



## The dark night metaphor in Saint John of the Cross' spiritual itinerary

A metáfora da noite escura no itinerário espiritual de São João da Cruz

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### Abstract

The night image is a constant in various mystic traditions, and it's generally associated to the need, expressed by apophatic mystique, for transcending images, to knowledge, and to God's name, as well as to an ascetic method which would lead to an experience that, being neither sensible nor intelligible, can't be catalogued by our cognition system. The night will be one of the most powerful and expressive images in Saint John of the Cross' poetry, representative of the Iberian mystique of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. A negative image which speaks us of a gradual and progressive denial process, that moves up to a limit point, where only the divine Name's absolute affirmation remains. The paper aims, through the analysis of the poems "Spiritual canticle" and "Dark night", to sketch some conjectures on the meaning of the dark night metaphor in Saint John of the Cross and in the mystic discourse as a whole.

**Keywords:** Saint John of the Cross. Mystic poetry. Spiritual canticle. Dark night.

### Resumo

A imagem da noite é uma constante em diversas tradições místicas, estando associada à necessidade, expressa pela mística apofática, de transcender às imagens, ao conhecimento e ao nome de Deus, bem como a um método ascético que conduziria a uma experiência que, não sendo sensível ou inteligível, não é catalogável pelo nosso sistema de cognição. A noite será uma das imagens mais poderosas e de maior expressividade na poesia de São João da Cruz, representante da mística ibérica do século XVI. Uma imagem negativa que nos fala de um processo de negação gradual e progressivo, que avança até um ponto-limite, onde reste a afirmação absoluta do Nome divino. Este artigo almeja, por meio da análise dos poemas "Cântico espiritual" e "Noite escura", ensaiar algumas conjecturas sobre o significado da metáfora da noite escura em São João da Cruz e no discurso místico em geral.

**Palavras-chave:** São João da Cruz. Poesia mística. Cântico espiritual. Noite escura.

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## Preambles

John of the Cross was born Juan de Yepes Alvarez in 1542, in Fontiveros, Spain. Coming from a family of impoverished aristocrats, he entered the Carmelite Order when he was 21 years old, surely driven by the ideals of absolute solitude and contemplation of the first hermits who founded the order. Soon, Saint John got disillusioned with relaxation of the monastic life experienced by the Carmelite Convents, where the contemplative ideals which had attracted him so much were converted into docile sociability that didn't fulfill his vocation as a mystic man. In 1567, he knew Teresa of Avila, who arrived to Medina to found a Discalced Carmelites monastery and, then, decided to ally her to start the Carmel Reform, resuming the contemplative and mystic fervor original to this order.

In 1577, Saint John was kidnapped by strangers and he was kept in jail for nine months in a small dark cell without any comfort. The reason for his arrest was discontent with the Carmelite Order Reform which Saint John and Teresa of Avila were undertaking. In the absolute solitude of his small dark cell, he stayed for nine months, poorly fed, often whipped and insulted, in a narrow and uncomfortable pit where he could feel the terrible winter in Toledo. There, with his soul immersed into the dark night of despair, Saint John started his mystic-poetic production with the few paper and ink that a merciful jailer gave him. Thus, when he escaped from prison, involving dramatic events which include a rope made of blankets and a descent down the high prison wall, he had in his memory the lines of "Spiritual canticle", so that, by finding refuge among the Discalced Carmelites, it wasn't about jail and escape that he provided them with news, before, he recites the still unfinished lines of the "Canticle".

Not all Saint John's commentators agree with regard to the poem's writing in prison, although they may agree with regard to the theme's inspiration and the making of some verses there. However, that's the way how the legend tells of the mystic saint, and this common narrative in various biographical notes about his

life. Our sympathy is with the legend, since it, as befits the mythic fabled stories, gathers several elements which help making intelligible important aspects of Saint John of the Cross' work.

More than a mere biographical curiosity, the prison episode in Toledo raises interest due to the decisive influence it'll have on the *noche oscura* symbology, key to Saint John's poetics and mystique. In a clear contrast to the light metaphor, so often related to the cognitive insight which "emancipates" the human being from ignorance darkness, the dark night image talks of the knowledge possibilities denial which is assumed, in apophatic theology, as a method for an experience which is neither sensible nor intelligible, thus, it isn't able to be catalogued through our cognition system.

In this essay, we analyze two poems by Saint John: "Dark night", the poem and some excerpts of the comments related to it (entitled "Ascent of Mount Carmel" and "Dark night"), and the "Spiritual canticle". Both poems deal with a quest full of danger, adventure, and loving *pathos*, where the ontological distance between lovers is abysmal, but not an obstacle to their date.

Although in the poem "Spiritual canticle" the dark night metaphor isn't explicitly observed, it remains underlying, insofar as the dialogue to the biblical text (the "Song of Songs" or "Solomon's Song") was established in an imperative way and, in the latter, the Beloved Woman rises from her bed, late at night, to seek the Beloved Man through the city streets and squares. Unlike the poem "*Noche oscura*", in the "Canticle" the night is quiet when it arrives and finds lovers in idyll, enjoying the loving delights. However, to get there (stanza XXII), what a long way hasn't been walked by Soul in search of her Beloved Man through hills and borders, with no fear of beasts or strong men (stanza III).

## 1 The female rhetoric of *Spiritual canticle*<sup>1</sup>

In this poem draws attention, right from the start, a certain female rhetoric very close to that adopted by the medieval troubadour poets, who played a leading role in one of the greatest inventions of the Western culture: gentle love<sup>2</sup>. The simple fact of finding the recurrence of a literary device, i.e. the assumption of a female lyricism, or speaking “as if he was” a woman – this in an austere religious man such as the Carmelite Saint John of the Cross –, would be enough for calling our attention to this lyric. However, there’s still more beauty, restlessness, aesthetic rigor, and intellectual speculation in this 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish man, who adopted traditional literary genres (novels and medieval canticles, Renaissance forms and meters) to coin a vigorous spiritual poetry which also dialogues to one of the most beautiful (and erotic) books of world literature: the “Song of Songs”, one of the canonical books of the Christian Bible.

Saint John of the Cross is, alongside Teresa of Avila, to whom he was friend and confessor, the greatest expression of the Hispanic Catholic mystique, a mystique which is, as Bingemer (2004, p. 55) states, “in the passivity sphere”, a characteristic culturally associated to women which is inherent to the very Christian mystique. Indeed, in other mystic traditions one doesn’t observe this emphasis on the passive character of the experience; and ecstasy – the culminating moment of mystique – can be stimulated or provoked, either by means of substances and/or hallucinogen rituals (as, e.g. in Candomble and in the Santo Daime sect), either through control and meditation techniques (as in some manifestations of Eastern spirituality). On the other hand, as Bingemer (2004, p. 55) states, “in the Christian tradition the route is reverse, since it starts top-down. The mystique is affected by an agent, God or the Devil. Hence this basic concept: the mystic experience is a possession experience”.

<sup>1</sup> Due to the poem’s length, we won’t transcribe it in the essay’s text.

<sup>2</sup> One may understand as gentle love, or courtly love, the extract of Provençal lyric which emerges from the southern France (Provence) still in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and it’s the basis of what we name nowadays “romantic love”. According to the historian Jacques Le Goff (1985, p. 56), “the discovery of human love [...] is one of the greatest events of the 12<sup>th</sup> century”.

The female element is referred to as passive, with all associated connotations: pathological, pathetic, patience, passion. In counterpoint to the masculine element, word's gender, of the action, the woman quietly generates the webs and veils with which she'll receive, always like Penelope, her adventurer Odysseus. The female element suffers the wait, absence, Beloved Man's forgetfulness, but she also weaves in this wait love and hope songs which feed her and our dreams<sup>3</sup>.

Saint John of the Cross' mystic poetry derives from this tradition which sees in women the receiver of an external action unrelated to her domination and control. However, it's worth noticing a small deviation from this common place route, insofar as it's a man, exercising his prerogatives as a priest and spiritual leader at a time when the ecclesiastical power rivaled the kings' power, who adopts this female rhetoric, from the one who loves in gerund, the Beloved Woman. Although it's more easily applicable to the poem "Canticle", the same principle could be extended to the entire Saint John of the Cross' work, and even, as Bingemer (2004) noticed in the quote above, to the entire Hispanic Christian mystique. One also needs to remember that in the very poem "Spiritual canticle", discussed below, the action of searching for the Beloved one is female.

Let us, thus, start analyzing the poem, which has as its subtitle "Songs between soul and the husband", announcing from now on the poem's structuring metaphor: the Wife is Soul, the one who loves (Lover), and the Husband (Beloved

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<sup>3</sup> There are numerous examples, inside and outside the literary culture, to support this finding, and we'll present only one, which takes place in the chivalry novel *Amadis of Gaul*, from the same century of Saint John of the Cross: Amadis and Oriana play the leading roles in this fiction work, still medieval, which narrates their loving adventures and misadventures. In the event which we want to highlight, the couple symbolizing the perfect love meeting between the Female and Male elements, must pass a test which only the "perfect lovers" would be able to. Amadis' task is removing a sword embedded in a rock, a clear reference to King Arthur's legend; in turn, Oriana must receive in her head a garland whose half consists of imperishable wonderful flowers and the other half consists of wilted and dried flowers, which would flourish again by touching the head of the woman whose Love was perfect. One sees, in this example, that action is understood as inherent to the male element – Amadis *pulls* the sword – and passivity – Oriana *receives* the wreath – is attributed to the female element (VIEIRA, 1983). However, passivity doesn't mean apathy or inertia, and Penelope's action, our symbol of the feminine element, proves it well, since, by weaving her veil, she also weaves the time which will make possible Odysseus' return and the resumption of everything he possessed by right. Before, passivity must be positively understood as a generous availability to embrace the other and suffer the loving *pathos* without shame, hence the finding that it hasn't to do with sex, here, but rather with archetypes, and an eloquent example is the song writer Chico Buarque, who often chooses the female voice to express the loving *pathos*.

Man) is God himself, the One who should be loved above all things, with our heart, soul, strength, and understanding (Mark 12,30).

The “Spiritual canticle” (SC), since the title, proposes itself to an intertextual dialogue to another mystic poem, the “Song of Songs” (SS), attributed to the biblical king Solomon. Let’s see, for instance, the comparison between a few lines of these poems:

### Song of Songs

- 3,1 By night on my bed,  
I sought him whom my soul loveth.  
I sought him, but I found him not.
- 3,2 I will rise now, and go about the city  
in the streets, and in the broad ways,  
I will seek him whom my soul loveth:  
I sought him, but I found him not.
- 3,3 The watchmen that go about the city  
found me:  
*to whom I said*, Saw ye him whom  
my soul loveth?
- [...]
- 5,8 I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem,  
if ye find my beloved, that ye tell him,  
What shall you tell him? ... say  
that I *am* sick of love.

(Song of Songs 3,1-3; 5,8)

### Spiritual canticle

- I Where did you hid,  
Beloved, and left me groaning?  
I wounded myself;  
I went, crying for you,  
and you were already gone.
- II Pastors who’ve ascended  
Beyond, through brindles, to the Knoll,  
If, perhaps, you see  
The one who I want more  
Tell him I got sick, suffer, and die.
- III Seeking for my loves,  
I’ll go through these hills and streams;  
I won’t reap the flowers,  
not fear the beasts  
and I’ll pass the forts and frontiers.
- QUESTION TO CREATURES
- IV Oh, woods and thicknesses,  
Planted by the hand of my Beloved!  
Oh, meadows of greens,  
Enameled by flowers,  
Tell me if he has passed you by!

(JOÃO DA CRUZ, 2002, p. 578-579)

In these compared excerpts, although brief, similarities between these poems already become evident and, as we don’t aim at conducting a stylistic comparison between them, we only point out the most significant ones: a) a female lyrical voice realizes the beloved’s absence and decides to go searching for him (SS 3,1; SC I); b) in the search for the beloved, many people are asked for news: the city

guards, the “daughters of Jerusalem” (SS 3,2; 5.8), pastors (SC II), and the creatures in the field (SC IV); c) the beloved’s absence causes excruciating love suffering: the beloved woman is “sick of love” (SS 5.8) and feels she’s going to die due to this pain (SC II). Not only the symbolism used by Saint John is inspired by the “Song of Songs”, but we may even say that, often, some stanza is a paraphrase or free interpretation of a Bible verse<sup>4</sup>. Saint John, as it was in vogue until then, allegorically interprets the Bible book as the love date between the Israelite people and its God, or as the marriage of Christ to his Church<sup>5</sup> and, supported on this interpretation, he plays with the Biblical symbolism, especially with the bridal symbol, as a mystic resource for expressing something ineffable (SALVADOR, 1968, p. 222-223).

Likewise, the erotic symbolism isn’t a privilege of Saint John of the Cross’ mystique, it appears in religious traditions as diverse as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Arabic Sufism.

The erotic loving union has been the only symbol of the mystic union used by virtually all mystic traditions, including the Christian, and, unlike any other sacred symbol, the sexuality inherent to love and eroticism is universal and ahistorical: the human being can never be separated from it, and when she/he did this through ascetic exercises, she/he uses metaphors or allegories to find a path which allows expressing the ineffability of the being’s continuity, God’s participation through its resemblance to a loving act (ROSADO, 2001, p. 10, our translation)<sup>6</sup>.

“In mystique one searches for a union beyond the limits set to lose her/himself in an impersonal and transcendent continuity to the other” (ROSADO, 2001, p. 10, our translation)<sup>7</sup>, so that it isn’t exactly a novelty establishing analogies

<sup>4</sup> About the stylistic similarities between the Biblical “Song” and Saint John of the Cross’ “Canticle” see the study by Alonso (1942).

<sup>5</sup> Despite the allegorical interpretation in pseudo-Solomon’s book is the most popular, and quite old, currently, many biblical exegetes believe this perspective is artificial and not natural, opting for the literal interpretation, that is, the celebration of legitimate love and eroticism between a man and a woman. In this regard, see the comments to the book “Song of Songs” in the Bible (1985).

<sup>6</sup> In the original, in Spanish: “La unión erótico-amorosa ha sido el único símbolo de la unión mística utilizada por prácticamente todas las tradiciones místicas, incluida la cristiana, y la diferencia de cualquier otro símbolo sagrado, la sexualidad inmanente en el amor y en el erotismo es universal y a-histórica: el ser humano jamás ha podido prescindir de ella, y cuando lo ha hecho con ejercicios del ascetismo, recurre a metáforas o alegorías para hallar una vía que permita expresar la inefabilidad de la continuidad del ser, de la participación de Dios por medio de su símil con el acto amoroso”.

<sup>7</sup> In the original, in Spanish: “En la mística se busca la unión más allá del límite de fija para perderse en una continuidad impersonal y trascendente con lo otro”.

between the wish for union inherent to mystique and the erotic loving union. Carlos Dominguez Morano (2004), analyzing the mystic experience through the means provided by psychiatry and psychology, explains these similarities by characterizing the human being as split, painfully aware of the initial break with the maternal body, from where this unitive aspiration which will appear very clearly emerges in the erotic loving union experience and also in the mystique:

This unitive experience lying at the very origin of desire is that which, in a paradigmatic way, offers itself to the human experiences of loving passion and in this other way of loving passion which is the mystic experience. The union desire, suffering due to separation from the beloved Being, the love and joy of presence offer themselves, this way, to a crucial analogy between mystic experience and human love. And we know, indeed, the way how mystic experience so often chose these affective, erotic, and passionate patterns of human love in order to try expressing in the best way its innermost experience (MORANO, 2004, p. 207, our translation)<sup>8</sup>.

If in eroticism the fusion between fragment and whole is given in an objective and timely manner, in mystique the quest for reconciliation with the divine/sacred will remain as an ideal to be restlessly pursued. Another interesting connection between these experiences is related to the common language to both reports: in many personal testimonies of mystic men, the symbols and metaphors used for characterizing the mystic union between Creator and creature take an overtly sexual connotation, as in the writings of Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross himself.

Faustino Teixeira (2006) draws attention to an image which appears at the very beginning of the “Canticle”: the Beloved Woman’s “exit” in search of the Beloved Man, in a similar manner to the biblical poem, where the invitation comes from the Beloved Man: “Rise up, my beloved, my beautiful one, come to me!” (SS 2,10). The uniqueness of John of the Cross’ poem is that, in it, this is an inward movement, towards oneself’s core, in an internalization process of the whole

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<sup>8</sup> In the original, in Spanish: “Esa aspiración unitiva que radica em el origen mismo del deseo es la que de modo paradigmático se ofrece en las experiencias humanas de la pasión amorosa que es la experiencia mística. El deseo de unión, el sufrimiento por la separación del Ser amado, el amor y el gozo de la presencia se prestan, así, una analogía fundamental a la experiencia mística con el amor humano. Y bien sabemos de qué modo la experiencia mística tantas veces eligió esos moldes efectivos, eróticos y pasionales del amor de pareja para intentar expresar del mejor modo su vivencia más íntima”.



poem's action, which would take place at the heart's bottom. As Saint John himself interprets, in order to find his Beloved Man, Soul must "leave all things according to the inclination and will, and enter into the uttermost withdrawing within herself, taking into account all things as if they didn't exist" (JOÃO DA CRUZ, 2002, p. 596). God lurks in the depths of Soul and, in order to find him, there's a need for "leaving", abandoning all sensitive and intelligible affections on a journey which goes through the dark night of not knowing. In the analysis by Faustino Teixeira (2006, p. 63-64) on the poem:

It's part of the beloved woman's purgative route trying to get rid of her old habits, breaking with the "distractions" which take her away from her loving object, distancing herself from all things and creatures ([SC] 8-9)<sup>9</sup>. Hence the beloved woman's need of also hiding in her interiority, since it isn't out of herself that she'll be able to find the Beloved Man: "What else do you want, oh, soul, and what else are you searching for out of thee, if thou hast within thee thy riches, thy delights, thy satisfaction, thy wealth, and thy kingdom" ([SC] 1,8). The Beloved Man dwells within the beloved woman, but she doesn't notice him, because he's hidden. She needs to "leave" inward herself, and hidden within herself she'll be able to find him and feel him ([SC] 1,9).

Thus, the "Canticle" is presented as a metaphor of the mystic process driving the mortal man towards God: in the first stanzas (IV) there's the *purgative way*, where Soul exposes her spiritual wounds and declares that these loving wounds can only be cured with "the presence and figure" of the Beloved Man; in the intermediate stanzas there's an *illuminating way* (VI-XIII), where the Beloved Man speaks for the first time, and Soul has again as interlocutors the nature's soul forces and, also, mythological beings (such as the nymphs from Judea), then pacified by the remembrance of what the Beloved Man represents in her life – "In the Beloved Man I find the mountains, / the lonely valleys, nemoral, / the strangest islands / the abuzz rivers, / and the whisper of loving airs..."; and, finally, in the

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<sup>9</sup> As Faustino Teixeira explains, there're two distinct versions of "Spiritual canticle", known as "Canticle A" (SA) and "Canticle B" (SB). The first version has 39 stanzas and the second has 40 stanzas, the version we chose for analyze is SB. Both versions are identical up to stanza 10 and, from then on, there's the addition of one stanza to SB, the 11<sup>th</sup> stanza. With the insertion of a new stanza in CB, the sequence is changed, something which remains up to the stanza 15. There will be, then, an order transposition up to the stanza 34 (SB), when, then, the original sequence is resumed, marked by the difference of one stanza. According to Teixeira (2006, p. 60), "John of the Cross' intent, with the order change in the stanzas of SB, is fostering a greater clarity in the presentation of spiritual life's development 'scheme'", insofar as this strophic order will arrange the lines so that there's a unitary block among those dealing with the spiritual betrothal and another one which deals with the marriage.

last stanzas, the *unitive way* (XIV-XV), where Lover and Beloved Man meet at a *locus amenus* previously prepared for their delight<sup>10</sup>.

Following the tradition which interprets the “Song of Songs” as an allegory of Christ’s union to his Church, the “Spiritual canticle”, Saint John creates a lyrical and loving narrative with comings and goings: Soul (the Wife) is that voice which opens the canticle, announcing the painful absence of the Beloved Man, and interpellating *the creatures* (in fact, the whole nature which, here, is understood as having its own life and will, being able, thus, to “see” the Beloved Man and “know” his whereabouts) in search for clues allowing him to be found. A few lines later, the Beloved Man appears and tenderly speaks, and Soul’s answer lists the Beloved Man’s sweetness, expressing, to the same nature forces which saw her previous love suffering, the current joy due to the Beloved Man’s presence. In stanzas 17-26 one narrates the lovers’ mystic union, in a paradisiacal Eden which is the setting for Soul’s redemption, who had gotten lost through the renewal provided by Christ, the second Adam<sup>11</sup>; in stanzas 27-31, the mystic marriage consummation, where Soul confesses that “[...] I don’t have another craft and loving is my exercise”, and in the other stanzas (32-34; 35-39) the narrative of loving delights in the union between Lover and Beloved and a new Soul’s monologue, but now without despair due to the Beloved Man’s absence.

If the “Spiritual canticle”, as defined by its author, is the narrative of a desperate Soul’s search for God and, finally, of the mystic union between them, there’s a need for being aware that it’s Soul who suffers the loving *pathos*, she is the one who loses her Beloved Man and cries for him: “Where did you hid, / Beloved, and left me groaning?”. This is the love misfortune, with some resonance of medieval poetry, expressed with intensity and passion for the female lyrical I, a predominant voice in this dramatic poem which is structured as a dialogue between

<sup>10</sup> The classification of Soul’s route into three pathways is provided by Saint John himself in the “Commentary on ‘Spiritual canticle’” (JOÃO DA CRUZ, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> As interpreted by Paul the Apostle in his Letter to the Romans 5,12-21. Let’s take into account the following excerpt: “Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life” (Romans 5,18).

Lover and Beloved, but in which the female voice is in the foreground. In the search for the Beloved Man, pleasures and fears are forgotten, and the Beloved Woman starts an intense searching journey which is, to some extent, a search for herself:

WIFE

VI Who can heal me?!

He's delivered it to me, indeed;  
Don't try sending me  
Any further messenger,  
Since they can't tell me what I wish for.

VII And among all wanderers,

From thee one thousand graces are reported,  
And everyone else hurts me;  
And hurt me to death  
A "I don't know why", which they keep on babbling.

VIII But how do thou persevere,

Oh, life, without living where thou live now?  
If do make you die  
The arrows thou receive  
Through what thou conceives about the Beloved one?

IX Why do thou wounded

This heart of mine, instead of healing it?  
And, since thou hast stolen it from me,  
Why do thou left it this way  
And don't take it away with thee?

X Give an end to my longings,

Because no one can undo them;  
And let my eyes see thee,  
Since thou art light for them,  
And I only wish having them for thee.

XI Show thy presence!

Kill me thy vision and beauty;  
See that this disease  
Due to love is never cured  
Unless with the presence and with the figure.

(JOÃO DA CRUZ, 2002, p. 582-583)

Intrepid, Soul goes forward, adventurous, without being distracted by the beauty and without fearing to go beyond the borders of what is speakable and known. It's driven by the loving *pathos* and bears wounds which only the Beloved Man can heal through his presence and beauty, otherwise, life will no longer be able to endure where it no longer exists: in this wounded heart. Only the Beloved

Man's presence and figure can establish this *locus amenus* suitable to the delights of passion: a place away from all human care, pleasant and in harmony with nature, where only the presence of Lover and Beloved will be allowed, so that they enjoy in the loving loneliness all pleasure and delight provided by the love date:

## WIFE

XIV In the Beloved Man I find the mountains,  
The lonely valleys, nemoral,  
The strangest islands,  
Abuzz rivers,  
And the whisper of loving airs;

XV The quiet night,  
Almost at the daybreak moment;  
The silent music,  
The loud loneliness,  
The supper which entertains and lets falling in love.

(JOÃO DA CRUZ, 2002, p. 590-591)<sup>12</sup>

After a long and tiring search, the Beloved Woman find her Beloved Man and she can, at last, invite him:

XXXIV Then the little white dove  
For the ark, with its branches, returned;  
And, happy, the little dove  
The so wished pair  
Already in the green streams found.

XXXV In solitude it lived,  
In solitude it has already built her nest;  
And in solitude guide her  
Alone, its Dear one,  
Also in loneliness, hurt by love.

XXXVI Let's enjoy, Beloved!  
Let's see in thy beauty,  
On the mountain and the hill,  
Where the pure water springs;  
Let's go deeper into the thickness.

<sup>12</sup> The Brazilian version of the poem translates in an imprecise manner the stanza XIV, including a verb in the first stanza which originally didn't exist ("I think"), which removes from the line the destabilizing effect it had, insofar as one loses the mysterious and incantatory effects that the repetition of phrases with antithetical adjectives and/or disconnected created: "Mi loved them montañas, / los valles nemorosos lonely, / them insulas extrañas, / los sonorosos rivers; / Silbo el de los aires loving; / La noche sosegada / en par de los del uprisings aurora / her music callada, / la soledad sound, / la cena y recreation that enamored" (stanzas XIV and XV). According to Luce López-Baralt (apud Teixeira, 2006, p. 64), a specialist in Saint John of the Cross, "this set of lyres produces a melody effect, that of a mantra, of a set or incantatory spell: Saint John, like many centuries later Rimbaud, manages to conjure the reader with the hypnotic rhythm of his acoustic magic".

XXXVII And, then, the highest  
 Caves dug in the stone, we'll seek;  
 They're much hidden;  
 And together we'll get into,  
 And we'll suck the pomegranates' juice.

XXXVIII There thou would'st show  
 What mine thou intended,  
 And soon thou would'st give,  
 There, thou, mine life,  
 What thou gave me the other day.

(JOÃO DA CRUZ, 2002, p. 593)

There're in these lines by Saint John of the Cross a female rhetoric on which one finds less interest in claiming a lack of action – something which, anyway, would be an obvious untruth, since the poem is structured through the effective Soul's action in searching for the Beloved Man – than a *mood* to the other and a cheerful and courageous acceptance of loving misfortune and *pathos*, experiencing it without subterfuges, but also without bitterness or disillusionment: although Soul wanders lost and deadly wounded due to the Beloved Man's absence there's no despair in her, only hope, faith, and love, the three major Christian virtues, as Paul the apostle taught us<sup>13</sup>.

## 2 The not knowing night

If in the “Spiritual canticle” the metaphors refer to a sweet melancholy, due to the absence of the Beloved Man, in the poem “*Noche oscura*” the semantic field is moved for unknowability and danger in nocturnal images, reaffirming a route that the mystic man feels impelled to follow: leave the everyday domestic tranquility towards a darkness which illuminates just by making darker. The dark night will be the symbol chosen for the needed abandonment of the sensible and

<sup>13</sup> “Because now we see like in a mirror, enigmatically, but, then, we'll see face to face; now I partly know, but, then, I'll fully know, as I'm also known. Now, thus, there remain faith, hope, love, all of these; but the greatest of them is love” (I Corinthians 13,12-13).

the intelligible element, so that one can ascend to the place where dwells the divine deity: Mount Carmel<sup>14</sup>. According to Mancho Duque (1982, p. 39):

The conception of Night as a route, emphasized by the vast majority of criticism on John of the Cross, responds and corresponds to the development of mystic experience itself. This is a process of divine conversion, to become a God due to participation<sup>15</sup>.

The “Ascent of Mount Carmel” is one of John of the Cross’s comments to the poem “*Noche oscura*”, the other comment is “*Soul’s noche oscura*”. Comment on the mystic-poetic texts themselves was his custom, and these texts in prose are subsequent to the poems, configuring a hermeneutic effort for clarifying the author’s mystic doctrine through them<sup>16</sup>. An interesting detail noticed by William Franke is a certain distance between form and content which opens up between the poems and the comments on them, since, if the poems are permeated by lush sensuality, the comments advise the severest asceticism (FRANKE, 2007 p. 366). In this essay, we prioritize analyzing the poem, resorting to the comments in prose just to clarify some point in our argumentation. In the comments “*Ascent of Mount Carmel*” and “*Soul’s noche oscura*” the night symbol is developed only in the first three stanzas, which deal with the route through the night of spirit or the night of senses. In turn, the poem “*Noche oscura*” deals with the night symbolism in its entirety, constituting, in fact, the core of the whole John of the Cross’ work (MANCHO DUQUE, 1982).

From the very beginning, John warns about the difficulty of making intelligible the dark night experience, the impossibility of capturing into concepts an experience which takes place when all human faculties (sensible and intelligible)

<sup>14</sup> Mount Carmel was the setting of the biblical fight between Elijah and the prophets from Baal (cf. I Kings 18), where God had materialized himself by consuming with fire the holocaust offered by Elijah to Yahweh. Afterwards, Elijah’s experience will be taken as a paradigm for mystic and contemplative life, inspiring, around the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the origin of the Order of the Brothers of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel, which has the prophet Elijah as the founder of a new lifestyle. Saint John of the Cross, as a Carmelite, is inspired by this episode to write the comment on the poem “*Noche oscura*”, titled “*Ascent of Mount Carmel*”.

<sup>15</sup> In the original, in Spanish: “La concepción de la Noche como tránsito, destacada por la gran mayoría de la crítica sanjuanina, responde y se corresponde con el desarrollo de la propia experiencia mística. Se trata de un proceso de conversión al divino, de un transformarse en Dios por participación” (MANCHO DUQUE, 1982, p. 39).

<sup>16</sup> According to Damaso Alonso, “[...] de las obras que conocemos, las primeras fueron poemas, y los tratados doctrinales vinieron después en forma de comentarios en prosa a las poesías. He aquí una estricta ordenación intelectual: primero, el impulso, el anhelo, el fervor; sólo después la madurada introspección, la rígida ordenación, el demorado análisis” (ALONSO, 1942, p. 24-25).

would be “neutralized” through a rigorous process of purgation and asceticism. Thus, he states:

In order to declare and to understand this dark night through which the soul passes to reach the divine light of perfect union to God’s love, as it’s possible in this life, there’s a need for a greater science and experience light than mine; because there’re so many and so deep darkness and works, both spiritual and temporal, through which usually go through the blissful souls in order to be able to reach this high perfection status, that human science isn’t enough to know how understanding it, nor the experience knows how to say it; because only the one who goes through it will know how to feel it, but not to tell it (JOÃO DA CRUZ, 2002, p. 134).

The night will be among the most powerful images and it’s one of the most expressive in Saint John’s poetry, a negative image which speaks of a gradual and progressive denial process that goes up to a limiting point, which is absolute affirmation (MANCHO DUQUE, 1982, p. 41). According to the mystic poet, the night is a narrow pathway, a love perfection pathway that “becomes soul to reach the high and blissful union to God” (JOÃO DA CRUZ, 2002, p. 27), after reaching the highest mountain summit (Mount Carmel) in the most extreme spirit poverty and detachment, united and turned into God, as Saint John explains in his comment:

The soul summarily reveals, in this song, that it came out, driven by God, only due to his love and inflamed by this love, in order to search for him in a dark night. This night is the deprivation and purification of all her sensitive appetites with regard to all things outside of this world, the flesh pleasures, as well as to the tastes of will. This work is done through the purification of senses; and, thus, she said to have gone “when her home was quiet”, i.e. having the sensitive part pacified, and all her appetites were asleep; because, in fact, she can’t get rid of the pities and anxieties related to the appetites’ jails if they aren’t mortified or asleep. Blissful happiness was “leaving unnoticed”, i.e. without any flesh appetite, or without anything else that could stop her, for leaving “at night”, i.e. when God deprived her of all appetites. This deprivation, the soul named “night” (JOÃO DA CRUZ, 2002, p. 142).

The mystic itinerary proposed by the poem, according to Saint John’s explanation in the comments, comprises all three phases of the night, which takes the active and passive forms. First, there’s the *twilight*, when takes place a

progressive elimination of the subject's visual ability to perceive and identify the sensitive objects.

I In a dark night,  
 By love in living anxieties inflamed,  
 Oh! Blissful happiness!  
 I left unnoticed,  
 In turn, my house was quiet.  
 (JOÃO DA CRUZ, 2002, p. 19)

This is the night of senses, when the soul is slowly falling off the affections (passions) and sensible pleasures, in an asceticism work where it's the soul itself which needs to strip: this is the active night, that, according to Pelle-Douel's reading, might consist more in a pacification and order restoration than a purification work. In this case, "not only trends need to be appeased and pacified; understanding also must start entering into the night, the not knowing, into the spirit's active Night" (PELLE-DOUEL, 1962, p. 141). Here, this is a great effort to prepare the soul for this meeting that, otherwise, couldn't happen, because "[...] aniquilamiento, en San Juan de la Cruz es condición indispensable para acceder a la contemplación pura, a la visión unitiva con Dios" (CAMON AZNAR, 1972, p. 141). There's a need for a true emptying process so that the soul becomes one along with her Beloved Man, an intensive stripping which progresses from outside to inside, from the sensible to the intelligible, from possession to wish, from action to intent: there's a need that the mystic man empties his soul's home so that, when God gets there, he don't find even a single subject waiting for him, but only the house empty and devoid of subjectivity.

The pathway leading to the mountain summit, where only the divine Presence subsists, is outlined by Saint John in a drawing where appears a track on which is written several times the word "Nothing". On both sides of this track there're the illusory earthly goods and the heavenly goods, those who intend to reach the mountain summit need to evade these goods, because those who seek them end up losing them, as well as the mystic meeting experience. By transcribing the words which make up this drawing one obtains the poem below, which



illustrates the rigorous asceticism process through which the soul must go through in order to reach the mountain summit:

In order to enjoy EVERYTHING  
wish to enjoy NOTHING.  
In order to have EVERYTHING,  
wish to have NOTHING.  
In order to have EVERYTHING,  
don't wish to have something in NOTHING.  
In order to be EVERYTHING,  
don't wish to be something in NOTHING  
In order to arrive where you DISLIKE,  
you need to go through where you DISLIKE.  
In order to reach what you don't KNOW,  
you need to go through what you don't KNOW.  
In order to have what you don't HAVE,  
you need to go through what you don't HAVE.  
In order to become something you ARE NOT,  
you need to go through something you ARE NOT.  
When noticing something  
avoid risking everything.  
Because in order to go from everything to everything,  
you need to give everything to everything.  
And when you have everything,  
you need to have it without wishing for anything.

In this nakedness the spirit finds its rest, as longing for nothing,  
nothing impels you up and nothing oppresses you down,  
because you're in the center of your humility<sup>17</sup>.

(JOÃO DA CRUZ, 2002, p. 86-87)

The poem is arranged into antithetical lines, where predominate the words Everything and Nothing organized in a parallelistic way, something which provides an equivalence effect between them, so that everything one wishes to enjoy, have, or be becomes Nothing. The denial effect is twofold: if Everything one wishes to enjoy, have, or be becomes Nothing, the Nothing one enjoys, has, or is becomes Everything. Vinicius Carvalho (2006, p. 137), commenting on this poem, states:

The use of indefinite pronouns “everything” and “nothing” in a noun form, part of the antilogy pointed out above, is another means to which the mystic man resorts for expressing his experience. Two opposite and extreme wholes which meet due to the very extreme condition and they don't constitute, this way, deprivation, but excess. Excess in a language

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<sup>17</sup> These lines are taken from a graph and literary sketch that Saint John wrote to the nuns from Beas as illustrative of the mystic and contemplative route. This draft provided the treatise “Ascent of Mount Carmel” with a starting point. The draft was also used by the Carmelite man in his doctrinal ministry as a sort of primer.

which searches for meaning. Language moves towards liminality pointing out the relationship known/unknown, a principle of supreme ignorance. The liminal images allow, in the poem, presence in absence, after all, what is “everything” and “nothing”? The word reaches its meaningful limit, but, at the same time, it’s silent and represents only the absence of signifiers.

The dark night’s second phase is named passive night, and it concerns *midnight*, when, after renunciation and abandonment of the affections, tastes and concepts, detachment from all natural or supernatural knowledge, the intellectual and discursive one, the soul reaches the natural limits of her mental and spiritual faculties. This is the night’s darkest part, when, after going through the not knowing night, the soul also needs to *die for herself*, experiencing the deep darkness of faith, this *sure and obscure soul’s habit* (JOÃO DA CRUZ, 2002, p. 188).

II In the darkness, safe,  
By the disguised secret ladder,  
Oh! Blissful happiness!  
In the darkness, veiled,  
Being already quiet at my home.

III In a so blessed night,  
And in a secret where no one saw me,  
Nor looked I at something,  
Without another light or guide  
In addition to that burning at heart.

IV This light guided me  
More clearly than that of noon,  
To where was waiting for me  
The one who I knew, indeed,  
In a site where no one appeared.  
(JOÃO DA CRUZ, 2002, p. 136-137)

If the night’s first part was related to the asceticism of senses and passions (the soul’s lower part, as explained by Saint John in the comment “Ascent of Mount Carmel”), the night’s second part refers to the cognizant and rational abilities of man (upper part), so that this is the time of greatest darkness and introspection, since the soul is stripped of its own light, without all culture landmarks in which we usually support ourselves. Pure faith, spirit nakedness, simplicity union are synonymous terms used by the poet to mean this whole light deprivation and the

theoretical and philosophical frameworks characterizing the spirit's night. At faith's midnight, the three powers of soul – understanding, memory, and will – are going to be improved through the three theological virtues – faith, hope, and love: faith acts on understanding, hope on memory, and love on will, in order to produce in each of these powers *emptiness* and *darkness* (JOÃO DA CRUZ, 2002, p. 200). This night phase is characterized by the poet as passive night, since, here, it's the soul which suffers action, the divine *pathos*:

Feels, then, in herself, a deep emptiness and poverty, with regard to the three kinds of goods that are arranged to her liking, i.e. temporal, natural, and spiritual goods; she sees herself surrounded by the contrary evils, which are miseries from imperfections, dryness, and emptiness in the exercise of her powers and spirit helplessness in darkness. As God purifies, that night, the soul, according to the sensory and spiritual substance, and, according to the interior and exterior powers, it's worth putting her into emptiness, poverty, and helplessness from all sides, and letting her dry, empty, and surrounded by darkness. The sensitive part is purified through dryness; powers, in the emptiness of her apprehension, and spirit, in black darkness ((JOÃO DA CRUZ, 2002, p. 499).

This need for denial was born from the deep awareness of the abyss between Creator and creature, divine and human.

Then, the scheme becomes effulgent due to its simplicity; on one hand (so to speak), God, in his Transcendence and his completely insensitive nature. Night for understanding; on the other hand, man and his understanding, fully connected to the sensitive, prisoner of the natural knowledge's night. No bond, a hiatus, a *chaos magnum*; no scale or analogy or relationship. The Night from all sides. At least, according to the knowledge mode from man. It will, therefore, be needed to lie at obscurity and darkness, at not knowing the (PELLE-DOUEL, 1962, p. 120-121)<sup>18</sup>.

The negative words attend witnessing the impossibility of predicating the One who dodges from every Name: nocturnal darkness, quietness, secret, invisibility, blindness, concealment, and disguise are signals which make up the beautiful image of this Lover who risks a meeting which, despite loving, happens

<sup>18</sup> In the original, in Spanish: "El esquema se hace entonces fulgurante por su sencillez; de un lado (si así puede decirse), Dios, en su Transcendencia y su naturaleza totalmente no sensible. Noche para el entendimiento; de otro lado, el hombre y su entendimiento, totalmente ligado a lo sensible, prisionero de la noche del conocimiento natural. Ninguno vínculo, un hiato, un *chaos magnum*; ninguna escala ni analogía ni relación. La Noche por todas las partes. Al menos, según el modo del conocimiento, a partir del hombre. Será pues, necesario situarse en oscuridad y las tinieblas, en el no-saber" (PELLE-DOUEL, 1962, p. 120-121).

beyond all representation possibilities, at the night of not knowing. However, the negativity which covers this dark night and is emphasized through these terms doesn't belong to common sense, that opposes darkness to light, it's rather a blessed night, since it's what unites the beloved man and woman, the latter turned into the first. Darkness in this so kind night seems, rather, related to the need expressed by the apophatic mystique to transcend the images, knowledge, and God's name, as expressed by the formula of *Meister Eckhart* (2004, p. 52):

When God formed and infuses himself into the soul, thou sees him as a light or a being or a good, but if thou can still learn something from him, then, it isn't God. Look, there's a need to go beyond this "little" thing, taking away all attributes, to know God as One.

The same idea of detachment and nakedness appears in Saint John of the Cross, for instance, in the prologue to "Ascent of Mount Carmel", where he explains the aims of the book concerned:

It deals with the way how a soul can present itself to reach the divine union. It provides warnings and doctrines, both to the novice and experienced people, very profitable for them to know how to get rid of all temporal things and to feel not embarrassed with the spiritual things, and stay in a supreme nakedness and freedom of spirit, which is required for the divine union (JOÃO DA CRUZ, 2002, p. 134).

This nakedness and freedom of spirit resemble that spoken of by Eckhart in the quote above, although with significant differences with regard to the subject: if for *Meister* it's the supreme Deity who will remain naked of attributes in front of the mystic man's eyes, according to the Spanish poet, nakedness is a process of the mystic subject, who will need to get rid of matter and spirit in order to achieve the divine Nothing. The processes complement each other: for understanding deity as One, without forms, attributes, or determinations, there's a need for going beyond one's own will, knowledge, ability to apprehend (possession), essence/existence: there's a need for letting the soul go, in through the dark and sinister night, towards the Mount Carmel summit, where there is no space for a knowing I and a

Divine knowledge object, since there only God's honor and glory dwells<sup>19</sup>. Regarding this aspect of divine unknowability, Vilanova (1993, p. 93) claims this way:

It's impossible to state what God positively is. God's knowledge isn't not knowing, but rather a lack of knowledge. Regarding God, every knowledge progress is paradoxically a lack of knowledge progress; the pathway goes towards darkness, towards the denial of everything we believe knowing or proving about God. *This is the pathway of mystic men, of everyone who experience God as a burn in her/his existence, the night and desert evidence.* It's the pathway which frees us from illusion, imagination, in order to get closer to the truth leading to the depth of our heart. Learning to know God is, at first and at every moment, conducting towards ourselves, learning to know ourselves, accepting what comes from us and knowing to criticize it. At every step, knowing God is getting rid of our false gods, pre-constructed day by day, gesticulating or sublimated images of the self. All this isn't God. Thus, God isn't here or there, *God is constantly elsewhere.* Ultimately, God is absent. We get nothing, in the language of our John of the Cross<sup>20</sup>.

Finally, there comes the dawn, when the darkness is fading and, little by little, there comes the light of *daybreak*. With the dawning of Alba, the soul reaches the top of the hill and joins the Beloved Man, being turned into him. Saint John of the Cross explains that the union of soul's powers (understanding, memory, and will) to the deity isn't only that union between God and all his creatures, because this is a union through participation, or substantial union, insofar as God provides the creatures with being. In turn, in the soul's union to God, this is a union of similarity in love, different from the first, which is natural, the union in love is supernatural, i.e. it happens only when

<sup>19</sup> In the drawing by Saint John to illustrate the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* there's the sentence "sólo mora en este monte honra y gloria de Dios" at the mountain top.

<sup>20</sup> In the original, in Spanish: "Imposible afirmar lo que Dios es positivamente. El conocimiento de Dios no es el no conocimiento, pero sí un desconocimiento. En lo referente a Dios, todo progreso de conocimiento es paradójicamente un progreso de desconocimiento; el camino va hacia la tiniebla, hacia la negación de todo lo que creemos saber o probar de Dios. *Este es el camino de los místicos, de todos los que experimentan a Dios como una quemadura en su existencia, la prueba de la noche y del desierto.* Es el camino que nos libra de la ilusión, de lo imaginario, para acercarnos a la verdad que nos conduce hacia la profundidad de nosotros mismos. Aprender a conocer a Dios es, en primer lugar y en cada momento, dirigirnos hacia nosotros mismos, es aprender a conocernos, a aceptar lo que procede de nosotros y saberlo criticar. A cada paso, conocer a Dios es librarnos de nuestros falsos dioses, prefabricados cada día, imágenes gesticulantes o sublimadas del propio yo. Todo esto no es Dios. De esta manera, Dios no está aquí o allá, *Dios está constantemente en otro sitio.* En último término, Dios está ausente. Nos queda la nada, en el lenguaje de nuestro Juan de la Cruz" (VILANOVA, 1993, p. 93, emphasis added).

both the soul and God's will, join and conform in such way that there's nothing contrary to each other. Thus, when the soul takes from her, totally, what disgusts her and what isn't identified with the divine will, shall be turned into God through love (JOÃO DA CRUZ, 2002, p. 196).

The *pathos* of this mystic itinerary is expressed by the *Sufi* tradition with the metaphor of a moth turning about the flame of a torch, in the dark night of desire:

The moth sees a fire burning in a lantern at night and, taken by an irresistible desire to be united to that flame, starts turning about the lantern, dating the flame until dawn, when it returns to its companions to tell them with the sweetest words about its experience: "You don't seem to have improved with it", is their comment, since they notice that its wings are crumpled and wounded: that's the ascetic condition. But the moth comes back the next night and, finding an empty space in the lantern's glass, it completely binds unto its beloved, turning itself into the flame (CAMPBELL, 2002, p. 71).

There're, therefore, damages and losses in the mystic process. Bearing in her body the wounds due to this meeting, *that's the ascetic condition*, but, after abandoning everything – sensible and intelligible –, Soul, having stripped itself of every created thing, is ready so that the divine sign and resemblance are carved on her, converting her in the one she loves for love's sake. Then, in a night more lovely than the daybreak, she'll be able to sing:

V Oh! Night which has led me  
Oh! Night more lovely than the daybreak;  
Oh! night which has brought together  
Beloved man and beloved woman  
Beloved woman turned into Beloved Man!

VI In my flowery chest  
Which was kept just for him,  
He lied asleep...  
And I, tenderly, entertained him,  
And the fan refreshed by cedars.

VII From the battlement came a balmy breeze,  
When I caressed his hair,  
With his serene hand  
In my lap was blowing,  
And took all my senses.

VIII Forgiven I stood,  
My face was leaning on the Beloved Man,  
Everything stopped. I let myself,  
Leaving my care  
Forgotten among the lilies.

(JOÃO DA CRUZ, 2002, p. 136-137)

*Forgotten* of herself and having abandoned all desire, but the Beloved Man's desire, Soul is, in short, far from all human care, in the arms of the Man she loves with a love greater than death.

### **By way of conclusion**

The dark night image in Saint John of the Cross proved to be a powerful metaphor to characterize this empty spatiality to which the mystic man is called for a draining experience which comprises culture, language, and rationality itself. It's through this experience that the mystic man's radical asceticism will be able to find the ineffable Presence, represented in Saint John of the Cross' mystic poetry and that other mystic men, with images and symbols of the erotic loving language.

Mystique, from this perspective, is didactic: it teaches us that we don't know, we can't know everything. There're interstices, there are gaps, there're is dark spots where our language collides. There's a night of not knowing which we can't go through unscathed, because in this experience of *closing the eyes* the structural void of our sociocultural constructions are unveiled to us. The very etymology of the word mystique confirms the negative mystic revelation character of this experience: the Greek term *mystikós* has in its root the verb *myo*, which means 'close' and, particularly, 'close the eyes', and in the most distinct mystic traditions one finds the assumption of mystery and the possibility of its unveiling, the understanding that behind the world of appearances there remains a knowledge and truth not subject to a knowable/sensitive apprehension, and this reality is accessible only when we 'closes the eyes' of reason and jump to the absolute and unknowable otherness revealed to the mystic man.

The mystic option to which resorts Saint John of the Cross' poetry shows up, then, a rigorous asceticism of all desire for knowledge and presence, so that the God who is experienced there won't be a discursive positivity, but rather an open wound in the fragile epidermis of the one who says nothing about Him, only the imperative of this calling, this Name to which no word could stop talking (or shut).

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