

BARTOLOME DE TORRES NAHARRO'S
DIALOGO DEL NASCIMIENTO:
A *CONVERSO* CHRISTMAS PLAY

Stephen Gilman has alerted us to the kind of communication that existed between the *converso* artist and his audience. As *The Spain of Fernando de Rojas* so movingly shows, the experience of shared misfortune created in the *conversos* a community very finely attuned to the rhetoric of ambiguity and silence.¹ The story of Christmas, presented by a *converso* dramatist such as Bartolomé de Torres Naharro² to what we can expect to have been a predominantly *converso* audience, acquires new resonances when we consider the criss-cross of associations and equivocations that make up New Christian rhetoric.

The *Diálogo del Nacimiento* (1512?) is Torres Naharro's first play and his only Christmas play.³ It was performed in Rome, on Christmas Eve, before a largely Spanish audience. The play consists of two parts: the *Diálogo* and the *Addición*. In the first part, the Spanish pilgrims Patrispano and Betiseo meet in Rome on Christmas Eve, offer news from the homeland, and discuss various aspects of Christian doctrine. In the second part, the rustics Hernando and Garrapata join the pilgrims and exchange

¹ Stephen Gilman's demonstration of Rojas' "tacit communication with readers who were *conversos* and who shared his corrosive vision of the universe" can be extended to include Torres Naharro. "Later on the preoccupations of *conversos* who had emigrated to Italy appear in such neo-Celestinesque works as *La lozana andaluza* and Torres Naharro's *Comedia Jacinta*" (*The Spain of Fernando de Rojas* [Princeton, 1972], p. 365).

² Américo Castro was the first to suspect the dramatist's *converso* identity: "En la obra de [Juan del Encina, Lucas Fernández, Torres Naharro, Diego Sánchez de Badajoz] y otros conversos se muestran las huellas de su procedencia, tanto en su estilo como en la manera de articular sus temas. En forma más o menos abierta se nota en ellos algo discrepante, minoritario, y esto ayuda a predecir en ciertos casos su pertenencia a la casta hispano-hebreá" (*De la edad conflictiva* [Madrid, 1961], p. 207; also pp. 184-185, 224). For additional references to Torres Naharro's *converso* status, see *La realidad histórica de España* (México, 1966), p. 185 and *Hacia Cervantes* (Madrid, 1967), pp. 127-128, 141. Gilman provided further literary evidence supporting Don Américo's view in "Retratos de conversos en la *Comedia Jacinta* de Torres Naharro," *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica*, 17, 1964, 20-39.

³ Joseph E. Gillet suggested an earlier date ("*Propalladia*" and *Other Works of Bartolomé de Torres Naharro*," 4 vols. [Bryn Mawr and Philadelphia, 1943-1961], vol. 3, p. 165), but Stanislav Zimic argues convincingly for the later date ("El pensamiento satírico y humanístico de Torres Naharro," *Boletín de la Biblioteca Menéndez Pelayo*, 52, 1976, 21-22). All quotes of the *Diálogo del Nacimiento* are from Gillet's edition of the play, vol. 1, pp. 261-292; section and line numbers in parentheses follow each quote.

pullas with them. All this might not seem to add up to a very good Christmas play, and yet it was meant to offer its audience some kind of "consolación" (*Introito*, 111). In its nostalgic evocation of powerful, contradictory emotions, the performance must have made for a rather strange Christmas celebration.

Torres Naharro, probably acting the part of *introito* rustic, promised his audience "vn poquito de nuestra nación/y todo el mesterio del gran Nacimiento" (*Introito*, 113-114). That the audience was interested in what the dramatist, a recent arrival to Rome, had to say about Spain, is obvious. That he announced a discussion of "todo el mesterio" is far more interesting, for we know that religious debates were central to pre-inquisitional life in Spain. The *Cancionero de Baena* attests to the fact that there was a tradition of polemical poetry inspired by Christian doctrine. Charles Fraker has shown that the various *mesterios*, such as the Trinity and the Incarnation, were defended or attacked with great vehemence throughout the fifteenth century in Spain.⁴ The Christians aimed to convert their Jewish neighbors, and the Jews barricaded themselves behind a scoffing rationalism. The *conversos* either resisted or were won over altogether, often becoming ardent defenders of their new "law." Or, as Fraker has demonstrated, they made sincere attempts to understand their new religion, often approaching it in the spirit of their old one.⁵

Clearly, in fashioning the *Diálogo del Nacimiento* Torres Naharro drew on the fifteenth-century tradition of debate poetry rather than on the less controversial pastoral sources that Encina had used in his Christmas plays. For Torres Naharro's play is just that: a dialogue, or a debate. Deliberately polemical in intent, the first part stands in sharp contrast to the second. The *preguntas* and *respuestas* in the *Diálogo* belong to the debate tradition; the *pullas* in the *Addición* draw on a medieval tradition that is now used to ridicule the *villano*. Together, the two parts make a vehement, controversial statement. The "dialogue" between the first part and the second demonstrates, in the end, the impossibility of dialogue itself. The *Diálogo del Nacimiento* is at once an eulogy and a celebration, a remembrance of a vital tradition, broken in Inquisitional Spain, but capable of enduring in the relative freedom of Rome.⁶

The play begins with Patrispano's entrance. Newly arrived from Jerusa-

⁴ Charles Fraker, *Studies on the Cancionero de Baena* (North Carolina, 1966). I owe a great deal, in this study, to Fraker's pivotal work.

⁵ Fraker, pp. 11-62. Gilman also has shown that there was freedom in pre-inquisitional Spain to discuss the Christian "law" openly. If continued, after the establishment of the Inquisition, the habit of polemical discussion could be very costly to the *conversos* (*The Spain of Fernando de Rojas*, pp. 205-266).

⁶ In his account of the trial of Alvaro de Montalbán, Rojas' father-in-law, Gilman shows the irritation of many *conversos* with religious commonplaces that were expected from all Spaniards as statements of faith. Failure to toe the line endangered their lives, and even inadvertent self-betrays had ghastly consequences (*The Spain of Fernando de Rojas*, pp. 67-109). In Rome, Torres Naharro could afford to attack "todo el mesterio," and he could expect the *conversos* in his audience to share his views.

lem, he immediately signals his *converso* identity.⁷ Beneath the conventionality of his opening lament, there may lurk the *converso*'s experience of exile. Persecutions and wanderings through the Spanish countryside, "por ásperas vías, por bosques y sotos" (*Diálogo*, 11), were a matter of the very recent past, and Patrispano's journeys "por mares ayrados, por puertos ignotos, / mudando lenguajes, cambiando possadas" (*Diálogo*, 13-14) may have evoked, in many a *converso* spectator, personal memories.⁸ Soon Betiseo enters with a comic account of his misfortunes on the road. Travelling from Santiago, the bastion of Spanish Christianity, he was probably meant to be recognized as an Old Christian. The emblematic significance of this reunion in Rome between Old Christian and New Christian must not have been lost on the audience, and the dialogue between the two was no doubt a source of "consolación" to those who hoped for reconciliation.

The discussion of doctrine starts almost immediately. Betiseo curses the highwaymen who relieved him of his wine flask, and he asks God to punish them by depriving them of His blood for good. Betiseo's comically blasphemous reference prompts Patrispano to lecture him on Christian conduct. What starts out as a commonplace exhortation to be a "buen christiano" (*Diálogo*, 115), however, soon turns recognizably polemical. The audience must have seen the controversial quality of Patrispano's classical *pregunta*:

¿Qué quiere dezir
que todas las cosas queriendo sentir
las ha hecho Dios perfectas y buenas?
¿Por qué a muchos malos les da en que biuir
y da a muchos buenos açotes y penas?
(*Diálogo*, 125-129)

This *topos*, associated with the *converso* sensibility, acquires special significance. How do we account for evil, if God is the source of all good? Why do good men suffer while evil men prosper? These questions raise, in Fraker's words, "the old theme of God's fundamental injustice."⁹ Although Patrispano, probably a sincere *converso*, answers his question in conventional enough terms (explaining, essentially, that God is not a lenient Father and

⁷ The *introito* had described him as "cansado que viene de Ierusalem" (*Introito*, 107). The audience could be expected to know that "cansado se refiere," as Francisco Márquez Villanueva alerted Don Américo, "a la ley del Antiguo Testamento." "Es decir," Castro agreed, "que *cansado* tomó sentido tan anti-judáico como *esperar*" (*De la edad conflictiva*, p. 227). The word *cansado* as an equivalent of *judío* was enduring, for it appears with precisely that meaning in *Peribáñez* (Joseph H. Silverman, "Los 'hidalgos cansados' de Lope de Vega," *Homenaje a William L. Fichter*, eds. Kossof and Amor y Vázquez [Madrid, 1971], pp. 693-711).

⁸ Many in the audience were also *peregrinos* for, as Constance H. Rose has shown, "a 'peregrino' is not a 'pilgrim' but a traveler, or more precisely, a 'wanderer.' Rather than having a goal toward which he strives, Reinoso's 'peregrino' is a wanderer who is in flight from his homeland, an outcast who finds himself without honor in his native land, an exile pursued by a relentless foe, the Inquisition in the guise of Fortune" (*Alonso Núñez de Reinoso: The Lament of a Sixteenth Century Exile* [Faleigh Dickinson, 1971], p. 154).

⁹ Fraker, p. 47.

that all is in the scheme of things), a polemical issue has been raised, and in a Christmas play no less.

Betiseo changes the topic of conversation. He expresses curiosity about his companion's past, but Patrispano is eager for news from the homeland. Betiseo reports excitedly on Spain's victories in the battlefields, but Patrispano interrupts his friend's rapture on Spain's epic hour. War, Patrispano declares, is contrary to the teachings of Christ (*Diálogo*, 245-264). He deplores the spectacle of Christians slaughtering each other, and his plea for peace leads quite naturally to an evocation of the Prince of Peace whose birth was heralded "con nuevas alegres, contrarias a guerra" (*Diálogo*, 262). By linking the Nativity to an anti-war sentiment, Torres Naharro went far beyond the liturgical Christmas message of peace on earth. The old commonplace was invested with new, urgent meaning as Torres Naharro gave voice to pacifist discontent a handful of years before the appearance of Erasmus' *Querella Pacis*.¹⁰ Those in the audience who, like Patrispano, had a conciliatory spirit, could rejoice in a very real hope for peace in Christian Europe. To others, Betiseo's rhapsodic exaltation of war may have been a reminder of everything that Christians had failed to be.

If the evocation of the Nativity with its promise of peace is another source of "consolación" that Torres Naharro offers his fellow exiles, from this point on the play becomes more openly polemical. Betiseo initiates a series of *preguntas* that would seem to have no place in a Christmas play and that in fact subvert the very meaning of Christmas. Ironically, it is Patrispano, a new Christian, who instructs Betiseo in the fundamentals of Christian doctrine. This reversal must not have escaped the audience, and it further points to the ambiguous intent of the play. Now Betiseo wants to know why Lucifer, God's finest angel, rejected the opportunity to "nacer,/ penar y morir con tanta amargura" (*Diálogo*, 323-324), an opportunity quite obviously bestowed upon Christ. This *pregunta*, as Fraker has shown, recalls the *converso* notion of God's arbitrariness.¹¹ Betiseo answers his own question, evoking the familiar argument of God's partiality to man (*Diálogo*, 325-334). As Fraker points out, this is a stock anti-Christian argument, for at its heart is the classic *converso* idea that God is the source of all discord in the world.¹² Torres Naharro could expect his audience to be sufficiently informed on the subject to be able to follow his characters'

¹⁰ For an appealing argument in favor of Torres Naharro's familiarity with the work of Erasmus, and Erasmus himself, see Zimic, 89-100. Zimic's valuable study counters Gillet's view that the *Diálogo del Nacimiento* is "medieval," focusing instead on the Erasmian religious statements that are evident in the play.

¹¹ To Gillet, this was a medieval *topos*: "Betiseo is here propounding a theological problem frequently discussed in the sixteenth-century drama, the question of why God gave only justice to Lucifer while granting mercy to man. In other words, we have here the great debate between Justice and Mercy" (vol. 3, p. 184, n. 320). This debate, understood in the context of fifteenth-century Spanish life, must be associated with a tradition of anti-Christian controversy (Fraker, p. 22). That the question appears so often among the playwrights of the period, many of them probably *conversos*, proves that the polemic was enduring.

¹² Fraker, p. 52 ff.

arguments, and to relish the spectacle of a dangerous *converso* argument tumbling out of the mouth of a naive Old Christian.

The most highly charged issue of the Christian "law," the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, are dealt with in an openly polemical manner. These doctrines, fundamental to Christianity, were perhaps the least understood and the most intolerable to Jews and many uneasy *conversos* whose earlier faith affirmed above all the unity and incorporeity of God.¹³ Betiseo brings up the issue: "¿por qué cupo más la muerte y pasión/a Hijo, que a Padre, que a Espíritu Sancto?" (*Diálogo*, 373-374). Gillet pointed to the commonplace nature of this question, failing to realize that in fifteenth-century Spain the issue of the Incarnation was provocative to an extreme degree.¹⁴ Patrispano does his best to explain the Trinity and the Incarnation, interweaving his account of the life of Christ with a justification of the dogma, and developing his arguments, on the whole, along characteristically *converso*, rational lines (*Diálogo*, 375-544).

Betiseo reacts to Parsipano's lengthy *respuesta* with:

Si morió por nos
yo no sé por qué, perdóneme Dios;
que en otra manera no se pronunciallo
(*Diálogo*, 545-547).

This rather startling response to the Passion is perhaps the most persuasive evidence of the polemical intent of the play. Betiseo's outburst might be seen as a momentary doubt in the Redemption, and yet we would expect the *converso* character to have such doubts. Ironically, and probably to the delight of his *converso* spectators, Torres Naharro has Betiseo wrestling with the same issue that so many New Christians found so baffling. Significantly, Patrispano is quick to recognize the dangerous direction in which the play is headed: "Hablad más con seso" (*Diálogo*, 548), he warns. Issue after issue, each a source of conflict among fifteenth-century Spaniards, has been inexorably linked together in the play. Now the issue of the Passion, like the rest, remains unresolved and is soon dropped altogether.¹⁵

The *Diálogo* ends with Patrispano's suggestion that they spend the night at the Spanish Hospital in Rome. As they turn to go off stage, two new characters enter. The *Addición* is fashioned from less problematical mate-

¹³ Fraker, p. 12-13.

¹⁴ To Gillet, this was "another frequently debated point, on which the Church Fathers were in general agreement" (vol. 3, p. 186, n. 373). In fifteenth-century Spain, however, this was one of the "literally great questions of the day" (Fraker, p. 120). Closely associated with this question was the issue of the Passion which, as Fraker noted, was the hardest to swallow for most Jews and scoffing *conversos*: "Also omnipresent in anti-Christian literature is the assertion that the notion is absurd that God should live as a human being, be humiliated, suffer and die" (Fraker, p. 17).

¹⁵ To Zimic, the *Diálogo* is "una completa lección catequística sobre los problemas más sencillos y básicos," and he feels that by the end of the first part of the play "todos los equívocos se han aclarado." And yet the *Addición* disappoints him: "La sorpresa es decepcionante" (p. 83).

rials than the *Diálogo*; its traditional *pullas* and concluding burlesque hymn are medieval commonplaces. Following, as it does, the polemical first part of the play, the *Addición* acquires a power that the boisterous exchange of old Christmas riddles, no matter how irreverent, would not lead us to expect. For now the rustics Hernando and Garrapata, representing the Christian who is certain of his "law," are mercilessly derided.¹⁶ Whatever hopes of reconciliation may have been raised in the *Diálogo* are now savagely dashed in the *Addición*. Disdain for the *villano*, as we well know, is typical of the *converso* sensibility, and the *Addición* amounts to an orgy of *desprecio*. What the dramatist offered his audience in the second part of the play is a peculiar sort of "consolación," a fine example of what Francisco Márquez Villanueva felicitously called a "desquite puramente literario."¹⁷ It is in the *Addición* that "la venganza de un converso," as Dr. Villalobos put it, takes place.¹⁸

Stephen Gilman called *Celestina* "a kind of anti-ceremonial manifesto."¹⁹ And what the *Diálogo del Nacimiento* adds up to is less a Christmas play than an anti-Christmas play. Christmas Eve is a time set aside for the celebration of shared values, and it is hardly fitting to quarrel with those values on such a highly ceremonial occasion. Torres Naharro's play subverts the very occasion of its performance as it affronts that sense of decorum which governs our ceremonial conduct. The ironic, contentious stance that can be perceived in Torres Naharro's first play was in part the result of his personal history as a *converso*. Later plays such as *Tinellaria* and *Trophea* undermine with even greater skill and audacity the very occasion of their performance, exposing Torres Naharro's profoundly anti-ceremonial, subversive view of the world.

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¹⁶ Here is an example of a typical *pulla*: Patrispano mockingly asks Hernando an easy riddle and then pretends to be impressed by the rustic's wit. The spectators are invited to share in the *burla* as Patrispano spreads his arms to encompass the entire audience:

PATRISPANO.	pero, pues que en ti se encierra vn saber así tan alto: ¿Quánto ay del cielo a la tierra?
HERRANDO.	A la fe, no ay más d'un salto.
PATRISPANO.	Por tu vida, pues tienes gracia complida que a mí y a todos espanta

(*Addición*, 131-137. Emphasis added).

¹⁷ Francisco Márquez Villanueva, *Fuentes literarias cervantinas* (Madrid, 1973), p. 81. "El teatro basado en la burla del rústico era, con toda lógica, un brote literario por esencia culto y aristocrático, que tomaba posiciones ante la oleada demagógica de la 'limpieza' " (p. 79, n. 109).

¹⁸ *The Spain of Fernando de Rojas*, p. 139.

¹⁹ *The Spain of Fernando de Rojas*, p. 294.