

constant lover. She will, as she promises, bring him through every danger, '*ich selbst führe dich*'. Love, she assures him, will find the way, '*die Liebe leite mich*'.

In November 1791, after the twenty-fourth performance, Zinzendorf noted sniffily that there had been 'a huge audience' at 'this incredible farce'. Perhaps the women and men and children at *Die Zauberflöte* were no more ready than their betters at *La Clemenza di Tito* to receive Mozart's meaning, though I do not care to think so. His farce, like his *opera seria*, refers to all that he found credible in our world. In both these last stage works he affirms that love will find the way, that suffering will be redemptive, that all faults may be pardoned. Now, on his deathbed, he was confronted by that Judgement which had provoked the crisis of *Die Schuldigkeit des ersten Gebotes*. He was reaching, in the *Requiem*, the violently imagined lines of the *Dies Irae*:

*Lacrimosa dies illa
Qua resurget ex favilla
Judicandus homo reus.*

He felt himself to be that justly accused man. He stopped composing here. He left the next line for others to set in their prayers:

Huic ergo parce Deus

and, hoping with us for forgiveness, he slipped down into our common grave.

A Study of the Poem: *Noche oscura del alma* of St John of the Cross

Edward Sarmiento

Noche Oscura

Stanzas

*en que canta el alma la dichosa ventura quo tuvo pasar por
La Oscura Noche de la Fe en desnudez y purgación suya, a la
unión del amado.*

- 1 En una noche oscura,
con ansias, en amores inflamada,
oh dichosa ventura!,
salí sin ser notada,
estando ya mi casa sosegada;

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- 2 a oscuras y segura
por la secreta escala, disfrazada,
oh dichosa ventura!,
a oscuras y en celada,
estando ya mi casa sosegada; 10
- 3 en la noche dichosa, .
en secreto, que naide me veía,
ni yo miraba cosa,
sin otra luz y guía,
sino la que en el corazón ardía. 15
- 4 Aquesta me guiaba
más cierto que la luz del mediodía,
adonde me esperaba
quien yo bien me sabía,
en parte donde naide parecía. 20
- 5 Oh noche que guiaste!
Oh noche, amable más que la alborada!
Oh noche que juntaste
Amado con amada,
amada en el Amado transformada! 25
- 6 En mi pecho florido,
que entero para él solo se guardaba,
allí quedó dormido,
y yo le regalaba,
y en ventalle de cedros aire daba. 30
- 7 El aire del almena,
cuando yo sus cabellos esparcía,
con su mano serena
en mi cuello hería
y todos mis sentidos suspendía. 35
- 8 Quedéme y olvidéme,
el rostro recliné sobre el Amado:
cesó todo, y dejéme,
dejando mi cuidado
entre las azucenas olvidado. 40

7 The wind from the battlements,
as I spread His locks,
with its gentle touch,
struck me upon my neck
and all my senses held in suspense. 35

8 I kept still, heedless of self,
I leaned my face upon the Beloved:
all was quietness, I gave myself (up to it),
leaving all my care(s)
among the lilies forgotten. 40

The *Noche oscura* is without doubt the finest of the poems of St. John of the Cross. The *Llama de amor viva* is the most profound and the most intense but, because of its very depth and the ineffable nature of its subject matter, it is lacking in the clarity of simplicity, for what it deals with is not simple. Even its syntax presents the reader with difficulties to overcome and problems to solve. The third of his great poems, the *Cántico espiritual*, occupies an intermediate place, in ease of reader comprehension, more than probably in order of composition, and also perhaps (though such judgements are very subjective) in aesthetic merit and appeal. Its dialogue form and pastoral setting, both derived, at least in part, from its inspiration, Solomon's *Song of Songs*, lend it scriptural authority, dramatic movement and a tremendous fluency.

This dramatic quality is anticipated in the *Noche oscura*. There are two symbolic figures: the feminine Soul in search of her Beloved, who is also her Lover, Christ, the Good Shepherd, God made Man. So much for *dramatis personae*. The action is twofold and reciprocal: the soul in search of God, and God seeking and waiting for the soul in search of Him. The stage of course is the life of man, both spatial and temporal, not only individually but collectively, from the Fall to the Redemption, from Tree to Tree one might say. In the *Cántico* this is explicit in the apple-tree stanza:

In the shade of the tree
you were betrothed, under the apple tree;
I gave you there my hand
and brought you back to grace,
there where your mother was betrayed and lost.

In the *Cántico*, the action is much more expanded than in the *Noche* and is acted out against the exquisitely painted *mise-en-scène* of the *Song of Songs*, which in the *Noche* is constricted to the garden, deftly sketched in stanzas 6, 7 and 8. But it is the same garden—the Eden of the Fall which is also the Gethsemane—where the agony of our Redemption was begun. The reader of the poems of St. John of the Cross must be prepared to carry to them all his knowledge and memory of the history of our

Redemption, to interact with the poet's word and thought in a two-way exchange: of himself on the poem and of the poem on his own soul.

One of the reasons why the *Noche* poem is so nearly perfect is that, in contrast to the *Cántico*, it is very concentrated. Yet as we shall presently see, the first five stanzas are almost entirely devoted to the night motif, absent from the *Cántico*, where its place is taken by the theme of the lost and hidden Beloved. For this difference there is, as we shall also see, a special reason and purpose: to guide souls in their early experience of prayer which St. John uniquely saw as night.

St. John in the *Noche* poem is, then, giving us a symbol of prayer, primarily the Night. But it is a complex poem and there are subsidiary symbols. We must bear in mind that his intention is to instruct and guide in the prose commentary and we must suppose that in projecting the poem, he had in mind, at least in a general way, the commentary he purposed making on it. There is a further strand in his thinking as he composes *Noche* and that is the *Song of Songs*, the foundations of his *Cántico espiritual*¹. *Noche* is a condensation of the *Cántico* as *Cántico* is a condensation of the *Song of Songs*. In it he is propounding symbols and images apt for conveying his teaching. Independently of the nocturnal setting vital for his purpose, we have the feminine figure of the soul, her house, the stair, which together form the elements of movement, a graceful descent to the garden—with true poetic economy we simply find ourselves in it, no description—only the hint of flowers (first line of stanza 6), the scented cedars (the last line of the same stanza) and the lilies (last line of the poem). *Almena* (battlement) may imply a walled garden, a castle or both². There is no more movement. The two symbolic figures are together and the light wind blows over the castle or garden wall.

The three poems in their order of composition cover the whole of St. John's teaching on the spiritual life. *Noche* is the dark night of the senses and of the spirit, with the emphasis on the early phases (stanzas 1 to 4) but delicately suggesting the eventual happiness of union (stanzas 6 to 8, linked to the early section by stanza 5). The *Cántico* expands the matter of *Noche* stanzas 6—8 at great length and covering later developments of contemplative prayer, using exclusively imagery from the *Song of Songs* (where the loss and hiddenness of the Beloved replaces the image of night). The *Llama* sings of the ultimate ecstasy of union under a different sign—light and fire.

The remaining stanzas of *Noche* have two functions. Stanza 3 completes the movement initiated in the first. As if almost in a formal choreographic design³. Soul, still making her way by night, descends the stair, secretly (emphasised) and guided by an inner (not outer) light, finds her way to the garden (stanza 4) where He whom she sought awaited her. Stanza 5 is a lyrical reiteration of the beauty and joy of the night and a promise of the union of the soul and God which is to come (lines 4 and 5) and is the gift of the very night in which she is enveloped. The other

function is to point to and make clear the glorious ultimate goal of the prayer life. The night does not go on forever, the day breaks! And so stanzas 6 — 8 cover the action to be narrated at length, on a different time scale and in a more varied setting skillfully selected from the beautiful confusion of the *Song of Songs*. The *Song* is palpably present in the *Noche* too: the movement from house to garden can be found in *Song* III, 3; the garden derives from V, 1 (and other *loci*), while the same chapter suggests stanzas 1 and 2, the descent of the stair itself. Stanza 8 is in harmony with the whole unfolding of the *Song of Songs* narrative and corresponds to stanza 22 (Jaén or B text) of the *Cántico*⁴. Thus we see the basic similarity of St. John's two poems and their filiation from the Biblical *Song*, in spite of their differences, in length, structure and the emphasis on night in the shorter poem.

As everyone knows, St. John's poems are accompanied by long prose commentaries explaining their symbolic and allegorical meaning, replete with scriptural quotations and allusions and full of practical advice for the Christian soul struggling to make its way in the life of prayer. In fact practical advice forms the greater part of the commentaries, much more important than what might be called theory from which to derive abstract 'states' and 'stages' of prayer. One may not say that these do not exist, or that St. Teresa and St. John do not sanction them, but sometimes, with certain types of mind and temperament, they can be overstressed.

The *Dark Night* is instructive on this point. There are two separate and distinct commentaries on this short poem of eight stanzas, indeed on only two of the stanzas. There is no commentary at all on stanzas 4 to 8 and stanza 3 is printed ready for commentary but no commentary is there. St John has no more to say. *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, in which the doctrine of the nights is expounded and the poem is presented, comes to an abrupt end. (All three of St. John's great poems first appeared with their commentary; there was never an edition of the poems only until the twentieth century.)

St. John's doctrine of the nights is complex and the scholastic psychology on which it is based (conceptually, not experientially) has to be understood. Broadly, the nights are (1) ascetical, i.e. self-denying and penitential, and (2) mystical, i.e. the direct action of God on the soul leading to the prayer of union and ultimately after death or even, in rare cases and for brief spells, to participation here and now in the divine life. That the two commentaries, ascetical and mystical ('active' and 'passive') make use of the same poem shows the close continuity of the whole process or experience.

The use of the 'night' image invites comment. That self-denial and an ascetic way of life should suggest darkness rather than light is easy to see. But the experience of seeking God in prayer involves giving up imaginative mental pictures (Christ on the Cross and so on) and discursive thought (God is infinitely good, my sins have offended His

goodness, and similar considerations). This blank in the mind is one aspect of 'night'. But the absence of imagery and thinking persists into the passive or mystical stage, and this too is 'night' even when the conviction of a true contact with the divine is present. This is the significance and importance of the symbol of night so dear to St. John of the Cross.

'Night' is, in the symbolism of St. John of the Cross, the representation of the theological virtue of faith. The experience that it symbolises is faith, blind faith. The soul sees nothing but yet believes in God, this is true of vocal prayer. Even in interior prayer this is also true and in the passive (called by the unfortunate word 'mystical' which after all only means 'hidden') conviction of the divine presence within the soul, it is still by faith that the soul is knowing God. *The Living Flame of Love*, stanza 3, lines 15 and 16, describes all the apparatus of the senses as 'blind', that is immersed in darkness. This, the third great poem of St. John, is a celebration of precisely the emergence of the soul from darkness into the blazing light that is God.

In one sense, the *Noche oscura* anticipates the *Cántico espiritual* in a way that enables us to understand, possibly, the reason for the abrupt end of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and the absence of commentary on stanzas 3—8 of the poem that is such a puzzling disappointment to the reader. The anticipation is in the fact that stanzas 6 to 8, though action is still taking place in the 'dark night' reach a degree of union that suggests quiet and rest (*quedéme*) and cessation of effort (*dejéme*) and the approach of dawn (*dejando mi cuidado/entre las azucenas olvidado*). This last line contains the one visual image that is really 'seen' in the reader's imagination. We of course 'see' the house and stair, but because Soul's monologue tells they are there. Other items are noted by other senses—we hear the wind in the trees, smell the scent of the cedars and feel the breeze sharper because it is being diverted through the machicolations of the wall. When it comes to the lilies, I think we see them. Both poems derive from the *Song of Songs*, but the *Noche* is only a glimpse of the scene as compared with the much longer pastoral dialogue of the *Cántico espiritual*, itself only one half the length of its biblical source. The word 'scene' is used advisedly because both poems are dramatic, the longer one entirely in dialogue (with an occasional chorus intervention) the shorter one a monologue. In neither is there any setting of the stage by the author or a third character. The stage properties are simply there when required. St. John is thorough, as in the long but lucid prose commentaries, but not prolix or fussy. It is worth noting here that lines 194—5 of the *Cántico espiritual* in stanza 39 (Jaén or B — see note 4) looks back to *Noche* and forward to *Llama*:

(The soul anticipates the delight of final union with the Beloved:)

The movement of the air,
the song of the sweet nightingale,
the pleasant grove,
in the serene night
with the flame that burns and gives no pain.

It looks back to a night that has become peaceful and serene in the very presence of the divine fire that was to be celebrated in the third poem, the *Llama*, perhaps already written or at least conceived when this culminating stanza of the *Cántico* was put in place.

To return now to the abrupt ending of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* and the sudden abandonment of commentary on *Noche oscura*. (The full title of this very long work is *The Dark Night of the Ascent of Mount Carmel*.) It has been suggested that this unexpected ending is due (a) to the poet's death, (b) to the destruction of the missing chapters, or (c) to their loss in some archive or library. At least equally plausible, I think, is it to suppose that he stopped writing because he found that he had said all that was necessary on the image of night and the prayer experience that it symbolised for him. It was vital to St. John to expound the nights, active and passive, on the senses and of the spirit. First, because he saw that the passage from discursive prayer to contemplation needed instruction and guidance. And second, because in the experience that is described from beginning to end of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, the passage from the effort of the individual soul to the action of God upon the individual soul, the first two stanzas of the *Noche* poem gave him a vibrant and luminous text to expound. The second half of the poem covers, though with extreme brevity, the later, more advanced stages of union with God that the *Cántico espiritual* (and the *Song of Songs*) can so dramatically represent. Any commentary of the latter half of *Noche* would overlap with that on *Cántico*.

It is not too wild a speculation, I think, to see the cause of the difference between the two poems, *Noche* and *Cántico*, otherwise so similar in their dependence on the *Song of Songs*, in the absence from the biblical text of the potent image of night. Of course, *Cántico* is allegorical and so diffuse, *Noche* is symbolic and therefore brief. But St. John further foresees, perhaps in the very act of conceiving the symbolic lyric, the opportunity it afforded for an exhaustive commentary that would help 'beginners' and 'proficient' (*principiantes* and *aprovechados*) so dear to his heart. Dom John Chapman said somewhere in his *Letters* that St. John wrote for beginners and St. Teresa for the advanced. No one can say the *Living Flame of Love* is for beginners or that St. Teresa's *Way of Perfection* is for the advanced, but broadly it is true. The church in the West has no tradition of a ministry of prayer or direction similar to the Russian *staretz*, and our clergy in the past few centuries have been chary of 'mystics' unless safely confined to the cloister, yet souls touched by God often do not know what is happening to them and are not always

enclosed. St. John was aware of this and though it is true that he was writing for the nuns of his order, I think one can see that he had a wider audience in mind. Indeed, he wrote the *Llama de amor viva* for Doña Ana de Peñalosa, a friend and supporter of St. Teresa and St. John in their work of Carmelite reform, a widow living in 'the world'.

We may then, I think, safely say that *Noche*, the poem, was intended to be, indeed is, a cameo version of the *Song of Songs* which presented itself to the poet's imagination enveloped in the mystical night he so wanted to comment on. Once he had expounded the night he turned to a new, fuller version of the biblical Song, perhaps already written, at least in part, because the commentary on the later development of prayer could be more easily or appropriately attached to it.

There are indeed, about eight occurrences of 'night' in the *Song of Songs* (I, 13; II, 17, III, 1, 4; IV, 3—4, 6; V, 2, 6, 7) none of them utilisable for St. John's purpose of suggesting blindness, desolation, weary length of waiting, the frustrating paradox of the presence of God and yet also His absence. He needed a symbol for all this and we may judge from one of the minor and earlier poems, *que bien sé yo* (*for I well know*) with its haunting refrain *aunque es de noche* (*although it is night*) how close to his need the image of night came and how deeply it appealed to him.

One of the passages from the *Song of Songs* containing a night image (V, 7) is used in the penultimate chapter of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* ('passive night of the spirit'), in which the text relates that the watchmen 'smote the maiden, taking away her veil' (A.V., Douai, substantially the same), this taking place at night. St. John in the relevant commentaries uses this text to show that the soul that truly seeks God must be denuded of self-will (the veil) and accept mortification ('smote') in the search for God in the darkness of the night. It is an odd application of even this text which, like so much in the *Song of Songs*, is mysterious and disjointed. This passage does not appear in the *Cántico espiritual*. When he came to write his own version of the *Song*, it is an elegant, streamlined poem that he produces. This example confirms the view that the *Song of Songs* was not easily adaptable to his concept of the night as a metaphor for the experience of blind union, union in faith, in the 'Cloud of Unknowing'.

In the commentary to the *Cántico espiritual*, St. John is concerned with fully developed passive contemplative prayer ('betrothal', 'mystical marriage'). The earlier stages, though necessarily present in the *Cántico* and commented on, receive a briefer and more concise treatment than in the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. The image he uses is that of hiddenness and search. In the nature of the change of symbol there is no overlap of *Noche* and *Cántico* at the beginning and the abrupt cessation of commentary after the exhaustive use of the first two stanzas of *Noche* avoids overlap between the poems when treating of the later phases of

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prayer. All this suggests that fairly early in his writing life, at least as early as his confinement in the Toledo monastery of the unreformed friars (1577—1578), he had the three poems, *Noche*, *Cántico*, *Llama* and their respective commentaries, more or less in place in his mind and intention. If that implies an intellectual power that is found surprising, then we must revise our idea of Juan de Yepes—not only a great contemplative and poet, but thinker too.

- 1 By far the best account of the *Cántico espiritual*, its dependence on the *Song of Songs* and other aspects of the poem is to be found in *The Poet and the Mystic: A Study of the Cántico Espiritual of San Juan de la Cruz*, by the Revd. Dr. Colin P. Thompson (Oxford University Press, 1977).
- 2 It is just possible that *almena* is a reminiscence of St. Teresa's *Interior Castle*. She began writing this book on Trinity Sunday (June 2nd) 1577. At the time St. John was confessor to the Convent of the Encarnación in Avila where she wrote the *Castle*.
- 3 The idea of dance, a formal patterned, significant movement, conveyed in both *Noche* and *Cántico*, is in fact present in the biblical text at VI, 13 and VII, 1 but is obscured by the Vulgate. Modern translations (*Jerusalem*, the Paoline Italian, Schonfield, for example) make it explicit. Fray Luis de León in his translation and commentary of the *Song of Songs* did not understand it so, though he was undoubtedly working from the Hebrew as well as the Vulgate. St. John of the Cross certainly knew León's commentary (in Latin, 1582), and quite possibly the Spanish translation in manuscript.
- 4 There are two versions of the *Cántico*, differing mainly in the order of stanzas and in the addition of one stanza. For a detailed and lucid account of the matter see Chapter 3 of Dr. Thompson's book *The Poet and the Mystic*, cf. note 1, above.

The Seven Sayings of Jesus from the Cross:

Observations on Order and Presentation in the New Testament, Literature and Cinema

Larry Kreitzer

Ever since Tatian's *Diatessaron* (c. 150 CE) there has been a tradition within the Christian Church of harmonizing the life of Jesus and blend together the four gospel accounts so as to compose a biography of the Lord. Perhaps nowhere is this tendency to harmonization more clearly demonstrated than in the sayings of Jesus from the cross. In fact, there