystical Poetry of Jalaluddin Rumi and St. John of the Cross
and the Tillichian Symbols for God**

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Nancy Lourdes U. Toledo

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APPROVAL SHEET


This thesis entitled "THE MYSTICAL POETRY OF JALALUDDIN RUMI AND ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS AND THE TILlichIAN SYMBOLS FOR GOD" prepared and submitted by NANCY LOURDES U. TOLEDO in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS IN LITERATURE has been examined and is recommended for acceptance and approval for ORAL EXAMINATION.

THESIS COMMITTEE


HOPE S. YU
Adviser


ERLINDA K. ALBUERO, Ph.D.
Member



FELY B. LATRAS, M.A.
Member


CLARITA C. FILIPINAS, Ph.D.
Committee Chair

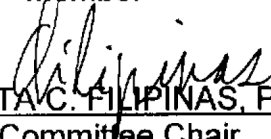
PANEL OF EXAMINERS


Approved by the Committee on Oral Examination with a grade of PASSED


CHARITY A. TECSON, Ph.D.
Department Chair


ERLINDA K. ALBUERO, Ph.D.
Member


FELY B. LATRAS, M.A.
Member


CLARITA C. FILIPINAS, Ph.D.
Committee Chair


HOPE S. YU, Ph.D.
Adviser

Accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree MASTER OF ARTS IN LITERATURE

Comprehensive Examination PASSED: August 12-13, 2012


RAMON S. DEL FIERRO, PhD
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

March 29, 2012
Date of Oral Examination

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Abstract

This thesis is a comparative study that attempts to bridge the spiritual divide of the East and the West by way of the poetry of two mystic poets: Jalaluddin Rumi and St. John of the Cross within the framework of Paul Tillich's concept of symbols.

The thesis compares and contrasts the symbols for God and the experience of God and the mystic's soul in relation to God. It makes use of Evelyn Underhill's three major symbols for the mystic's path: the pilgrim, the beloved and the alchemist to find similarities and differences in the work of both poets.

In the analysis of the symbols that both poets used, it was found that there were a significant number of similar recurring symbols. Furthermore, majority of the symbols points to the same mystical experiences that transcend both Catholic and Islamic dogma and religious practices.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Paul Tillich poses a question: "Is there anything to express at all, if the content of mystical faith transcends anything expressible?" How *does* one speak about an experience that seems to go beyond everything in man's rational mind? Tillich believes that if one must speak at all about God, it must be in the language of symbols.

Faith is the language of symbols. And so is poetry. It is natural, then, that mystics would use poetry in the expression of something as deeply personal and as deeply spiritual as an experience of God. There are few genuine mystics in the world, in any religion. There are even fewer mystic poets.

Jalaluddin Rumi (in Persian, Jalāl ad-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī) was a 13th century Sufi mystical poet. He is a popular figure in Persian poetry and in Islamic mystical circles. His most famous work, the *Masnavi*, is a six-volume poem containing about 27,000 lines. Many consider the *Masnavi* the Persian version of the entire Quran. Rumi's other major work, *The Works of Shams Tabriz*, a collection of poems was dedicated to his master.

Rumi established the whirling dervishes as part of his mystical prayer and his followers established the Mawlawi Sufi order after his death. Rumi's popularity, however, spans many generations, cultures and religions. Rumi is the bestselling

poet in 21st century America, in large part due to the translations¹ by Coleman Barks.

John of the Cross, born Juan de Yepes y Álvarez in 16th century Spain, is not as prolific as Rumi but he wrote such beautiful poems about his experiences with God that he is considered by some to be Spain's greatest lyric poet. But to Catholic faithful, he is more popularly known as the Spanish saint, who along with another mystic Teresa of Avila, reformed the Carmelite Order. With only thirty-two others, the prestigious title of Doctor² of the Church, was conferred on him. He is the Doctor of Mystical Theology. His famous work, "The Spiritual Canticle," an attempt to express the different stages by which a soul attains union with God, was written when John was imprisoned by religious authorities for his work in the reform of his order. When John escaped from prison he wrote even more poems and treatises about his experiences as a mystic.

Rumi and John of the Cross are two of the most popular mystic poets in the world. Their poems have found audiences all over the world in every generation. But theirs is a unique combination of gifts—both are considered holy men in their respective religions, both have claimed to have had a direct experience with the Divine and both of them have expressed the experience in poetry. They both feel the tension of what theologian philosopher Paul Tillich describes as "the infinite distance between the infinite and the finite" (*Dynamics* 71).

¹ Coleman Barks did not translate the poems from Persian. His works are rather interpretations or versions of English translations of the poem by several authors.

² The Catholic Church gives the title "Doctor of the Church" to canonized saints in recognition of a particular field of expertise in theological teaching. In the entire two thousand year history of the Church, only 33 doctors have been named.

This paper's attempt to make a comparison between the religious symbols as expressed in the poets' works becomes a natural subject of study for those who are aware of the deep ties that bind the spiritual and the poetic or in the poetry of Rumi:

God has said, "The images that come with human language
do not correspond to me,
but those who love words must use them to come near."
Just remember, it's
like saying of the king, "He is not a weaver." Is that
praise? Whatever such
a statement is, words are on *that* level of God-knowing. (Rumi trans.
Barks 77)

Rationale of the Study

There is a beautiful line from an English translation of Pablo Neruda's poem that says, "And it was at that age/ poetry arrived in search of me." I find that a very apt description of how I came to "meet" Jalaluddin Rumi. I was in college then and had just been introduced to the "grown-up" world of poetry. I came across a compilation of Rumi's poems, edited by Deepak Chopra and read aloud by celebrities like Madonna and Demi Moore. High art met pop culture. And I was hooked.

St. John of the Cross—I met not on a literary journey but on a spiritual one. I was at that stage in my life when I was taking a more active role in my faith and learning what I could from Catholic saints and blessed. St. John of the Cross' *Dark Night of the Soul* was what I read. Fascinated by his life, I found out that he was