

POETRY AND SPIRITUALITY

A Lecture by
The Revd Dr Colin Thompson
in honour of Yvonne Workman

This Occasional Paper is the text delivered on 30th October 1997 in the Chapel of Mansfield College, Oxford, of the Sixth Annual Lecture in honour of The Reverend Yvonne Workman, who died in January 1991. Yvonne was a close personal friend to many, including Colin Thompson (the author) and Peggy Morgan (Director of the Religious Experience Research Centre, the publisher).

A Fund has been established in her name which aims 'to continue the ministry begun by Yvonne Workman, mainly but not exclusively in the areas of justice, peace and the integrity of creation' and to apply the capital and/or income of the Fund to promote education and research in these and other areas.

All of us who knew and loved Yvonne know that both parts of this Lecture title were close to her heart. She had a rare feel for words and an even rarer radiance and warmth of spirit. Being Irish was a natural advantage; her husband Wesley also shared these same concerns.
– Colin Thompson

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Language

The first point I want to make is about language itself. It is a precious gift which we constantly undervalue and devalue. In our everyday speech we use it sloppily and it is frequently cheapened by politicians and the media. Because we live in an age in which visual stimuli – film, television, advertising – have become dominant, the power of the written or spoken word has tended to become diminished. Yet words put together in a particular way and in a particular context can still inflame passions and crowds, manipulate emotions, appear to justify violence and in the end lead to attempted genocide. All these things we have seen and witnessed in the 20th century. No wonder we have learnt to mistrust language.

Can language be redeemed? My contention is that poetry is proof that it can. Poets are the true ecologists of language, attending carefully to its variety and seeking to renew it where it is in danger of becoming trite or, worse still, oppressive. They are not always easy to understand because of that. They question our familiarity with words, make us puzzle over them, see them in new and surprising combinations, and liberate them to speak again as if fresh-minted. Writing of the epithet 'new-made' in the 11th poem of Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns* of 1971, Peter Robinson connects it with Ezra Pound's collection of essays in 1934 entitled *Make It New* and links it to wider environmental concerns: 'It suggests ... that, as

the seasons retouch the earth, so to rinse and refresh the language is to refurbish the sensible world' [Peter Robinson (ed.), *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on his Work*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1985. p.208]. If poets can help us see familiar things in a new way they may help us to recover a sense of wonder and gratitude for the world around us and a greater sensitivity to its constituent parts. If they do that, then the link between poetry and spirituality becomes self-evident.

Spanish Painters and Poets

I was set off along this unexpected path two years ago when I went to see the *Spanish Still Life from Velazquez to Goya* exhibition at the National Gallery. The earliest of these still lifes were by a Carthusian friar called Sánchez Cotán, who lived from 1560-1627, and painted around 1600. As a religious painter he seems to me of only moderate interest, perhaps because his saints and Virgins do not appeal to the Protestant eye. But when it comes to cabbages, cucumbers and melons, parsnips and cardoons, he is in a league of his own. Painted usually against a dark background, so that nothing else distracts the eye, and arranged quite formally against it in an almost geometric pattern, his fruits and vegetables become startling objects in their own right, visual dramas in which the real stars are everyday objects from the larder.

At the time I was teaching (as I still do) the most complex and obscure of all the Spanish 17th-century poets, Góngora. When his longer poems appeared around 1613-14, the same time as Cervantes was writing the second part of his *Don Quixote*, they caused the same kind of scandal as Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* did to audiences used to gentler fare at the beginning of this century. For all its linguistic exuberance, Góngora's poetry does not really seem to be about anything. It is as though arranging words in new and surprising patterns, creating new words out of classical languages and changing their order so that you had to work out the structure of a sentence before you could begin to unravel its sense, was so absorbing a game that the content could be quite slight. If there was any, it was resolutely secular. Góngora was famously fined for playing cards during the Cathedral services he was obliged to attend to earn his living.

Poetry and Everyday Images

But one of the things I had noticed about his poetry was that he delighted in turning simple everyday objects into objects of linguistic wonder. For example, here is his version of a shipwrecked sailor being given a bowl of thick curds for his breakfast by a peasant family. The translation is by Edward Wilson, who was external examiner for my thesis in 1974 and died not long afterwards:

In boxwood (which, though rebel to the wheel,
Did elegance, not ornament reveal)
Milk – which pressed out that day the Dawn had seen,
Whose lilies white beneath her brow of gold
 With it could not compare –
 They gave him thick and cold,
Impenetrable almost to the spoon,
Ancient Alcimedon's invention rare. (*Soledades* I, 138-45)

The point is that the aristocratic sailor, used to silver and gold vessels and exotic fare, is given food in the plainest, simplest way, but dressed up in rich and exotic language, so that we learn to see how beautiful the turned plain boxwood bowl, the thick white milk and the humble spoon are, ennobled by reference to a passage in Virgil's Third Eclogue (ll.36ff)

which tells us about Alcimedon the master-craftsman and his carved wooden objects. I think Ruskin and Morris would have approved of Góngora's sense that everyday articles may possess a simple beauty which is in no way inferior, and may indeed be preferable, to elaborately decorated examples.

Poetry, like art, can restore our jaded vision. It does so, as often as not, by creating new and unexpected combinations of words, in rhythmical patterns, vivid and memorable. It is like art because often we need to picture and savour the images it creates. Sometimes, and particularly with poetry from the 16th and 17th centuries, it reveals hidden connections between things which can bring them into surprising relationships. Let me give you just one example, the second stanza of George Herbert's poem *Easter*. Herbert begins his poem commanding the heart to rise because the Lord is risen – perhaps thinking of the ancient Eucharistic command we still use, '*Sursum corda*', 'Lift up your hearts'. The Lord is risen so that we may rise with him and follow his journey, as dust turned to gold. Then come these lines:

Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part
With all thy art.
The crosse taught all wood to resound his name,
Who bore the same.
His stretchèd sinews taught all strings, what key
Is best to celebrate this most high day.

Herbert is not content to tell us to sing out our praises because Christ is risen. He wants us to think more deeply about why we should do this. So he looks for the point of connection between the cross and music, seeing the cross and its victim as the first instruments on which God played the divine music of suffering and redemptive, resurrected love.

The lute is made mainly of wood, so too the woodwind instruments of the band. They play their melodies. The Cross is made of wood and it plays for the first and only time the tune of God's love sacrificing itself in Christ for us. Because of that the wood of the Cross teaches the wood of all musical instruments to 'resound his name', since without it there would be nothing for them to celebrate.

Herbert makes a more difficult correspondence between the crucified Christ and stringed instruments, but once we sense that Christ is stretched out on the Cross and the strings on the instruments need to be kept taut to remain in tune, the sense follows. Christ's sinews, stretched out on the Cross, are likened to the strings of a viol or other stringed instrument, stretched along its wooden frame; and it is his stretching out on the Cross which teaches these instruments to play in the key appropriate for Easter Day.

One of the profound pleasures of reading Herbert is that scarcely a stanza does not create these extraordinary and original relationships, in which, for example, the Cross can become both instrument and teacher and the instruments of wood and string can represent the crucified Lord, whose resurrection they are now to celebrate in music. Equally, though the thought which can make these connections is complex, the kinds of images Herbert chooses belong largely to everyday life, as in the famous 'Who sweeps a room as for thy sake / Makes that and the action fine' of his poem *The Elixir*, which we still sing ('Teach me, my God and King').

Because he uses familiar things, like musical instruments and housework, to become bearers of divine truth, two things happen. One is that we feel at home, we do not feel threatened by a spirituality which seems to be beyond us. The other is that we return to familiar things with a sense of awe, because they have become the place of revelation, and

though they remain familiar they are changed. I am sure it is that kind of experience which has the wise man who narrates T. S. Eliot's equally famous *The Journey of the Magi* – which begins with a direct quotation from a 17th-century sermon by Lancelot Andrewes, 'A cold coming we had of it' – express at the end of the poem, years after the journey is over, his sense of returning to old haunts yet no longer at ease among them.

Yet as someone who by profession is a teacher of Spanish (not English) literature, I am myself not entirely at ease talking about English poetry. So I take my cue from one of the finest poets writing in the English-speaking world today, our former Professor of Poetry, Seamus Heaney. In his collection *Station Island* (1984), he remembers a moment from the past, when he has made his confession to a monk:

As if the prisms of the kaleidoscope
I plunged once in a butt of muddied water
surfaced like a marvellous lightship
and out of its silted crystals a monk's face
that had spoken years ago from behind a grille
spoke again about the need and chance
to salvage everything, to re-envisage
the zenith and glimpsed jewels of any gift
mistakenly abased ...

What came to nothing could always be replenished.
'Read poems as prayers', he said, 'and for your penance
translate me something by Juan de la Cruz.'

Juan de la Cruz – St. John of the Cross

That is going to form the substance of the rest of this paper.

Juan de la Cruz is the Carmelite friar St. John of the Cross, Spanish poet and mystic, who lived from 1542 to 1591, who suffered a spell of eight months' solitary confinement in 1577-78 for supporting the Reform of his Order, and who began to compose poems in his dark and narrow cell – poems which are among the most beautiful ever written in the Spanish language. Translation can only give you a hint of this, but it is better than nothing. The 'something' Heaney then proceeds to translate is a short poem known in Spanish as the *Fonte*, or *Fountain*, which St John of the Cross wrote during his imprisonment. It is not one of his greatest poems, but it has subtleties which a first reading may not sense.

This is a poem written in a popular idiom, using the image of the fountain, which is an ancient symbol for God. To this it joins the image of night, not surprisingly for a poet who is best known to us for giving us the expression 'the dark night of the soul'. Water and night form a powerful, elemental combination. Water is an essential for life; darkness is an experience we all share, literally and metaphorically.

I am sure that John of the Cross created his poem to be a kind of free meditation on the Gospel of John which, more than any other Biblical text, is constructed around a series of deeply symbolic images – light and darkness, life and death, water and bread.

Part of his purpose is to offer a picture of the Holy Trinity and of the Eucharist which works at the level of poetry rather than doctrine, even though there are doctrinal and credal echoes in the poem, especially the procession of Persons of the Trinity in the eighth verse. He makes this connection for liturgical reasons, because the Church celebrates the feast of

the Trinity on one Sunday and five days later the feast of Corpus Christi, in which the consecrated Eucharistic bread is carried in procession through the streets and revered. When at the start of the poem he contrasts the fact that the fountain's source is hidden with his knowing where it begins to flow visibly, he is imagining the hiddenness and mystery of the Godhead on the one hand and the Incarnation, in which God makes himself known and is seen among us, on the other. Like the Incarnation, the consecrated Host, the living bread at the end of the poem, is also the fullness of Christ.

Cantar del alma que se huelga de conocer a Dios por fe
Song of the soul which rejoices to know God by night

Qué bien sé yo la fonte, que mana, y corre:
aunque es de noche.

How well I know the fountain, which flows and runs:
although by night.

1. Aquella eterna fonte está escondida
que bien sé yo do tiene su manida
aunque es de noche.

*That eternal fountain is hidden
and well I know where it flows forth
although by night.*

2. Su origen no lo sé, pues no le tiene;
mas sé que todo origen della viene,
aunque es de noche.

*I do not know its origin, for it has none;
but I know that from it comes all origin,
a/though by night.*

3. Sé que no puede ser cosa tan bella
y que cielos y tierra beben della
aunque es de noche.

*I know there can be nothing so beautiful
and that the heavens and the earth drink there
although by night.*

4. Bien sé que suelo en ella no se halla
y que ninguno puede vadealla
aunque es de noche.

*Well I know that it is bottomless
and that no one can ford it
although by night.*

5. Su claridad nunca es escurecida
y sé que toda luz de ella es venida aunque
es de noche.

*Its brightness is never darkened
and I know that all light comes from it
although by night.*

6. Sé ser tan caudalosos sus corrientes
que infiernos, cielos riegan, y las gentes
aunque es de noche.

*I know its currents are so full
that they water hells, heavens and nations
although by night.*

7. El corriente que nace desta fuente
bien sé que es tan capaz y omnipotente
aunque es de noche.

*The current which is born from this fountain
I know well is so full and omnipotent
although by night.*

8. El corriente que de estas dos precede
sé que ninguna de ellas le precede
aunque es de noche.

*The current which proceeds from these two
I know that neither precedes it
although by night.*

9. Aquesta eterna fonte está escondida
en este vivo pan por darnos vida
aunque es de noche.

*This eternal fountain is hidden
in this living bread, to give us life
although by night.*

10. Aquí se está llamando a las criaturas
y de esta agua se hartan aunque a oscuras
porque es de noche.

*Here it is calling to the creatures
and they are satisfied with this water though in the dark
because by night.*

11. Aquesta viva fuente que deseo
en esta pan de vida yo la veo
aunque de noche.

*This living fountain I desire
in this bread of life I see it
though by night.*

Elemental Imagery

So the poem weaves a series of patterns around elemental images of darkness, water and bread, which it associates with the theme of knowledge. In so doing, it is in particular dialogue with two passages in St. John's Gospel: the visit of Nicodemus by night to Jesus, who tells him that he must be born again of water and the Spirit, and the encounter of Jesus with the woman of Samaria at the well, and their exchange, which includes several references to the knowledge of God, as well as to living water. So it becomes the confession of faith of a Nicodemus who sought Jesus by night and of the woman of Samaria, whose religion teaches her that it has true knowledge of God yet who will ask for the living water from the Christ.

Later in the Gospel, Jesus will speak more generally to any believer about streams of water welling up within to eternal life. As the poem develops, the doctrine of the Trinity begins to emerge, as the Son and the Spirit flow from the source and come to form three equal streams. The switch to bread, which has worried some critics, is logical in theological and liturgical terms. In the poem, the unknown source (the hidden God) has a known outlet or spring (the Incarnate Son). In the world in which we live, physical and temporal, we can only sense the eternal through its revelation in flesh and blood and time; and that revelation, begun in the Incarnation, is prolonged in a physical and spiritual sense in the Eucharist, the bread of life in John's Gospel, the sacrament in which the eternal and temporal are joined.

Fountains and streams, light and dark, bread and knowledge all cohere in the poem through symbols which are so basic to our humanity that we can be moved by them even if we cannot adequately understand all that they imply.

But there is one respect in which the poem departs radically from the Gospel. Some of you will know the wonderful poem called *The Night* by the Welsh metaphysical poet Henry Vaughan:

Wise Nicodemus saw such light
As made him know his God by night.

Vaughan's poem ends with these words:

There is in God (some say)
A deep, but dazzling darkness; as men here
Say it is late and dusky, because they
See not all clear;
O for that night! where I in him
Might live invisible and dim.

'God is light, and in him is no darkness at all', the First Letter of John tells us (1:5). In John's Gospel darkness and night are always symbolic of ignorance and evil. The light shines in the darkness but can never be extinguished. It is night when the Last Supper is ended and Jesus goes forth to meet his betrayer, accusers and executioners. How can it ever be appropriate to use the image of darkness or night of God? Yet John of the Cross does; so do Vaughan and many other religious poets. The clue lies in Vaughan's paradox of the deep but dazzling darkness. If we find God dark, it is because divine light is so bright that it dazzles us and we experience it as a kind of blindness.

For this reason, for at least a thousand years in the West (and longer in Eastern Christianity) darkness and night have become symbols for the transcendence of God, for our inability to see and understand him. The anonymous medieval work *The Cloud of Unknowing* is a good example. This is not, however, a negative darkness, an end in itself. Whatever we know and say about God can only be a dim reflection of his being. Words are finite, changing things;

God – infinite, unchanging. Though we must be careful about the words we use of God, they cannot capture him. Their confusions and inadequacies point to him yet cannot enclose him. There is an important theological point here, which affects all the language we use about God, and St. John of the Cross has much to say about this in his treatises. But let us stay with his poetry, and see how the dark night itself becomes a cause for wonder and joy, because it seems to me that one of his real gifts to us is to give value to those experiences which we find difficult or frustrating to bear: our inability to know for certain the nature and purposes of God, the times when we feel ourselves to have dried up spiritually, the suffering we may have to bear, the failures which become such a burden to us.

In his treatises, John sees at least some of these moments of crisis as times for growth, and he consistently uses images like that of the mother who needs to stop her baby breastfeeding so that the baby can be weaned on to more solid food. The baby cries and protests, wants familiar comforts; but the only way to grow and mature is to leave them behind and taste unfamiliar things.

The Dark Night

The poem *par excellence* of the dark night is his *Noche oscura*. I give it in Spanish, so that you can feel something of the beauty of its sound, which the translation I have provided cannot hope to convey.

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

a oscuras y segura
por la secreta escala, disfrazada,
¡oh dichosa ventura!,
a oscuras y en celada,
estando ya mi casa sosegada;

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.

Aquésta me guiaba
más cierto que la luz del mediodía
adonde me esperaba
quien yo bien me sabía
en parte donde naide parecía.

¡Oh noche que guiaste!
¡Oh noche amable más que la alborada!
¡Oh noche que juntaste
Amado con amada,
amada en el Amado transformada!

En mi pecho florido,
que entero para él solo se guardaba,
allí quedó dormido,
y yo le regalaba,
y el ventalle de cedros aire daba.

*On a dark night,
anxiously, inflamed in love,
oh happy fortune!
I left unnoticed,
my house being already at rest;*

*in the dark and surely
by the secret stairway, in disguise,
oh happy fortune!
in the dark and hidden,
my house being already at rest.*

*on the happy night,
in secret, for no one saw me,
nor did I look at anything,
with no other light or guide
save that which burned in my heart.*

*That [light] guided me
more surely than midday light
to where there waited for me
him whom well I knew
in a place where no one else appeared.*

*Oh night that guided!
Oh night more lovely than the dawn!
Oh night that joined
Beloved with lover,
lover transformed in the Beloved!*

*In my flowering breast
which wholly for him alone was kept,
there he fell asleep,
and I caressed him,
and the wind fanning the cedars brought a breeze.*

El aire del almena,
cuando yo sus cabellos esparcía,
con su mano serena
en mi cuello hería,
y todos mis sentidos suspendía.

Quedéme y olvidéme,
el rostro recliné sobre el Amado,
cesó todo y dejéme,
dejando mi cuidado
entre las azucenas olvidado.

San Juan de la Cruz (1542-91)

*The breeze from the battlements,
when I stroked his hair,
with his calm hand
he wounded my neck,
and suspended all my senses.*

*I stayed and forgot myself,
I leant my face upon the Beloved;
everything ceased and I abandoned myself,
abandoning my care
among the lilies forgotten.*

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A Celebration of Love

I do not know how you will have reacted to a poem of this kind. I have sometimes given it to candidates for Oxford entrance to see what they make of it. They are invariably surprised when I tell them that it was written as a religious poem, about the union of the soul with God. The *Noche* poem is, after all, a love story. A girl describes how she left her house at night, secretly and in disguise, to meet her lover and be united with him. The first half of the poem tells of her journey, dark, dangerous yet with a guiding light. We assume she arrives safely, though we do not witness their encounter. Instead, the fifth verse is addressed to the night which transformed each of them into the other. The final three verses appear to describe their joyful rest after the ecstasy of love-making.

The language and imagery of the poem suggest that it is a celebration of a purely human love. There are no words which point to a religious meaning. Read as a poem of erotic love it succeeds brilliantly. It speaks of the mystery, wonder, tenderness and intimacy of a truly mutual relationship; it reveals sexual love as discovery, encounter, transformation, fulfilment. It is the complete opposite of the brutal and explicit treatment of sex which our own age has grown so used to: sex as chase, possession, power.

The poem does not attempt to describe the sexual act, though the exclamations of the fifth verse testify to its joy. The language of the last three stanzas is physical, but in the most delicate way: mutual caressing against the background of the refreshing breezes of the night. Reciprocity governs the love-making: each is transformed into the other, each caresses the other, and the wound he gives her on the neck with his hand leads to the suspension of all her senses, and, in the final verse, the suspension of all activity and the letting go of all cares.

There is, when you think about it, not much love poetry written about love happy and fulfilled. Most love poems dwell on the pains and frustrations of love. The *Noche* is different: it is a beautiful poem which appears to celebrate the journey of love to its human completion. Like the poem about the fountain, but much more mysteriously, it is woven around a symbol which gives the poem both openness and depth, the symbol of the night. Yet it is full of uncertainties.

The first surrounds the identity of the protagonists. We know the author to have been a man, yet the voice of the speaker is that of a woman. A male author, it appears, is telling of a sexual encounter from the female point of view: unusual, but not unknown. No names are given; they are identified generically, as 'Beloved' and 'Lover'. Neither is described, nor does either speak of the other's beauty, nor is there any direct verbal communication between

them. While the woman dominates the narrative, the male figure remains entirely passive, awaiting her, then asleep (vv. 4, 6), with the exception of one action which is the more vivid because it is the only thing he does, his wounding of her on the neck, a love-bite, perhaps, which sends her into ecstasy.

The journey through the night leads to a place lacking in definition, where love is celebrated between two anonymous lovers, while the poem dissolves into the abstract and intangible. Only after the apostrophe to the night which joined the lovers does physical imagery return, with the mutual caresses of the lovers in the breeze from the cedars and the battlements. This foregrounding of concrete images, like the stairway at the start and the trees and building here, against an otherwise largely unseen background, is one of the most striking features of the poem.

A Biblical Love Song

You may have guessed that behind this poem there lies one of the Biblical books we read the least, perhaps because we do not quite know what to do with it, the *Song of Songs*. You may also know that for well over 1,500 years it was read as a love-song between God and Israel, Christ and the Church, or Christ and the human soul.

St. John's *Noche* poem includes several images derived from the *Song*, like the lilies which appear as if out of nowhere at the end – and the central motif itself, a young woman leaving her home at night, is found twice in the Biblical poem. St. John of the Cross could write religious poetry as sensual as this not because he was sexually repressed but because there was a long tradition of doing so, and because that tradition was itself authorized by the existence of such a poem in the Bible.

Light and Darkness

In the poem he also gives a profound and original treatment to the opposition of light and darkness, or, more precisely, to the light shining in the darkness of John 1:5. The *Noche* is a poem of the night, and nightscapes impose their own constraints, as they do in painting. One thinks of the brutal light of Goya's *Los fusilamientos del 3 de Mayo* or the play of light and shadow in El Greco's *Adoration of the Shepherds*; of the need for there to be a point of light so that whatever needs to be seen against the surrounding darkness can become visible.

Where is the point of light in the *Noche* which illuminates the nightscape of the poem? In the first three verses San Juan constructs the atmosphere with great care, insisting through repetition and variation on the pervasiveness of the night. But all the time its character is changing, as other definitions come into play.

There is a sense of anxiety and danger in the first two verses, as if the speaker fears to be followed, but also, almost from the beginning, a sense of joy and a growing light to guide her. By the start of the third verse the dark night of the opening line has become a happy night, preparing the way for the celebration of night's power to guide and to unite in the fourth and fifth verses, and its disappearance into the background in the caresses and peaceful rest of the last three verses, which contain no explicit mention of night at all. During the first four verses light gradually emerges from a series of halting phrases to illuminate the nightscape and become the transforming night of the fifth. The light which guides her through the darkness is the fire of love which sent her forth in the first place. This inner, burning, guiding light grows through the fourth verse, where it becomes brighter than the midday sun – this from a poet who experienced its intensity in Spain.

But there is a greater surprise yet in store. No sooner has it become clear that the light which illumines the journey through the night is an inner light which yet outshines the sun at the height of its powers, than the poem makes a dramatic leap. The night, the very thing which at the start of the journey seemed to be the source of danger, now becomes the guiding night, the means of safe arrival at the destination. Having introduced into the poem a vivid contrast between the secret, nocturnal world the woman travels through in safety and the inner light which shines with undiminished power in its midst to guide her steps, San Juan then erases the distinction at its heart. If this light is both inward and metaphorical and yet belongs to the guiding night, we must assume that the night, too, represents not the outside world but the inner landscapes of the soul.

Mysterious Levels of Meaning

When you start to understand the poem in that way, it no longer seems possible to limit its meaning to the purely erotic. It uses erotic language, but in a mysterious and profound way which suggests other levels of meaning. The transition from a dark night to a happy or blessed night has reminded some critics of the *Exsultet*, the proclamation sung at the Easter Vigil as Christ rises from the night of death to the dawn of Easter. In this great hymn of praise the night of Holy Saturday becomes the *beata nox* of a new Exodus which renews the whole creation and procures the salvation of the human race:

Most blessed of all nights, chosen by God
to see Christ rising from the dead!
Of this night scripture says:
'The night will be clear as day:
it will become my light, my joy.'
...
Night truly blessed when heaven is wedded to earth
and man is reconciled with God!

It may be no more than an echo in the *Noche* poem, but if it is it adds a new dimension to its scope. As happens so often in hymns, the first person protagonist of San Juan's poems needs to be understood as a representative, not an isolated individual. On this reading, the poem sets the Lover's quest and its fulfilment in the wider context of the journey every human soul must undertake, through death and beyond.

The Imagery of Touch

Though the night is textually absent from the closing verses it remains the context in which the picture is drawn. If the first half of the poem sets a burning light in its midst by which its purpose and meaning are illumined, the last three verses belong to the world not of sight but of touch, and are the most physical of the entire poem. In his famous *Ode to a Nightingale* Keats is able to picture by night the intense beauty of early May in England because the sounds and scents which reach him in the 'embalmed darkness' enable him to imagine what he cannot see.

San Juan achieves a similar effect through images of touch: the weight of the lover asleep on the woman's breast, her caressing him and the breeze from the cedar trees which wafts over them (v.6); the breeze from the battlements as she runs her fingers through his hair, and his wounding of her neck with his gentle hand, which brings her to ecstasy (v.7); her face leaning against her Beloved, in a gesture reminiscent perhaps of the Beloved Disciple (v.8; John 21:20). Only the mysterious image of the lilies where she leaves her cares belongs to the realm of the visual, though they may also have scent. In the *Song* the Beloved is shown as feeding among the lilies (2:16), but even so, the ending is magical, showing as it does an image which is all whiteness and perfume against the nightscape of the rest.

Christian Love disclosed through Poetry

When you read a poem as beautiful as this and discover that it is meant to be read as the love-song between Christ and each human person, several things may be learnt. First, the Christian faith is a journey of love. Most people think of it as a set of beliefs you have to be persuaded to hold or a set of moral rules you are expected to follow. This poem tells us something else.

The fact that it uses the language of sexual intimacy suggests that we are called into a developing relationship with God which is so precious and transforming that only that language comes anywhere near the reality. Much must be left behind as we leave the silent house; the way is dark, because it involves choices and priorities which at first are strange to us; but it is a journey, something dynamic and growing, not a state. Here is a 16th-century Catholic mystic who sees the way to God as having more to do with attraction than fear; more to do with travelling and becoming than with obligations and burdens. He can take darkness and set a burning light in its midst because the true Lover of humanity is the risen Lord. Delicacy, mystery and beauty characterize the story this poem tells, and in them lies its spirituality.

Like so many poets, St. John of the Cross makes us see familiar things differently. Here he shows us the connections between our physical and spiritual desires, instead of forcing them apart. He affirms beauty, makes houses, stairs, trees, breezes, flowers, speak the language of God and yet still remain themselves. I cannot help thinking of another poet, a more tortured soul, I think, who taught us that human beauty is not the enemy of God but a gift which points us to a greater beauty still. I mean Gerard Manley Hopkins, with whose words I must conclude, from two of his poems, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire* and *To What Serves Mortal Beauty?*

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As rumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each rucked strong tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves - goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

Í say móre: the just man justices;
Keeps gráce: thát keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is -
Christ - for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the feature of men's faces.

To what serves mortal beauty -
...
See: it does this: keeps warm
men's wits to the things that are.

In that respect, poets who help us to see the world and ourselves as freshly-minted, full of wonder and surprise, even in the darkest places, may help to keep us warm to the world and, in so doing, open to the touch of God.

THE AUTHOR

Colin Thompson was born in 1945. After reading Modern Languages (French and Spanish) at Trinity College, Oxford, and Theology at Mansfield College, Oxford, in 1971 he was ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament of the Congregational Church, which united with the Presbyterian Church of England in 1972 to become the United Reformed Church. From 1970-78 he shared in ministry at Trinity Church, Abingdon (Methodist-URC), and in 1974 successfully completed his doctorate on the *Spiritual Canticle* of St. John of the Cross.

From 1974-78 he was a Junior Research Fellow at Christ Church, Oxford, and was then appointed University Chaplain to the University of Sussex – a post with wide-ranging responsibilities, pastoral, ecumenical and academic, which he held until 1989. That year he returned to Oxford to become Fellow and Tutor in Spanish at St. Catherine's College and Lecturer in Spanish in the University of Oxford. He retired from this post in September 2012 and is now an Emeritus Fellow of St Catherine's. He is also Associate Minister at Wheatley URC.

He has published three books. The first two, *The Poet and the Mystic* (Oxford, 1977) and *The Strife of Tongues*, are studies of St. John of the Cross (1542-91) and Fray Luis de Leon (1527-91) respectively; for the third, *St John of the Cross: Songs in the Night* (SPCK, 2001), he has returned to the world of the Spanish Mystics. He has also published many articles on a broad range of Spanish Golden Age literature and culture, and has more recently been researching into the links between literature and painting in that period.

He has a particular interest in liturgy and hymnody, and has had several hymn texts published in a variety of denominational hymnbooks in Britain and North America.

He lives in the country and has a deep concern for the natural creation as well as a growing appreciation of the arts, both of which he tries to reflect on in theological and spiritual terms. He looks for a Christianity which sees connections and continuities rather than separations and divisions, and a spirituality which embraces tensions and paradoxes rather than seeking refuge in certainties. Poets are good allies.

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