

“I ENTERED WHERE I KNEW NOT”

Semiotic approaches to Saint John of the Cross’ poetry

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Abstract

This paper studies Saint John of the Cross’ works, from both a literary point of view and also as a testimony of Spain in the XVI Century. The method of analysis is semiotic and textual interpretative, which renders possible a personal explicative hypothesis. The conclusion is that the poet’s era was tumultuous; hence his descriptions of transcendence do not necessarily match the standards of that time. This could have two causes: first, a tremendous polarization in which Christianity causes violence, which could explain the poetry of impossibility as a way of escape; and second, the supremacy wish of the factions in conflict. The poet’s attitude is active neutrality, a quiet way of impugnation for both extremes; this would explain the intimate tone. Religion generates conventions for the representation of the sublime; but it seems that the opposite also exists: meaning paradigms generate religion, or at least an independent ascetic possibility. We call this process “mutual semiosis.” Poetry is, then, extremely efficient in expressing these ambiguities. So literature reaches degree of infiniteness, setting an aesthetic of the impossible and semiotics reaches a crossroad: to be holistic or not to be.

Key words: Saint John of the Cross, ascetics, poetry.

Introduction

In the XX century, at least two extreme positions towards the relation between the artist and his social context were held. On the one hand, Marxists like Sartre (1981) think the author is a “restless consciousness” in a perpetual antagonism against conservative forces. By reflecting society, he becomes useless and even harmful. But, for Sartre, there is a conflict *ab origine*: either there is a reaction against *statu quo*, or one is not a writer, or the work lacks validity. Sartre never thinks that the author might agree with the values of the society he belongs to and, therefore, that he would choose to consecrate them. On the other hand, from the psychoanalytic point of view, Jaffé (1997, 251) says the artist “has been, in all times, instrument and spokesman of the spirit of his time... Consciously or unconsciously, the artist shapes the nature and the values of his time, which conversely form him.” That is a possibility, but only one of them. Sometimes the artist reflects his epoch precisely because he proposes something different, be it a conflict or an alternative. Anyway, it is clear that the bond between the creator and his world is not only very intimate and profound, but that it also generates important paths of meaning. In the case of Saint John of the Cross, however, things might not be that easy.

Semiotics has been somewhere in the middle. Eco (1972, 37) affirms that there are two methods to evaluate a work in its context: (1) the *a priori* method reflects on the world in which the work has appeared and which it conveys, summarizes and sometimes questions; this method considers the work in its autonomy, which would be the sole access to the context; and (2) the *a posteriori*

method, which tries to explain the exact meaning of a work and of some of its elements through the knowledge of the sociological phenomena in which they would be immersed. Nonetheless, he categorically says the most adequate procedure is double: one should neither fall in the deterministic materialism of the *a priori* vision, nor completely ignore the relation between art and its world, for autonomy is never total. It is precisely that *closed* situation what makes it impossible to reduce Saint John's work to absolute categories.

This paper will try to establish some analytic elements in order to understand Saint John's poetry. We will chiefly follow Eco's double-edged system, having as complements some perspective set by historians and literary critics.

1. Saint John of the Cross and His Time: The Logical, the Theological and the Illogical

Let us first trace a brief sketch of the Spanish society in the XVI Century. Based on anthropologists' investigations, Jung (1997, 175) deduces this: when a primitive society is exposed to the influx of alien thoughts, "people lose the sense of life, moral organization disintegrates and people themselves decay morally." The invention of the printing press and the reform ignited by Martin Luther generated unexpected situations within the European society of that time:

«The enormous rupture meant by the monopoly of written culture in the hands of the cultivated ones, and the monopoly of the religious on pious themes, had created a new and potentially explosive situation ... a new era, highly characterized by hierarchical rigorousness, paternalistic indoctrination of the masses, eradication of popular culture, more or less violent exile of minorities and dissident groups had initiated» (Ginzburg 1999, 13).

In theory, the world had stopped being feudal in the sixteenth century, but everything seems to show that Spain did not know how to handle the thought evolution and the new ideas. Was it a phenomenon of the entire Spanish society? Maybe. The process seems to have consisted of two different sides, a good one and a bad one. The positive side was the creation of a *national soul* through religiousness. Before that time, only versions of Italian and German mysticism circulated in Spain. Hence, "the first vindication of the national philosophical personality is due to the mystics." Furthermore, in tumultuous epochs such as this, mysticism

«fills a vacuum of the heart, and, by supporting itself on a personal and immediate revelation, it becomes suspicious before the always mistrustful eyes of the orthodox» (Méndez 2000, 175).

Paradoxically, the political situation, the Inquisition and despotism, favored the apparition of mysticism, for astonishment separates man from society and «shelters all generous and ardent souls from the harshness of social environment» (Méndez 2000, 179). The opposition to the *status quo* (including sometimes the Church itself) and the wish, covert or not, for reforms was born there (Méndez 2000, 181).

The negative side was intolerance and fanaticism. Reality was clear and tough: willing to destroy "heresy," the Catholic Church sinned heavily. The Inquisition moved –at least sometimes– in the "collective mentality" zone, where common values of all social classes intersected in a "spontaneous convergence of elements" (Ginzburg 1999, 8). The Inquisition in Spain had a

number of functions, lasted a long time, and was implacable, so the contact between Spanish population and the world of Reform was impossible: “it is evident that this dogmatic surveillance, lacking all intellectual judgment, allowed the Inquisition to oppress thought” (Ginzburg 1999, 9).

The reasons for personal and collective harassment were not always religious, only its excuse, as it happened in the long Conquest against the Muslims and the growing importance the Jewish community was gaining. In fact, Friar Mguel Morillo and Friar Juan de San Martín were known to be severe and cold, just less famous than Tomás de Torquemada, under whose administration some 14,000 people were executed in Spain alone. A harsh punishment were given Pedro Ruiz de Alcaraz, Sister Isabel de la Cruz and certain Friar Melchor and the sect of the Alumbrados [the Enlightened Ones]. However, Francisco de Osuna, a Franciscan Friar who preached a very questionable doctrine called *recogimiento*¹ was not vehemently prosecuted. Erasmism and Protestantism generated different reactions, some in favor, most against (Testas and Testas 1970). In fact, “Spaniards extracted all the consequences of mysticism, from supreme illumination to the rudest practices” (Méndez 2000, 185).

Therefore, if it is true that “nobody escapes from his epoch and from his own class, but to enter in delirium and incommunication” (Ginzburg 1999, 10), Saint John seems to have taken the risk. He does not necessarily follow social and religious standards to represent transcendence, for symbolism can be ambiguous. By doing that, he created an unforeseen discourse. We can infer several explanations for his conduct. First, social and religious discord between several factions was extreme. Furthermore, this polarization was absurd: Christianity, meant to be a brotherly link between men, ended up being a bloody way of separation. This would explain the discourse of what is impossible: representing what cannot be represented can be an escape valve for that tension:

«In that subjective world contemplation creates, mystics enjoy an absolute reality that exterior reality denies, and from their illuminated summits, they set principles which they would not have dared expose in the social plains, for the bolder the feeling appears when the more restricted it is by external tyranny thought moans» (Méndez 2000, 185).

And, second, the wish –worldly as well- for supremacy of the factions in conflict: neither Reform nor Counter-Reform fought only to exist, they also wanted to oust the rival faction by indoctrinating a larger number of adepts. This would explain Saint John’s intimate and personal discourse: in a context dominated by violent social issues, a pacific, mystical poetry would emerge as a sensible way of rejecting both extremes. This is what he conveys in “Entreme donde no supe” (‘I entered where I knew not’):

<i>De paz y de piedad/ era la ciencia perfecta,/ en profunda soledad/ entendida vía recta”</i> (Saint John of the Cross 1991, 56).	Of peace and piety / was the perfect science,/ in deep solitude/ was the understood, straight path
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In moments of great polarization, there seems to be three possible attitudes. The more obvious two are also the most radical ones: to support one group or to be fully indifferent. But with Saint

¹ A word impossible to translate; in Spanish it would stand for something like “keeping within oneself.”

John a third possibility shows up: active neutrality, a non-violent way to concurrently impugn both positions. Through paradoxes, the poet appeals to the individual and freedom of choice as the solution. Yet more, without negating his origin, Saint John separates himself from concepts which are unmistakably Catholic (the Virgin Mary and transubstantiation, for example) but which are rejected by the Protestants. This pedagogical tone can be traced in works like “Por toda la hermosura (For all beauty)”

<i>No penséis que el interior, / que es de mucha más valía, / halla gozo y alegría / en lo que acá da sabor. / Mas sobre toda hermosura / y lo que es y será y fue, / gusta de un no sé qué / que se halla por ventura</i> (Saint John of the Cross 1991, 59).	‘Do not think the interior/ Which is worth much more/ finds bliss and joy / in what here gives flavor / But, instead of all beauty/ and what is, and will be and was/ it likes an unknown thing / that is found by venture’
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The poet uses a *vosotros*, the Spanish second person plural, in order to address a hypothetical audience. Finally, there would be another factor, which would explain Saint John’s enigmatic descriptions: his own security. Let us see this in detail. Firstly, we must remember that ciphered cryptic language is no stranger for Christian thought. According to Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Bible has four senses: (1) the literal, the evident meaning, and the spiritual, which is itself divided into three other senses: (2) the allegorical, in which New and Old Testaments are compared; (3) the tropological, which contains moral teachings; and (4) the anagogic, which contains religious and transcendent teachings and therefore, reflects the glory of God. Besides, parables are used in the Bible for three reasons: because the discussed themes are ineffable, because by that means boredom is avoided and because words may have many significations (Viñas 2002, 111). So, by writing in an obscure mode, Saint John remained within the borders of traditional Christian reflections: he proposed a different approach to spirituality without risking his own safety.

And secondly, let us consider this. Though Harris seem to ignore many elements from the Christian tradition, he correctly says that personal pacifism may appear in “unbelievable” moments, due to the great violence they display; that is what turns them into “apparently unexplainable paradoxes.” He gives an example: around the year 1000 CE, a treatise called *Canon Episcopi* claimed that nobody could fly riding a broom. But people kept on insulting each other and calling witches one another. Such situation and the huge earnings inquisitors received, inverted the dogma: almost five centuries later, after 1480 CE, denying the existence of witches was a heresy (Harris 2006, 194). Saint John knew how hard it was to be safe of those dogmatic changes; in fact, he was actually imprisoned because of the internal struggles within the Carmelites. Maybe that is the reason why his poems “Living flame of love” and “Dark night of the soul” were published twenty-seven years after the poet’s death, and “Spiritual canticle” thirty-eight years after. The *flight* theme may have been very risky by then.

This situation, however, seems to be limited only to the dissident positions. Whoever remained within the acceptable standards did not face any problems. Or, at least, not severe ones. In fact, in Saint John’s lifetime reflections about sign and representation followed the path traced in Saint Augustine’s thought.² Back then, the Iberian Peninsula was especially active in creating

² Obviously, the word *semiotics* did not exist back then, and all these reflections were gathered under the name of *logic*. Yet, some have seen antecedents of Peirce in Soto’s ideas, i.e.: “two notices are required so that one thing

theories about sign and representation: during our poet's lifetime, the Portuguese Pedro da Fonseca published his "Institutionem" (1564), and the Spaniard Domingo de Soto published his "Summulae" (1575). Both Fonseca and Soto say that signification is representing something to the cognitive faculty, and the sign is that through which representation is produced. But whereas Soto thinks the sign can be "natural" or "conventional," and that representation as a process can be either objective, effective, formal and instrumental, Fonseca thinks both the signs and the representation can be either natural, conventional, instrumental or formal (Beuchot 1995, 27). In "Sin arrimo y con arrimo" (Farther and closer) Saint John writes:

<i>Mi alma está desasida / de toda cosa criada / y sobre sí levantada. / Y en una sabrosa vida / sólo en su Dios arrimada (...) / Y aunque tinieblas padezco/ en esta vida mortal / no es tan crecido mi mal, / porque, si de luz carezco / tengo vida celestial</i> (SJC 1991, 54).	'My soul is detached / from all created things / and stands up on itself / And in a delightful life/ only to its God it approaches/ ... And although obscurity I suffer / in this mortal life/ my evil is not so big / for, if I lack of light / I have celestial life'.
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To summarize, during the XVI century the Catholic Church had a tremendous power in Spain; that power was hegemonic, at times excessive, and mostly duplicitous. And, in general, Spanish society was traditional, bellicose and everything but fraternal. There seems to be, then, a constant pattern in History. The "drama of every culture," as Bravo (1997, 20) calls it, would be the attempt of confining all forms of social life in the ideological tranquility of identity, the order somehow sanctified by that culture itself. Therefore, it is possible to deduce that some ideological postures alternate in the dialectical positions of Same and Otherness, and consequently in that part of culture known as literature. So, when facing new beliefs and values, some societies build obstacles to protect themselves from the unknown. But, at the same time, the context remains unbalanced: some practices are tolerated just because they are in agreement with the common values of the epoch. Other circumstances, otherwise perfectly acceptable, end up being condemned because of intolerance. And, in the middle of it all, there is literature as a fertile witness of such process.

2. Non-representational Realities

Let us now consider how the world Saint John's poetry somehow mirrored the world he had to live in. Eco (1972) says that culture, as a whole, is a meaningful communicative phenomenon, for society exists only when relations of meaning and communication processes are established. Eco has also said that the only way in which Mankind's fundamental issues can be studied is understanding society as a communicative entity based on signification systems:

«Semiotic analysis can precisely render recognizable certain problems of cultural life by revealing contradictions which otherwise would remain hidden. Culture as a whole, can be better understood if it is considered from a semiotic viewpoint. To summarize, this means

represents another instrumentally: the notice of the instrument itself and then that of the meaning" (Beuchot 1995, 10).

that objects, behaviours and values function as such because they obey semiotic laws» (Eco 2000, 51)

Consequently, we can infer a cyclical relation: as soon as a human community appears, all communication means instantly become based on signs. We can deduce that there is a value in literature which transcends the category of mere entertainment and even that of art; literature can be considered a vehicle and a testimony of ideas. Yet more, by studying artists as Saint John of the Cross, semiotics finds itself at a crossroad: to be holistic or not to be.

In fact, reductive formulas cannot be applied to discourse like Saint John of the Cross'. In fact, he discovers a fertile ground to create meaning: spirituality. He also finds the perfect tool: poetry, which depends on apparent contradictions and therefore, at first glance, it seems to be absurd. By means of language, poetry represents very abstract realities. But for him, even metaphors are not enough. If Saint John's mind is clear in the philosophical level, as a poet he has to use aporias. Meaning does not come from "positive" attributes, but precisely from their absence. Spiritual life is, then, described as indescribable. In another paper, we dared to call this process as "inverse semiosis", for signs are not created by a positive attribution of meaning, but precisely by their absence. (Quero, 2015)³

Poetry, then, does acquire a surprising power for it tries to define even the indefinable. Poetry becomes more compelling by what it hides, not by what it depicts. It then becomes identical to the ecstatic experience that precedes and justifies it. That sameness is precisely what is concealed, what is discovered in the hidden. In "vivo sin vivir en mí" (I live without living in me), the poet writes:

<i>Sácame de aquesta muerte, / mi Dios, y dame la vida;/ no me tengas impedida/ en este lazo tan fuerte; / mira que peno por verte / y mi mal es tan entero / que muero porque no muero / (...) / Lloraré mi muerte ya / y lamentaré mi vida / en tanto que detenida/ por mis pecados está. / ¡Oh, mi Dios! ¿cuándo será/ que yo diga de vero / vivo ya porque no muero. (SJC 1991, 50).</i>	‘Take me out of this death, / my God, and give me life; / do not have me constrained/ in this so tight bond; / see how I suffer willing to see you/ and my pain is so terrible/ that I die because I do not die/ (...) / I will cry my death now / and I will lament my life / for stopped/ due to my sins it is. / O, my God!, when will it be / that I may for real say / I live now because I do not die?’
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As we can see, not even the minutest testimony will be effective in order to discern sublime situations ... but poetry is. Saint John's dilemma is this: he has found the ideal means to express the deepest feelings and the most intangible ideas, yet he is cannot find an adequate an adequate expression, for there is no convention through which a spiritual reality can be represented. Therefore, constructing a sign becomes very hard for him, for what is signified remains intangible. Much more: when he writes a poem like "Tras un amoroso lance" (After a loving affair) he does much more than creating interesting metaphors: he also creates a whole new

³ For more information, see our paper "Of all things speakable and unspeakable" where we proposed the term "saintjoanine glosa" for a strophe consisting of nine eight-syllable verses, rhyming A, B, B, A, B, C, D, C, D, which is very infrequent in Spanish poetry.

symbol, which will eventually carved its own niche in Christian spiritual imagery. In “Tras un amoroso lance” (After a loving affair) he depicts the following scene:

<p><i>Cuanto más alto subía / deslumbróseme la vista / Y la más fuerte conquista / en oscuro se hacía. / Mas, por ser de amor el lance, / di un ciego y oscuro salto / y fui tan alto, tan alto / que le di a la caza alcance / Cuanto más alto llegaba / de este lance tan subido, / tanto más bajo y rendido / abatido me hallaba. / Dije: no habrá quien alcance. / Y abatime tanto, tanto / que fui alto, tan alto / que le di a la caza alcance (SJC 1991, 52).</i></p>	<p>‘As I soared more / my sight was blinded / And the toughest conquest / in the dark was made / But, being of love the affair/ I took a blind and obscure jump / and I soared so high, so high / that I caught the prey/ The higher I arrived / in this elevated affaire/ the lower, the more surrendered/ and lessened I found myself / I said: there will not be anyone able to reach / And I lessened myself so much / that I soared so much, so much / that I caught the prey.’</p>
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Whatever the reason was –pacifism, neutrality, his own safety, etc- the fact of the matter is that Saint John creates an aesthetic idiolect. By establishing textual variations, he creates a unique corpus, one which follows its own rules. Yet more: those apparent incongruent pieces become a suitable place for art to grow (Quero 2015, 90). This is what he achieved in “Llama de amor viva” (Living flame of love), a classic poem within Catholic mystical tradition.

<p><i>¡Oh cauterio suave! / ¡Oh regalada llaga! / ¡Oh mano blanda! ¡Oh toque delicado! / que a vida eterna sabe / y toda deuda paga. / Matando, muerte en vida has trocado (Saint John of the Cross 1991, 94).</i></p>	<p>‘O soft burning! / O delicious wound! / O smooth hand! O delicate touch!/ that tastes like eternal life and all debts pays. / Killing, death in life you have swapped’</p>
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Perhaps it is time to remember Barthes, whose idea of the “degree zero of writing” may match Eco’s laboratory. This absolute origin Barthes thinks of would be the one which sums the total content of the words and allows them to be received as something absolute but accompanied by all its possibilities. In fact, he also said that

«language always nurtures and fills, as the sudden discovery of something, always certain: poetic word can never be false for it is total; it shines with an infinite freedom and is ready to irradiate to thousands of uncertain or possible directions ... it only has a vertical project, it is as a block, a column which is submerged in a totality of sense ... it is here an act with no immediate past, an act with no surroundings and which only proposes the thick shadow of reflexes of all kinds which are linked to it» (Barthes 2005, 175).

If he is right and there is a starting point for poetry, then Saint John inaugurated the *infinite* degree of poetry: if the poetic word has an unexpected form, “like a Pandora’s box where all language categories appear from” (Barthes 2005, 179), then Saint John’s poetry is infinite just because it runs out of words: states of the soul and invisible realities are so extraordinary that art lives on the very edge of feasibility. Its beauty is the writer’s own amazement before what his soul can comprehend, but his speech cannot describe.

Was this understood during Saint John’s lifetime? It probably was not. It has taken us modern criticism to understand certain realities of art and life. For instance, Blanchot (1992) told us that

a phrase does not unfurl itself only in a lineal way. A phrase opens and through such gap other phrases and rhythms reunite and interact in structures that are definite but apart from ordinary logic. Therefore, common language is available for us and it makes reality available for us. But when it becomes artistic language, it becomes incredible. Yet we believe that in ordinary life writing the word *bread* or the word *angel* is enough to convey the beauty of the angel and the flavour of the bread. The sole condition is that things must be infinitely separated from themselves, and that “I cannot longer say I” (Blanchot 1992, 233).

He seems to be right. Human matters cannot be measured by standard means. That represented an unprecedented event in the literature of his time. And it still does now. Maybe his sense of amazement is what makes Saint John of the Cross’ poetry appealing even after these many centuries.

Conclusions: Poetry, spirituality and reality.

The poetry of Saint John of the Cross gives faithful evidence of his experiences and of his deep spirituality. It is also a contrasting authentication of the time he lived in. That is why we must trace a basic conclusive path:

Saint John’s poetry was a precise testimony of his era. Artistic products like his poetry are very likely to appear precisely in societies which are overwhelmed by internal –and normally worldly rather than religious- conflicts. The mystical discourse emerges, then, not only as an antithesis but rather as a response to the social struggles. Saint John of the Cross does not support any side; his position is in the middle: neither he proposes revisionist theories, nor he accepts schisms, nor he justifies the fanaticisms and the abuses of the ultra orthodoxy. He conceives faith as something intensely personal: individual, direct experience is the only way to solve spiritual enigmas. There is no way to answer pious questions in an objective way. At some point that one is the tragedy of his century: many men thought they owned an absolute truth, and hence they would have had the right to oppress others.

As we have said, Saint John’s poetry was unexpected, for he expresses himself mainly through paradoxes and contradictions. A hypercoded message becomes uncertain, and henceforth, auto-reflective. So, when a divergence in the expression matches a modification in the content, the text generates multiple senses (Eco 2000, 378). And this is what we see in Saint John’s works: his basic semiotic procedure is recoding. He gives the words a different meaning, one that is humanly unfeasible. By doing this, he alters language and makes it unpredictable. But he also configures reality itself: amazing language is required in order to convey an amazing reality such as mysticism. (Quero 2015, 94)

Therefore, his writings may produce what we will dare to call a “mutual semiosis” between literature and religion. The latter obviously generates conventions which rule the representation of certain ideas, which may be earthly or sublime. But when reading Saint John’s works, we may also think there could be a converse process: conventions through which transcendence is represented may generate more religion ... or at least an ascetic possibility. Indeed, the poet does not produce anything new when he says the divinity is ineffable; what he generates is, rather, a personal description of his own mystical ideas, and these can be followed and duplicated by others. Then, the process seems to be reciprocal: the representation seems to generate semiosis, and not only the other way around. And it is almost sure that no other semiotic register could be as efficient as poetry: only poetry seems to be able to express these ambiguities.

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