

Rosa de Lima and the Tropes of Sanctity

Frank Graziano

History is lived forward but read backwards. What the actors in any particular historical sequence live as an "open work," characterized by unexpected turns of events and unforeseeable conclusions, is later interpreted retrospectively with its initial uncertainties clarified, with narrative closure, with sediments of previous interpretations already embedded. Such openness of lived experience in contrast to the closure of the historical narratives representing it is paralleled in literary analysis by two registers of reading, one heuristic and the other retroactive. In the former, a reader's understanding and expectations are guided by the text's unfolding as, for example, a novel's plots and themes are gradually revealed. One remains unaware in this first reading of how one's interpretations and expectations will be altered, or even undermined, by developments forthcoming in the narrative. In the subsequent retroactive register, once the reader has progressed through the narrative and is cognizant of those new developments, he or she then recontextualizes all parts of the text in relation to one another and to the narrative as a whole. As Michael Riffaterre described it, the reader "remembers what he has just read and modifies his understanding of it in light of what he is now decoding, . . . reviewing, revising, comparing backwards."¹ Wolfgang Iser argues similarly: just as one lived event affects those which precede and follow it, "each intentional sentence correlative opens up a particular horizon, which is modified, if not completely changed, by succeeding sentences."² The revision of those sentences, or of narrativized historical events, is then further compounded as a sequence is read backwards "through" later developments perpetually contributing their respective, retroactive gloss on what preceded them.

In the seventeenth century, retroactive interpretations of this kind accumulated around the image of Isabel Flores y Oliva, canonized as Santa Rosa de Lima. During her lifetime (1576–1617) and most notably following her death, the initial or heuristic perceptions of

Rosa de Lima were transformed by a retroactive gloss, occasioning a reversal in familial, popular and official opinions of the girl's austerities and mortifications. While Rosa's excesses initially inspired her appraisal as – in words attributed to her mother – the “tormentor of herself” and a “hypocrite, imposter, deceiver, [and] fake saint alien to and empty of any true and solid virtue,”³ such bad-faith and other insanity readings of Rosa's behaviour gradually yielded to a sanctified interpretation. Rosa was expeditiously ushered through the process of canonization to assume, in 1671, the symbolically laden position as first saint of the New World and patron of the Americas.

With Rosa de Lima's one identity (insanity) evolving into the other (sanctity), with the psychopathological reading of her mortifications gradually yielding to the religious one, there was a corresponding shift from a “factual” to a fictional (and thematized) level of discourse and accordingly, a symbolic displacement which recycled the repressed material through a proliferation of tropes. In hagiographies of Rosa de Lima a narrative tension is generated between the history intended and the fiction authored: the tropes are loaded in the hagiographies-as-fiction precisely because they are presented as facts in the hagiographies-as-history. No fiction is as rich as the one that is unintended. Fictional facts are always artifacts, in this case cultural artifacts, speaking both for and through the culture revering them as truths.

My present concern is to introduce one such trope in its relation to perceptions of colonial Spanish America. The depiction of Rosa de Lima as a rose – no less tautological than the reception of her sanctity within the same socio-cultural milieu which produced it – is so thoroughly determined and rhetorically exploited in the seventeenth century that it comes to consolidate the hagiographies' predominant themes and to overflow onto the literature as a whole. Rose imagery is instituted early in the narratives through the relation of an episode in which the infant saint's face seems to have transformed miraculously into “a beautiful, great and fragrant Rose.”⁴ At the time Rosa de Lima carried the given name “Isabel,” but moved by the miracle, her mother exclaimed, “You are the Rose itself. . . and from now on must have no name other than Rose.”⁵ The change from one name to the other was not without its repercussions. Rosa de Lima's grandmother, after whom she had originally been named, was displeased in an aggressive manner, the miracle notwithstanding. When as a child the saint responded to her mother's call of “Rosa,” she was punished by her grandmother, and when she responded to her grandmother's call of “Isabel,” she was punished by her mother. This double bind of love and punishment continued until the Archbishop of Lima, Toribio de Mogrovejo (himself canonized in 1726), resolved the matter by confirming the girl as “Rosa.” All parties contented themselves

with the new name except, later, Rosa herself, who came to view the flowery denomination as a sinful suggestion of beauty and vanity. The dilemma was again resolved by outside arbitration; this time a statue of the Virgin Mary with the Christ child in its arms interceded, explaining that "it pleases the Child that she be named Rose, and that she add to the name the additional name of Santa Maria, forever."⁶ Ecstatic to please the Christ child (simultaneously depicted as Bridegroom), Rosa heeds the Virgin's advice and takes leave of this statue in the Dominican Church as Rosa de Santa Maria.

With the cornerstone for the Rose trope thus in place, the hagiographers indulge in repetitions and stylizations of "our most fragrant Rose."⁷ Many of these are simple images of beauty, form and fragrance; many others are baroque conceits elaborated at great length. The rose's symbolic representation of perfection, completion, messianic hope and other concepts of religiosity and purity was no doubt the intent in all cases, but rose symbolism, double-edged from the beginning, is never free of its carnal lining, carrying specific reference to the female genitalia and, by brief extension, to the echo of virgin fornication as deflowering.⁸ The rose's close traditional association with both worldly and otherworldly love was thus called into play by the symbolism of Rosa's mortifications and by the tropes in the narratives representing them. Born into what Philippe Ariès described as the baroque era's "veritable corpus of macabre eroticism,"⁹ Rosa de Lima engaged in a voluptuous, cruel agenda of self-torture inextricably linked to her mystical preparation for Christ the Bridegroom, who sanctions and encourages her virginity and the mortifications protecting it precisely because he plans to later "enjoy her as His Wife eternally."¹⁰ When we remind ourselves that Christ's discourse is Rosa's own – i.e., Rosa's discourse of the Other – and when we view the drama with the Bridegroom's presence restored to the imaginary realm which brought it forth, it then becomes especially evident that Rosa's mortifications are in service to an agenda other than the purported divine one, that a rationale is invented to bestow a transcendental sanction upon the desire for eroticized suffering which precedes it.

The general tendency in Christianity to repress human sexuality and to divert its insistent resurgence into penance thus gains most vivid representation in a Rosa de Lima, in whom the denial of sexual pleasure takes an aberrant detour through self-inflicted pain as eroticized – auto-eroticized – as it is sanctified by the religious imagination sustaining it. In 1671, the same year Rosa de Lima was canonized, Juan Meléndez explained that Rosa's "greatest pleasure and consolation was to open up her flesh"; forbidding Rosa's mortifications, he concluded, would be "to deprive her of the opportunity for so much pleasure."¹¹ The flesh opens, the flower opens, because the hand that wounds it claims an imaginary

union with the hand of Christ, itself wounded. The pain is pleasurable and the pain is consolation for that pleasure; the sin and its penance are inextricably bound in one erotic, mystical gesture.

Rosa de Lima's mortifications as acts of mystical love, as acts of union with the (imaginary) Bridegroom, are further indexed as diversions of normal sexuality when we call into focus the worldly factors precipitating specific episodes of asceticism and self-inflicted pain. When Rosa was five, to cite one cornerstone in her deification of diverted sexuality, she chopped off her hair (believing its beauty might lead men to sinful thoughts) and took a lifetime vow of virginity. Many of Rosa's self-tortures (lime rubbed on her hands and aji onto her eyelids, a heavy stovepot dropped on her foot, a hatpin jammed into her scalp when she is obliged to wear a crown of flowers) were designed to pre-empt the social outings arranged by her mother to expose the girl to appropriate suitors. On one occasion, when Rosa's mother began arrangements for her daughter's ideal marriage, Rosa rejected the possibility by resorting to her (imaginary) status as Christ's wife, asking if she were expected to abandon a Heavenly Bridegroom for a man.¹² Rather than courting, Rosa withdrew to the tiny hermitage in which "my Husband and I fit well," and the ceremony of erotic torture ensued.¹³ On another occasion the "devil" appeared at that same hermitage in the guise of a handsome man who "sent her lascivious signs with his eyes and mouth." Rosa responded by running inside her house and locking the door; she then "undressed and with an iron chain . . . gave herself so many and such bloody lashes that the blood flowed down to the floor."¹⁴ Rosa's repertory of austerities on earth in preparation for matrimony with Christ hereafter was gruesome, including a daily schedule of ten hours of work, twelve hours of mortification and prayer (the latter often recited while hanging by her hair from a peg in the wall), and two hours of sleep (on a bed made of "three of the most knotty and crooked willow trunks," the cracks between them filled with "pieces of rooftiles and broken plates and bowls").¹⁵ Her diet's staple was ashes mixed with bitter herbs. Routine flagellation was augmented and intensified in response to particularly "sinful" occasions. No part of Rosa's body could be spared the glorified pain. When it once occurred to her that the bottoms of her feet remained untortured, she compensated for the oversight by walking barefooted across the iron of a hot stove. "Lord, increase my sufferings," Rosa prayed at the hour of her death, making the agenda explicit, "and with them increase thy love in my heart."

As Rosa's deathbed supplication illustrates, Christian mortification agendas often establish a proportional relation between pain and love. There are, however, more factors at play than Rosa's simple relation accounts for. The concept of "love" signifies simultane-

ously in two registers: The mortifications are set in motion by denial of carnal love, of sexuality, but this flesh-bound love is then disembodied through mortifications penalizing the body, symbolically mutilating the body that experiences it. Love is then transcendentized, either by stylizing the carnal model into mystical love for an imaginary diety (as in Rosa's case) or more generally by desexualizing it into the Platonic love propagated in the New Testament. What mediates the transition from human sexuality to divine love in the extreme cases – and even in the paradigmatic case, if we recall Christ-the-man's crucifixion in relation to Adam's sin – is the interposition of violence between them. A diversion through pain consecrates the denial of sexuality and transforms the one love into the other; the ascetic, the self-mortifier, makes a "change of fire." The "sin" of the flame's heat is neutralized by the penance of its burn. The more psychosexual demands on the subject are denied and diverted, the more pathological their symbolic expression in the subject's behaviour; Rosa's proportional relation of love and suffering is salvaged in this balancing operation of psychic pressure and the deformation of normal sexual expression.

In returning to the rose trope, we can see how its dual play on carnal and divine love, and its relation to mortification and transcendence, is further suggested by extension into the thematics of thorns, or into what one observer termed "the theatre of horrible thorns."¹⁶ Rosa de Lima herself contributes to the theme by wearing a silver crown of thorns in imitation of her Bridegroom, a crown with ninety-nine barbs rotated regularly to keep all parts of the scalp perpetually wounded. "All of Rosa's fragrance was for everyone, but only the thorns were for herself."¹⁷ Meléndez demetaphorizes the thorn trope by arguing that many Christians wear crowns of thorns pretentiously, but that Rosa's crown was "natural": "What rose is there or has there ever been that is not crowned with thorns?"¹⁸ He then continues to assert that Rosa de Lima "was growing, and because she was a rose, the thorns grew with her,"¹⁹ the one advancing in tandem with the other. In another particularly suggestive passage, the relation of the thorns' development to that of the rose consolidates the crown image with an image of the closed flower's blossoming and with metaphors again expressing the autoeroticism of religious mortification. The erotic implications enmeshed in the passage are first suggested generally by the rose's reference to the female genitalia, and are then enhanced by the double signification of *botón* (flower bud and button) and of *desabrochar(se)* (unbuttoning, and figuratively, opening of the flower). "The rose is born and the thorns are born to crown it; the thorns are rough until the rose flowers (*se desabrocha*) and from its green bud (*botón*) . . . breaking the narrow prison of the petals little by little, while the thorns get smoother and sharpen their points."²⁰ The more the rose's "narrow prison" opens, the more the thorns of mortification refine themselves and

sharpen. In addition to its representations of worldly love converted into mystical love for the Bridegroom, the rose trope further registers Rosa de Lima as a metonymical representation of the Spanish colonies. To sketch the matter here briefly, the hagiographers stylize the indigenous "undiscovered" Americas as a barbarous insult to the Christian diety by virtue of their paganism, their cannibalism, their sodomy, their subjugation for centuries to the "tyrannical yoke of Idols."²¹ This sorry state of affairs is rectified because Rosa de Lima, as the New World's first saint, "first fruit of the Indies," "transplants" the rose garden, "the delicious Garden of the Church," from Europe to the Americas.²² Jacinto de Parra goes so far as to pursue the transplantation trope into utopian motifs by citing a tip for gardeners from Pliny: "The Rose gets better when transplanted."²³ Whatever European Christendom left to be desired, whatever the exhausted soil of Europe failed to yield, will blossom now in the Edenic Indies.

With the "pleasant garden of the New World" thus established, Rosa de Lima is depicted first as its perfection ("If Peru is the Garden, this flower is its finest adornment"²⁴) and then, pursuant to an implied decadence, as the messianic agency of its salvation. The hagiographies establish the necessity for such salvation on the various grounds of the native's continued idolatry, the atrocities committed during conquest, the imperfect Christianity of the Spanish colonizers, and the need to counterbalance a frenzy for material wealth with a spiritual commodity of equal preciousness.²⁵ The hagiographies' New World desert-made-garden, now an imperfect garden, introduces this perfect Rose, this penitent Rose with its thorns turned inward, as part of the narrative emphasis stressing Rosa de Lima as a sacrificial victim offered in expiation to the same Christ who provides the model for her vicarious atonement. The induction of the colonies into Christendom is consummated when the Bridegroom reaches down to "deflower" Rosa from His newfound garden in America.

NOTES

A version of this essay previously appeared in *Encounters* 8 (December 1991).

1. Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 5-6.
2. Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 278.
3. Leonardo Hansen, *Vida admirable de Santa Rosa de Lima, patrona del nuevo mundo*, trans. Jacinto de Parra (Lima: Centro Católico, 1895), 177.
4. Juan Meléndez, *Tesoros verdaderos de las Yndias* (Rome: 1681), I, 179. See also Hansen, 3.

5. Ibid., 180. Note that Rosa de Lima's paternal surname is Flores.
6. Ibid., 180.
7. Juan Meléndez, *Festiva pompa, culto religioso, veneración reverente...* (Lima: 1671), 60.
8. In early Christianity the rose was also a symbol of secrecy, discretion and silence, this dating back to Cupid (also responsible for the fragrance of the rose, having overturned a bowl of nectar on the flower), who used a rose as a bribe to dissuade Hippocrates from revealing the indiscretions of Venus.
9. Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Vintage, 1982), 393. The fusion of sexuality, violence and religion gained sixteenth-century depiction in artistic as well as ascetic expressions: Dürer's Fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse is mounted on a beast with disproportionately large genitals; Nicolas Manuel has Death plunge his hand into the vagina of his victim; and so on. See Ariès, 370, 373.
10. Jacinto de Parra, *Rosa laureada entre los santos...* (Madrid: Impresor Eclesiástico de la Real Corona de Castilla, 1670), 2.
11. Meléndez, *Tesoros*, 230. Mallarmé's phrase "I love the horror of being virgin" is particularly resonant in this context.
12. Ibid., 200.
13. Meléndez, *Festiva pompa*, 48-49.
14. Meléndez, *Tesoros*, 332 and 333.
15. Ibid., 200.
16. Gonzalo Andres de Meneses y Arce, *Ilustración de la Rosa del Peru* (Lima: 1670), 2.
17. Meléndez, *Festiva pompa*, 215.
18. Meléndez, *Tesoros*, 240.
19. Ibid., 69.
20. Ibid., 240.
21. Parra, 55.
22. Ibid., 50, and Meléndez, *Festiva pompa*, 1.
23. Parra, 561.
24. Hansen, 1, and Parra, 53.
25. Rosa de Lima is accordingly often depicted in gem and precious metal tropes.