

GENDER IN THE NIGHT:
JUAN DE LA CRUZ
AND CECILIA DEL NACIMIENTO

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*Et dixi: Forsitan tenebrae conculcabunt me;
Et nox illuminatio mea in deliciis meis.*
(Psalmus 138.11 [St. Jerome's Vulgate])

The notion of "the dark night of the soul," the subject of the two mystical poems under consideration here, has passed itself through a remarkable metamorphosis. The phrase is generally understood to have originated in Plotinus (?205-270? C.E.), who used it to describe the radiant darkness that characterizes the final phases of mystical union (Underhill 15). St. Juan de la Cruz made the expression famous in his eight-stanza poem "Noche oscura," whose subject Kieran Kavanaugh describes as "the painful passage through the night, and the unspeakable joy of encountering God" (353). From this celestial height, the same expression has suffered something of a fall into popular discourse, and is used today to describe any difficult circumstance. For example, on a website for a software company recently in financial distress, one finds "The Dark Night of the Soul" heading a page that opens, "The last quarter of Autodesk's fiscal year has always been the most difficult . . ." (Autodesk).

This leap illustrates the ability of certain powerful signifiers to remain fixed while what they signify crosses large semantic distances, particularly over long expanses of time. What follows is a consideration of a similar leap, at work not along the axis of geography or time, rather of gender. The lexical and anecdotal similarities between Juan de la Cruz's "Noche oscura" and Cecilia del Nacimiento's "Canciones de la unión y transformación del alma en Dios" (hereafter "Canciones") point to some kind of a relationship between the two: both employ apophatic tropes of darkness and cast the human soul as a lover whose desire for her beloved leads her to seek him out and become one with him in joy.¹ The fact that Cecilia del Nacimiento's "Canciones" were actually attributed to Juan de la Cruz for several hundred years is

testimony of both the high quality of her poem and its apparent kinship with his work.²

The connection between the two texts has been described as that of a poem and its gloss, or one text that inspires another, with Cecilia del Nacimiento as the imitator and Juan de la Cruz the imitated. Boyce and Olivares refer to the “Canciones” as a verse contemplation on Juan de la Cruz’s text (148); Toft says the Carmelite nun’s poem is based on Saint Juan de la Cruz’s (84); Arenal and Schlau find that it explicates and expands Juan de la Cruz’s mystical theme (144).³ The poems have much in common; they share the theme of the mystical union of the soul with God, embodied in a female protagonist who leaves one space to seek out her lover in another. Furthermore, both use standard mystical signifiers of night, light, and fire, culminate in an exclamatory stanza that masks the moment of union, and end depicting a dissolution into bliss. These representational tools could have been drawn from the common pool of tropes that characterize Catholic mystical writings, writings indebted to Christian interpretations of the Song of Songs.

Although written after Juan de la Cruz’s poem, Cecilia del Nacimiento’s is not constrained by his, and in fact may be read as a different answer to the same question to which he responds in “Noche oscura”: what is the state of the soul at its final approach to and encounter with the divinity? In what follows, I would like to suggest that the gendered conditions of mystical representation, conditions that reflect gender socialization, are manifest in the differences between the Discalced Carmelite nun’s verse account of the soul’s union with God and that of the Discalced Carmelite friar. In this context, the distinctions between the two texts illuminate not only the plurality of paths leading to God, but also the vivid differences between the way in which early modern man rendered his path to God and the way his female contemporary did. This is to say that Cecilia del Nacimiento’s “Canciones” serve as an alternative to Juan de la Cruz’s story of the soul’s encounter with God, and constitute a response to his.

The life and writings of Teresa de Jesús provided an important a model for Cecilia del Nacimiento’s poem, and perhaps of an autobiographical experience represented in it. There are several reasons to assume that Cecilia del Nacimiento was intimately familiar with Teresa de Jesús’s works describing how she related to God, beyond the fact that Cecilia del Nacimiento took her vows as a Discalced Carmelite just six years after the death of the foundress (1588). Cecilia del Nacimiento and her sister María de San Alberto wrote many texts celebrating Teresa de Jesús, a salient feature of their substantial literary production to which Arenal and Schlau call attention (137-38). In their own works, the sisters enthusiastically participated in the ebullient

cult of the future saint, who was canonized, in record time, in 1622, when Cecilia del Nacimiento was 52. As second-generation Carmelites, Teresa de Jesús's spiritual daughters surely enjoyed access to an oral tradition by and about Teresa de Jesús available only to the nuns of the Order, which would have made them privileged recipients of Teresa de Jesús's experiences and understandings.

The influence of Teresa de Jesús on Cecilia del Nacimiento is extremely important, because the Saint's writings about how to find God reveal an important divide in the way women represent their experiences of God and the way men do. Early modern Spanish women seeking to articulate their relationships with God during the years after Teresa de Jesús's manuscripts began to circulate, and certainly after her works were published in 1588, had in them a source of validation and encouragement for representing their own familiarity with the divinity in a gender-specific fashion. Cecilia del Nacimiento's "Canciones" suggest that she should be counted among those who took ample advantage of that source, for the poem subtly reflects what might be called a woman's articulation of mysticism, as revealed in Teresa de Jesús's writings: emphasis on an inward- versus outward-moving progression (cf. the *Castillo interior*); expression of comfort in the flexible ego boundaries required for union with God; reliance on tropes of circularity, enclosure, and stasis versus escape, removal, and movement; and recourse to a language of abstraction rather than one of corporeality in reference to the soul's desire and pleasure.

A note of caution is appropriate: I am not suggesting that gender matters at all in the quality or the nature of union with God; mystics often celebrate the irrelevance of all such distinctions in the company of the divinity. I am suggesting, however, that the fashion in which that process and that experience can be convincingly and acceptably rendered in human language by a man and by a woman, at the same point in time, will reflect the gender-marked social expectations with which that man and woman lived (whether those expectations are subverted or respected). In other words, the more women and men are socialized in patterns of gender difference, the more distinct their representations of union with God will be, even if they use the same lexicon to effect that representation.

In early modern Spain, there were sharp differences between the way in which women and men were socialized.⁴ Women were generally inculcated in self-denial, pleasing others, enclosure, and silence; men in self-fulfillment, being pleased, movement, and articulation. To early modern men fell the difficult task of proving that they were virile (sexual capacity) even when moral norms censored all but highly controlled proof of that virility (sexual activity). Thus Juan de la Cruz

could represent the soul desiring God in highly erotic terms, because to do so satisfied his society's expectations for men.⁵ His religious profession and celibacy may have theoretically mitigated the applicability of those expectations to him, but they also worked to protect him from accusations of impropriety by not only allowing his erotic expressions to be metaphorical, but assuring that they were, which in turn protected him from censure and liberated him to use eroticized language.⁶ The step down in the social hierarchy effected by Juan de la Cruz's appropriation of a female poetic voice reinforced the dominant understanding that women were lesser, lower, and submissive to the male, a hierarchy which, although suitably reflecting human inferiority to the divinity, also served to separate the poet from his poetic voice. Had "Noche oscura" been written with a male protagonist, it would have been revolutionary indeed.

Cecilia del Nacimiento did not have free access to highly charged erotic language (assuming she was inclined to use it in the first place), because a woman's representation of erotic experience had the effect of stigmatizing her as over-sexed, accessible, and thereby anti-heroic, according to the gender standards of the day. The weighty stigma of "whorishness" poised to fall on any woman dealing in desire was not mitigated, rather intensified for religious women, who were expected to be even purer, more self-denying, and more enclosed than their secular sisters. Therefore, the fashion in which nuns and friars could render the experience of the divine was not the same, even though they drew from the same pool of symbolic language mentioned above, even though their experiences in the company of God may have been quite similar. The marked distinction in the socialization of males and females in early modern Spain guaranteed that each gender would express, and perhaps encounter, its own dark nights along the mystical way.

Following Dionyus the Areopagite, articulations and studies of mysticism define the path to the divine as a three-part process: purgation, illumination, union.⁷ Purgation, the phase during which the human subject is active, entails social and corporeal discipline centered on renunciation, the exercise of will, and the understanding of oneself not only as an agent, but also as an individual: the phase of purgation requires a self to purge as surely as the artist requires a medium with which to create.⁸ In early modern Spain, men were overtly and actively socialized for the identification and exercise of their own identities and their own desires, which were then relatively easy to tame in that at least they could be identified.

Women were not socialized for selfhood in early modern Spain; on the contrary, they were socialized against it, and their social training

emphasized instead the identification and satisfaction of others' needs. Without the fully functional self that is necessary to *begin* purgation, it is impossible to undertake one's mystical journey effectively. Teresa de Jesús vividly describes the frustrating conflict she experienced by attempting to attain complete union with God before she truly knew herself and stood firm in her own identity (*Vida* 1-25). This is to say that women socialized as early modern Woman (the cultural construct), may have encountered a great challenge entering into the first phase of mystical training, as defined by traditional norms. Teresa de Jesús spent more than twenty years struggling at the threshold of selfhood, learning to authorize herself to act with integrity in light of what she knew she wanted to do. Only after passing the threshold into her self was she able to enter phase one, to learn self-discipline and true denial. The process of purgation itself may entail purging passivity for women, whereas it means purging activity for men; it is more an apprenticeship in activating the will for women, whereas for men it involves denial of will. Certainly these distinctions correlate with the socialization of each gender. Thus, Cecilia del Nacimiento's "Canciones" describe first an arrival ("la cual [luz] a gozar *llega* el alma" [6-7; emphasis mine]) before the soul's first departure.

Phase two, illumination, is the nexus at which the divinity intervenes in the aspiring mystic's path, when the interplay between active and passive functions begins. The human self sporadically releases its boundaries and gains a new form of identity through its contact with the divine. In phase three, union, the individual human soul dissolves into the divinity, as it is rendered the nothing which is all, a state that necessarily drives the mystic into the depths of paradox as the only solution to the representative conundrum that this phase produces. Union entails not only the complete surrender of all identity and all that is known, but moving beyond identity and experience themselves, into the welcoming arms of that which has no words.

Experienced mystics, such as Plotinus, describe the soul's final approach to the divinity as immersion in a radiant darkness; this is the moment at which human identity is released. The more a person has been socialized for self-realization and affirmation (as are men, in the traditional paradigm), the greater the difficulty that person is likely to encounter in releasing personal identity. At the same moment, the person trained in flexible frontiers of the ego will effect a retrogressive locution to the being for which she was initially socialized, and will thus be on relatively familiar terrain as the moment of union draws nigh. The ease with which Teresa de Jesús united with God from the very beginning of her career in prayer is notorious, and it was precisely the facility with which she found God that alarmed her superiors, who

required her to return to the beginning, forge her own identity, and then take off again, assured of herself and her direction.

After having known union, the mature mystic might be referred to as “a self which is not one,” whose ultimate objective is to accomplish her or his personal mission on earth in partnership with God. Although Catholic mystics represent the final denouement of union with God as necessarily entailing a delicate balance between work and prayer, the emphasis that men and woman place on the personal effects of union is quite different, judging by Juan de la Cruz and Cecilia del Nacimiento. Not surprisingly, Juan de la Cruz represents great joy in release from worldliness in God, in terms remarkably similar to those presented by the resting protagonist of Luis de León’s “Vida descansada”: both emphasize life in harmony with the divine principle as a liberation from a burdensome previous existence. The last stanza of “Noche oscura,” in which the lover delights in removed, silent solitude with her beloved, exemplifies this joy.⁹

Teresa de Jesús and Cecilia del Nacimiento, socialized for and long experienced in removal from the world, celebrate instead the empowerment of the self that is the consequence of mystical union for women. Both nuns represent the soul’s search for God as a retreat to an interior space (Teresa de Jesús’s *Castillo interior*, and the walled-in meadow of the “Canciones”), versus an escape to an exterior locale. “The “Canciones” end invoking the might of the divinity, into which the soul is converted in union and whose power the soul shares thereby: “Como es tan poderosa / la fuerza de aquel bien con que está unida / . . . / pierde su ser y en él es convertida” (76-80). In the case of women and men alike, the way in which the ecstasy of union is represented may gravitate toward inversions of standard social expectations (women empowered, men released into restful bliss), if for nothing else than to emphasize the distinction of the experience from that which is known. Clearly, further comparisons between mystical writings by women and men are necessary to prove whether these observations are generally applicable even to this one period, and whether they are more broadly observable at other times in history.

More immediately, Juan de la Cruz and Cecilia del Nacimiento are appropriate specimens to use in a relatively controlled experiment with which to test the variant of gender in the representation of mystical experience. Both were the offspring of strong mothers who were intensely devoted to their children.¹⁰ Both were Discalced Carmelites, born twenty-eight years apart (Juan de la Cruz lived from 1542-1591; Cecilia del Nacimiento was born in 1570 and died in 1646). Both were expert Catholic mystics, both were educated in letters and theology.¹¹ Cecilia del Nacimiento’s brothers Francisco and José worked extensively

with manuscripts of Juan de la Cruz (as well as Teresa de Jesús's; Alonso-Cortés 12-23). The nun's early exposure to the texts and spiritual praxis of the two founding figures of her Order is assured, and this, in turn, suggests an affiliation between the objectives of their religious lives. The many similarities between Cecilia del Nacimiento and Juan de la Cruz's life experience, mission, and the parallels in their written works make the discrepancies between their representations of the mystical way particularly significant.

Both the "Noche oscura" and the "Canciones" are *liras*; the former is eight stanzas long whereas the latter has sixteen.¹² Both poets composed commentaries of their verse when asked to do so.¹³ Although these prose documents are theoretically useful for purposes of clarification, all of them are guaranteed, as Dámaso Alonso says, "a enfriarnos el entusiasmo" (120). Aside from explicating only two stanzas completely and the third in but four paragraphs, Juan de la Cruz's exposition of "Noche oscura," is recognized to be the continuation of his treatise *Subida del Monte Carmelo*, and is laden with passages that have little or nothing to do with the poetry theoretically at hand, passages that realize a larger, pedagogical objective. There is no commentary for the poem's most erotic moments, while the female lover is in the company of her beloved (stanzas 5-8).

Cecilia del Nacimiento's first commentary is close to her poetic text and elaborates on the metaphorical meaning of the poem, already explicit in the poem itself. Her second version is a more distanced, theological exposition of general principles, and adds little if anything to her poem, which stands as fully justified as that of Juan de la Cruz without the prose. If, as Robert Frost said, poetry is that which gets lost in translation, then it is the perfect vehicle for the expression of mystical experience, which by all accounts gets lost as it passes into human language. With that in mind, the following analysis will focus on the poetry, since what is meant to be said is somehow encoded therein more effectively than in its prose commentaries.

The two poems in question tell very different stories on the literal level (both are included below). In "Noche oscura," an embodied female voice recalls how, one dark night, she left her house under a double cover of darkness and in disguise, inflamed with desire and guided only by its intense light. She describes the night as "oscura" (1) and "dichosa" (11), and herself as "con ansias en amores inflamada" (2), "segura y en celada" (6). The anxiety created by her departure from the presumed safety of her house is reduced by her revelation that she is going to meet someone she already knows (19), and she mentions repeatedly that she is alone, and that no one saw her go (4; 5; 6; 7; 9; 12; 20). These details protect her reputation on the literal

level, and on the theological level emphasize the solitude and blindness to all but God necessary for what follows. Her exclamatory stanza celebrating the night as the locus of her joy (21-25) suggests that she met her beloved behind its cover and explicitly states that she was united with him to the point of transformation.

Stanzas six through eight describe what can rightly be called afterglow, all of which transpires while the lovers are in a reclined position, a lyric calm in which the beloved rests, then awakens again and arouses the protagonist once more. She stops speaking after describing herself looking down on her beloved as everything ceases, leaving her cares forgotten among the lilies. Lilies are a traditional symbol of purity, and the syntactic proximity (not grammatical agreement) of "azucenas" and "olvidado" indirectly suggests that she is no longer a virgin. The poem, then, is one of initiation through a joyous rite of passage, a purposeful going out from one state to actively seek another. The desired end is found beyond the enclosure in which the protagonist recalls having started.¹⁴

A consideration of the function of gender in "Noche oscura," is greatly enhanced by grounding the poem in fullness of its language, looking frankly at what it says as a complement to, rather than a contradiction of, what it means. Allegorizing the poem's passionate sexuality completely to insist on its religious (presumably a-sexual) meaning neutralizes its electrifying passion, thereby reducing its fundamental appeal, and requires inserting a small, if traditional, abyss between the poem's signifiers and what they signify. On the other hand, without the allegory it may read to some, such as André Stoll, as "eine skandalöse Geschichte" ("a scandalous story," 326). As Sesé insists, "Esta poesía tiene un argumento; relata un acontecimiento; describe una escena; tiene un desarrollo dramático. Así que resulta legítimo interpretarla en todos estos planos. . . . La interpretación corre pues siempre en la frontera indecisa entre esas dos vertientes: la representación o la espiritualización" (248).¹⁵ Imitating the Song of Songs, Juan de la Cruz enclosed a heterosexual human couple attaining physical union in a textually hermetic seal; nothing but the poem's verbose title calls the reader to enter it as an allegory of the soul's relationship with God. Unlike the Song of Songs, he included no specific reference to the spousal relationship of the lover and beloved, thereby heightening the poem's already transgressive nature.

In Juan de la Cruz's poem, the discourse of virility is essential, and virility informs the poem's lexicon and its anecdote. The first-person voice of the text is female, which might appear to compromise the text's masculine interests. According to an orthodox Christian reading, the protagonist is female because she represents the human soul, in

Latin the grammatically feminine noun *anima*, “the principle of life,” which evolved into the Spanish *alma*. The grammatical gender came with other conveniences, however. Mystical experience is “other” to human life; it is not a normative achievement, and the femininity of the soul in Juan de la Cruz’s poem, first revealed in the sensual splendor of the adjective “inflamada” (2), is an inverted synecdoque for the soul, particularly apt because she signifies as a woman. The poem leans heavily on the femininity of its protagonist to create its heady desire and intense sense of contravention, secrecy, and exceptionality.

The basic anecdote of “Noche oscura” would lose its legitimacy with a male protagonist. Casting a man as the inflamed lover who risks all for his beloved would have debilitated, not enhanced, the mimetic power of poems’ protagonist, because the heroic, imitable Man (a cultural construct) did not have anything to lose by slipping out into the darkness for an amorous encounter.¹⁶ Beyond the exigencies of the soul’s grammatical gender, beyond the influence of the Song of Songs, Juan de la Cruz’s ventriloquism of a female voice in his poem was necessary because the mimetic stature of a male would have been debilitated if cast in such a role, not to mention the problems that a male voice would have posed in the representation of an encounter with the male divinity as a sexual one.¹⁷

In contrast, a female could be heroic and signify exclusively by virtue of her desire; the vast majority of known texts of the period represent women whose entire signifying field is circumscribed by the status of their relationships with a man or men. According to the features normatively ascribed to Male and Female during the time when these two poets were writing, affiliation with darkness and desire enhance the protagonist’s identification with Woman, because that affiliation reinforced, if indirectly, Male light, reason, and control. Her lack of identity, which enables her ready transformation into the Other, was also a feature ascribed to Woman.

Taking recourse in the female voice enabled Juan de la Cruz to render helpless, uncontrollable desire in the gender deemed most appropriate for such emotions. The protagonist’s femininity also opened up an entire spectrum of representational dynamics: the woman lover is to her male lover as the human soul is to God: adoring, inferior, and rightly submissive.

The poetic persona of “Noche oscura,” smitten with desire and rushing to surrender under cover of darkness, was not a viable option for Cecilia del Nacimiento, nor was she accessible to any upper-class woman poet of the seventeenth century writing anything but satire, for two reasons. First, for a woman to have composed a poem in which (on the literal level) an admirable, successfully transgressive

woman leaves her house, no matter how quiet, to meet her lover, constituted an irreparable violation of social and moral decorum for women: proper ladies were desired, not desiring, and good women (particularly good nuns) did not go climbing ladders in the darkest of night to seek out lovers with whose ways they were already familiar. In the dominant representational paradigm, a woman's soul simply could not do that, literally or figuratively, and still serve as an acceptable vessel of divine intervention on earth. The anecdote was accessible to Juan de la Cruz because on the one hand, he was a man and his feminine voice did not threaten behind its veil of obvious fiction, and on the other, the anecdote itself supports a repressive, reductive representation of Woman that was normalized in patriarchal discourse. In the male mystic, sexual desire was transgressive only if completely literal; in Juan de la Cruz's poem, it is not.¹⁸

With this in mind, Cecilia del Nacimiento's "Canciones" take on a new light. Like Juan de la Cruz, she announced in her title that her poem's subject is the transformation of the soul into God. However, the story she tells and the way in which she tells it are radically different from those of her male counterpart. Throughout, Cecilia del Nacimiento follows a poetics of abstraction where Juan de la Cruz inscribed the experience of love in corporeal and earthly images, in dense and fragrant presence, and a deeply marked first person.¹⁹ The nun's opening demonstrative adjective, "Aquella," initiates the distancing technique she follows throughout, an allayed intimacy that protects the poetic voice from implications of indecorous passion. Neither "la" nor "esta," "aquella" pushes the dark mist cloaking the union of the soul with God to a prudent remove.²⁰ Whereas the first-person narration of "Noche oscura" augments the poem's intimacy, the third-person omniscient voice of "Canciones" disassociates the text from actual experience, and allows it to be prescriptive versus descriptive.

These distancing techniques are beautifully mitigated by the circularity of Cecilia del Nacimiento's poem, which represents the soul arriving at three places (to delight in love, to the highest heaven, to the walled meadow), only to re-locate each place inside the soul herself, within a safe and intimate enclosure beloved of God. As mentioned above, the soul does not depart, she arrives at an enlightenment: "La cual [luz] a gozar llega / el alma que de Amor está inflamada" (6-7). The intimacy with love established, the soul is blinded and enlightened at once: "viene a quedar ciega / ... / la ciencia trascendida y alcanzada" (8; 10). Implicitly, the soul finds her way only in infused wisdom, the unworldly way of knowing born of experience, the way at which women were necessarily expert.

Whereas Juan de la Cruz never breaks the seal of the erotic allegory in which he proffers his poem to his reader, Cecilia del Nacimiento explicitly declares who is what, thereby forcing a double-reading on her poem: the feminine subject of her poem is the soul (“la cual a gozar llega / *el alma* que de Amor está inflamada” [6-7; emphasis mine]).²¹ There is no house/home in the “Canciones,” no physical dwelling to represent the body from which the soul removes herself, and the entire text has a studied disembodiment to it. The soul departs in the dark not from a domestic locale, but from her own interior: “sale de sí” (17). The relative dearth of corporeal referents in the poem may have been another distancing technique purposefully employed by the poet, given the long-standing Christian association between Woman and bodiliness (and sin), a history well presented by Donnelly.

In the first half of the poem, the soul inflamed by love goes up, not out, and her first destination is the empyreal heavens: “sube al empíreo cielo” (19).²² That upward spiral is described in the commentary as leading to the most interior space, “el cielo empíreo de su centro” (OC 163). Unlike Juan de la Cruz, whose “escala” is ambiguous (does it serve to go up, to go down, to go in, or out?), at the end of the first part of her poem Cecilia del Nacimiento specifies that the instrument of ascent, whose symbol is her “escala,” are the mysteries of Christ’s life, a theme on which Teresa de Jesús also insists in the sixth dwelling of the *Castillo interior*.²³ In the second half of the “Canciones,” the soul seeks God within and love guides her to where the King awaits.

The poem’s contradictory locution, of inward motion out and outward-reaching movement inward, is introduced on the syntactic level by the poet’s regular recourse to paradox, whose referents lead the mind to seek resolution of contradictory terms by moving restlessly back and forth from one to the other. Among the poem’s central paradoxes are the dark mist which is light (1;2); the light that is inaccessible and also intimate (1;3); seeing God in darkness and blindness (5); stasis in motion, as when the poet describes the soul united with the beloved saying, “tiene, quieta en su amado / continuo movimiento / estando sosegada y muy de asiento” (38-40); and finally the road that has no way, along which the soul passes secure (54; 56). The circular nature of paradox serves as a miniature of the spiraling soul, who reaches out and finds God, only to discover that her destination was her own center. Cecilia del Nacimiento represents the soul as attaining its greatest integrity through the stationary exploration of its own parameters. In this sense, the protagonist never leaves her initial enclosure.

Cecilia del Nacimiento's soul undertakes two departures after her initial arrival, both of which lead to confined spaces, not openings, and both of which reflect the intimate interplay of meaning manifest in the central paradoxes of the poem. In the first departure, the soul inflamed by love attains the dark mist/divine light, conquers the kingdom of her self and leaves unseen, searching for her life (11-15). She ascends to the highest heaven (19), only to part the secret veil of that heaven and find that the beloved, everything she sought, lies within her: "en sí lo [amado] tiene hallado" (23). In the second half of the text, the soul begins anew, engulfed not in a dark mist but in a serene night, implicitly having progressed to the clarity of quiet darkness (46). She seeks God, rendered with the abstract, interior signifiers of "su vida y centro" (48), from which she reaches out, "con deseo saliéndole al encuentro" (50). Like Teresa de Jesús, Cecilia del Nacimiento defines God as within; the foundress says of the inmost dwelling of the *Castillo interior*, "aparécese el Señor en este centro del alma" (VII: 2, 3). Once again, Cecilia del Nacimiento renders the spiritual quest through the paradox of outward movement that leads in (stanzas 1-8), and inward movement that leads out, then back in (stanzas 10-16).²⁴

On her second departure, the soul follows a path that has no way "camina muy segura / . . . / yendo sin camino" (56), where the divine King appears for the first time and shows her his ability (virtud) and glory (59).²⁵ Immediately thereafter, the soul disappears behind a stanza of exclamation, during which union discretely occurs, as if offstage, in the same fashion as "Noche oscura" (21-25). At this point, the night has transformed from "serena" to "cristalina," increasing in brightness as the soul has moved ever closer to the beloved:

¡Oh noche cristalina
que juntaste con esa luz hermosa
en una unión divina
al esposo y la esposa,
haciendo de ambos una misma cosa! (61-65).

Cecilia del Nacimiento employs the spousal nouns eschewed by Juan de la Cruz, and hides her pair of lovers immediately after their union, exactly where the camera of Juan de la Cruz's narrative closes in on a particularly physical image of the lover resting on the beloved. In the "Canciones," in contrast, a wall simply appears in the meadow where they are: "y puesto un muro en este prado ameno" (67). The appearance of the wall invokes the soft wind that blows in it, just as mysteriously: "vienen las blandas olas / de aqueste aire sereno, / y todo lo de afuera lo hace ajeno" (68-70). The wall is a hard enclosure

that anticipates the enveloping strength of the Beloved, whose mention follows. In her first commentary, Cecilia del Nacimiento specifies that it represents not only the fortified soul, but the strength of God, now the soul's own: "Dice muro, por las grandes fuerzas con que está defendida y amparada el alma, ya no sólo con su resistencia, sino con la fuerza divina que tiene como muro para su defensa" (OC 163).

As her poem reaches to its conclusion, the poet consistently represents union as the acquisition of great power. Unlike the air blowing off the crenels in "Noche oscura" (31), which accompanies a painful intimacy ("en mi cuello hería," 34), the breeze of Cecilia del Nacimiento's "Canciones" carries a new identity to the soul, tightly enclosed in the embrace of the beloved.²⁶ That embrace is materialized in the walls around the meadow, in which she surrenders the entirety of her being in his: "pierde su ser y en él es convertida" (80).

The ending of Cecilia del Nacimiento's poem specifies exactly what is lost: the merely human soul, suddenly small compared to the might that surrounds her, is simply transformed into God by the force of God. The prose commentary is particularly bold in its clarification: "por tenerla [el alma] recibida en Sí [Dios], la deja deificada y con las propiedades y condiciones del Criador" (OC 171). The last line of her poem describes conversion into the divinity as the acquisition of a new and powerful identity, whereas Juan de la Cruz's ends with the delight of abandon. Both conclude inverting traditional gender roles: the disempowered woman acquires power, the man charged with power and responsibilities is released from his burdens. In Juan de la Cruz's open, exotic, and enticing space, the soul forgets herself and leaves herself behind ("Quedéme y olvidéme / . . . / dejando mi cuidado / entre las azucenas olvidado," 38-40). Emphasis falls on what is not: olvidéme, dejar (2), cuidado, olvidado.

Whereas Juan de la Cruz describes a leaving off, Cecilia del Nacimiento describes a taking on. In accordance with the gendered representation of mysticism, Cecilia del Nacimiento's "Canciones" conclude with a union and the restoration of a paradoxical and joyous plurality: she is God, whose "fuerza," mentioned twice (72, 77) is thereby hers, as she becomes what God is ("haciendo de ambos una misma cosa!" 65). Similarly, Teresa de Jesús leads to the conclusion of the seventh dwelling of her interior castle saying, "no hay que dudar sino que, estando hecha una cosa con él, fuerte por la unión tan soberana de espíritu con espíritu, se la ha de pegar *fortaleza*" (VII: 4.10; emphasis mine).

Cecilia del Nacimiento finally describes the soul as empowered in union with God, equal to God, and enclosed in a holy union that was within the soul all along, a profound articulation of feminine

empowerment. Juan de la Cruz represents the soul as surrendering in ecstasy after an escape from darkness and enclosure. Cecilia del Nacimiento depicts the way to God as a moving inward, and her soul arrives at a new identity by soaring through the core of her own being.

The differences between these two poems suggest that texts by women mystics bring a new dynamic to this type of heroic literature, to this form of representation that normatively renders quest as incessant motion and progress as changing places. Our understanding of the way to God is incomplete without both of them. Ethicist Sharon Daloz Park recommends embracing this inclusive understanding, to thereby “recognize the power of home places as well as the power of travel. . . . The practice of pilgrimage is a going forth and a return home that enlarge the meaning of both self and home” (50). If, as Kieran Kavanaugh has said, in “Noche oscura” Juan de la Cruz “sings of his happiness in having escaped from himself” (354), then Cecilia del Nacimiento sings of the soul’s delight at having found hers, “por estar toda esta Gloria del alma dentro” (OC 87-88).

Juan de la Cruz
Noche oscura

Canciones de el alma
que se goza de haber llegado al alto estado de la perfección
que es la unión con Dios por el camino de la negación espiritual

1. En una noche oscura
con ansias en amores inflamada
¡oh dichosa ventura!
salí sin ser notada
estando ya mi casa sosegada;
2. A escuras, y segura
por la secreta escala disfrazada
¡oh dichosa ventura!
a escuras y en celada
estando ya mi casa sosegada.
3. En la noche dichosa
en secreto que nadie me veía
ni yo miraba cosa,
sin otra luz y guía
sino la que en el corazón ardía.
4. Aquésta me guiaba
más cierto que la luz del mediodía
adonde me esperaba
quien yo bien me sabía
en parte donde nadie parecía.
5. ¡Oh noche que guiaste!
¡Oh noche amable más que la alborada!
¡Oh noche que juntaste
Amado con amada,
amada en el Amado transformada!
6. 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.

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

8. Quédeme y olvídeme,
el rostro recliné sobre el Amado,
cesó todo y déjeme,
dejando mi cuidado
entre las azucenas olvidado. (OC 73-74)

Cecilia del Nacimiento

Canciones

de la unión y transformación del alma en Dios
por la niebla divina de pura contemplación

1. Aquella niebla oscura
es una luz divina, fuerte, hermosa,
inaccesible y pura,
íntima [y] deleitosa,
un ver a Dios sin vista de otra cosa.

2. La cual a gozar llega
el alma que de amor está inflamada,
y viene a quedar ciega
quedando sin ver nada,
la ciencia trascendida y alcanzada.

3. Y cuando la conquista
del Reino de sí misma es acabada,
se sale sin ser vista
de nadie, ni notada,
a buscar a su Dios dél inflamada.

4. Y en aquesta salida,
que sale de sí el alma dando un vuelo,
en busca de su vida
sube al empíreo Cielo
y a su secreto centro quita el velo.

5. Y aunque busca al Amado
con la fuerza de amor toda encendida,
en sí lo tiene hallado,
pues está entretenida
en gozar de su bien con Él unida.
6. Está puesta en sosiego,
y a todas las imágenes perdidas,
y su entender ya ciego,
las pasiones rendidas,
con fuerza las potencias suspendidas.
7. A tal gloria y ventura
subir por escalera la convino,
para venir segura;
que por modo divino
los misterios de Cristo fue el camino.
8. Habiendo ya llegado
al deseado fin que fue su intento,
tiene, quieta en su Amado,
continuo movimiento,
estando sosegada y muy de asiento.
9. Y cuando de contino
del Verbo Eterno el alma está gozando
su espíritu divino
mueve un aire muy blando
que todo lo interior va regalando.
10. En la noche serena,
en que goza de Dios, su vida y centro,
sin darla nada pena,
le busca bien adentro,
con deseos saliéndole al encuentro.
11. El amor la encamina,
metida entre tiniebla tan oscura
y sin otra doctrina
camina muy segura
a donde Dios la muestra su hermosura.

12. Y yendo sin camino,
sin que haya entendimiento ni memoria,
la muestra el Rey divino
su virtud y su gloria
como se puede en vida transitoria.

13. ¡Oh noche cristalina
que juntaste con esa luz hermosa
en una unión divina
al Esposo y la esposa,
haciendo de ambos una misma cosa!

14. Gozando dél a solas,
y puesto un muro en este prado ameno,
vienen las blandas olas
de aquesta aire sereno,
y todo lo de afuera lo hace ajeno.

15. Aquel Rey en quien vive
la tiene con gran fuerza ya robada,
y como le recibe
de asiento en su morada,
la deja de sí toda enajenada.

16. Como es tan poderosa
la fuerza de aquel bien con que está unida
y ella tan poca cosa,
con darse por vencida
pierde su ser y en Él es convertida. (OC 54-60)

Notes

¹Apophysis is the rhetorical trope that alludes to something by denying that it will be mentioned. That paradox at its core makes it particularly appropriate for the articulation of mystical experience.

²Díaz Cerión, following Alonso-Cortés, lists the several other authors to whom the poem has been attributed (52).

³Cecilia del Nacimiento may have written the poem for a *justa poética*, meaning a poetic joust or competition, either private or public. Her sister María de San Alberto also wrote a poem that shares referents with Juan de la Cruz's "Noche," and the siblings wrote many texts in partnership, a literary relationship that Alonso-Cortés describes throughout her book and Arenal and Schlau summarize (131-190).

⁴What follows is a summary of an argument presented fully, including citation of primary sources, in Rhodes, "Seasons."

⁵I consider erotic that which brings or represents pleasure without compromising in any way the subjective status of any of the parties involved. The pornographic, in contrast, is the representation of acts in which one or more of the parties (usually a woman or a child) is objectified and either silenced, or silenced and forced to articulate the desire of the dominant party. Juan de la Cruz's poem is highly erotic, I believe, because it celebrates the desire of the lover and the beloved.

⁶Not coincidentally, "Noche oscura" was discovered to be among the favorite reading materials of the illuminists of Seville. The illuminists were known for their unorthodox emphasis on carnal experience. Huerga details the Inquisition's inquiry into the orthodoxy of Juan de la Cruz's poem in this light.

⁷Underhill points out that mystics world wide describe a similar three-part process (7); she cites Dionysius the Areopagite in full (11). Andía indicates that Juan de la Cruz was directly familiar with the mystical theology of Dionysius. Alcalá insists that orthodox mystical doctrine describes six gradations of ascent, each including passage through the three divisions mentioned by Underhill (38).

⁸Turner's *The Darkness of God* is devoted exclusively to the function of the self in mysticism. His analysis of the mystical way throughout his book is particularly well rendered in terms that incorporate post-modern psychological insights.

⁹There has been much debate over whether Juan de la Cruz was influenced by Luis de León; Ángel Alcalá has recently summarized the issue. Whatever the answer to that question, the representation of happiness as escape from enclosure and retreat to open space, in both "Vida retirada" and "Noche oscura," may be a feature of male mystical experience and/or its representation.

¹⁰Cecilia del Nacimiento's mother, Cecilia Morillas, was one of the most remarkable women of her age; see Alonso Cortés 7-12.

¹¹On Juan de la Cruz's university studies, see Rodríguez San Pedro 1989 and 1993; on Cecilia del Nacimiento's education, begun by her mother, see Aonso-

Cortés 59-77. The depth of her theological understanding is most evident in her second commentary on the “Canciones,” in OC 181-260.

¹²As Boyce and Olivares explain in their forthcoming anthology, Cecilia del Nacimiento wrote at least two versions of the poem. To her sixteen-stanzas, her brother Fray Antonio Sobrino rather insistently suggested that she add a final one, and she did include it, with minor modifications. This extra stanza, which reads like the afterthought it was, protected Cecilia del Nacimiento from the dangers of being labeled a pantheist, according to Díaz Cerón (62-65).

¹³Cecilia del Nacimiento composed two. Her first commentary, “Tratado de la transformación del alma en Dios” (OC 77-177) is dated 1603 and was written at the behest of her confessor Tomás de Jesús a year or two after she wrote the first version of her poem. In the prologue to the second commentary, which has the same title, she says she had written the poem itself “some thirty years ago,” and had been asked by Fray Esteban de San José, General of the Discalced Carmelites, to re-compose it because the first version was believed to have been lost (OC 181-260).

¹⁴Sesé’s reading of the presence of God as the text’s watermark is excellent; he concludes, “la figura de Dios, inserta en el poema, actúa como la gracia eficiente. Si se rechaza, o si se tiene alguna dificultad en admitirla, el poema se empobrece otro tanto” (255).

¹⁵Baruzi, for example, on whose reading Dámaso Alonso elaborates in *La poesía de San Juan de la Cruz*, prefers a completely allegorical reading of the text. Baruzi describes Juan de la Cruz’s symbols as “pure,” completely intuitive and divorced from any relationship with reality.

¹⁶The semantic fields of Man and Woman operative in early modern Spain are developed in Rhodes, “Gender and the Monstrous.”

¹⁷See Heise for a compelling treatment of the social pressures that constricted the representation of homosexual desire in early modern Spain.

¹⁸Pushing the argument further (admittedly a dangerous enterprise), one might consider that the desiring lover of “Noche oscura” may be the perfect representative of the human soul seeking God, but she is also a patriarchal fantasy, a woman who willingly and actively compromises and sacrifices herself for her lover (clearly an orthodox and desirable compromise in a religious reading, a detail which makes the point all the more interesting). As such, Juan de la Cruz’s woman/soul would probably be less appealing as a protagonist to any woman artist sensitive to “the economy of mysticism, the manner in which power relationships were expressed” (Arenal and Schlauf 136), because the literal anecdote represents her social imprudence.

¹⁹“Noche oscura” is replete with self-references, the effect of which is to reinforce individual presence and identity, a hallmark of male socialization. Sesé categorizes the self-references grammatically, “[En las dos partes del poema] estas dos versiones, tan distintas, de la protagonista se refieren sin embargo a la misma persona, como lo sugieren fuertemente los adjetivos posesivos de primera persona (*mi casa, mi casa, mi pecho, mi cuello, mi cuidado*), los pronombres de primera persona (*no yo miraba, yo bien me sabía, yole regalaba, yo sus cabellos esparcía*) o los pronombres personales de primera persona en

función de complementos directos o reflexivos (*me veía, me guiaba, me esperaba, me sabía, quedéme y olvidéme, dejéme*)” (248).

²⁰In her compelling essay, Mary Giles discusses the particular appeal of the trope of the night to women mystics, due to its subversive relationship to operations of the intellect and association with that which is known only by experience and love.

²¹There are many parallels between the “Canciones” and the seventh dwelling of Teresa de Jesús’s *Castillo interior*, which represents the culmination of mystical union. For example, Teresa de Jesús describes the arrival of God using a metaphor of presence in darkness, saying, “Digamos ahora como una persona que estuviese en una muy clara pieza con otras y cerrasen las ventanas y se quedase oscuras; no porque se quitó la luz para verlas, y que hasta tornar la luz no las ve, deja de entender que están allí” (VII: 1.9).

²²Cf. Teresa de Jesús’s seventh dwelling of the interior castle, where she says, “en metiendo el Señor al alma en esta morada suya, que es el centro de la misma alma, así como dicen que el cielo empíreo adonde está nuestro Señor no se mueve como los demás, así parece no hay los movimientos en esta alma, en entrando aquí” (VII: 3.9). The passage is relevant to Cecilia del Nacimiento’s reference to the empyreal heavens, as well as the stasis in motion, mentioned below.

²³Cf. VI: 7, 6-11. For example, “Mas no la tendrá, digo razón, si dice que no se detiene en estos misterios y los trae presentes muchas veces” (VI: 7, 11).

²⁴Stanza 9 (“Y cuando de contino”) appears before stanza 14 (“Gozando dél a solas”) in a later version of the poem, where it complements the reference to the breeze mentioned in line 69.

²⁵Teresa de Jesús describes God as King in the seventh dwelling of the *Castillo interior*: VII: 2, 11.

²⁶In her first commentary, Cecilia del Nacimiento clarifies that the breeze represents the paradoxical movement in stasis of the Holy Spirit: “Y así siente el alma esta aspiración del Espíritu Santo, que aquí llama aire blando, por la blandura y suavidad con que se mueve sin moverse” (OC 145).

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