

NOT FOR ALL OF BEAUTY
A POEM BY SAINT JOHN OF THE CROSS

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*Not for All of Beauty
Will I ever lose myself
But far I-don't-know-what
Which is attained so gladly.*

*(Por toda la hermosura
Nunca yo me perderé
Sine por un no sé qué
Que se alcanza por ventura.)*

I. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

This essay will consider the decision of the late Gerald Brennan to omit from the poems appended to his book on the poetry of Saint John of the Cross¹ the poem which begins *Not for All of Beauty*.

In his introduction to the Kavanaugh/Rodriguez translations (which include the extract above) of the poems attributed to the saint, Kavanaugh succinctly summarises *Not for All of Beauty* as treating of the soul's turning away from all created beauty to the uncreated beauty of God known through faith.²

II. THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE POEM

Kavanaugh states that it is a work absent from the collection contained in the *Sanlucar Codex*, which contains poems collected and approved by the saint himself. The genuineness of this and of three other poems, not included in *Sanlucar* but

¹ GERALD BRENNAN, *St. John of the Cross: His Life and Poetry*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

² Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Translations), *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, (Washington: ICS Publications, 1973), 710.

usually attributed to the saint, is considered by Kavanaugh to be 'probable; only the guarantee of the manuscripts presents them as authentic'.³

Gerald Brenan explains that he is omitting *Not for All of Beauty* (and another poem) since they are not in *Sanlucar* 'and bear no trace of his characteristic diction'. He concedes that the opening theme, quoted at the beginning of this essay, is beautiful 'and would seem to be pure San Juan', but considers that its development in the octaves that follow is 'so poor that, even if he wrote it – and it is not in his usual style or diction – it seems better to omit it.'

Brenan says

as Damaso Alonso has pointed out, it appears in an anthology of poems published in 1580 by Pedro de Padilla where it is followed by a development that might refer either to a profane or to a heavenly love. The development attributed to San Juan is quite different...⁴

John Frederick Nims in a comment accompanying his version of *Not for All of Beauty* says that the poem

is based on a poem published in 1580 with an almost identical initial theme; a poem that refers, with a certain ambiguity, to idealized human love. The author (*sic*)⁵, Pedro de Padilla, five years later himself became a Carmelite. St. John (if he is the author) develops de Padilla's theme *a lo divino*.⁶

It could be that the work attributed to the saint followed, rather than preceded, the 1580 publication, although it remains remarkable that there should be another person,

³ *Ibid.*, 709.

⁴ BRENNAN, *St. John of the Cross: His Life and Poetry*, 129.

⁵ Brenan's cautious description of de Padilla as the publisher of an anthology rather than composer of a verse is to be preferred in the absence of support elsewhere for Nims's certainty. It has not proved possible to consult in Dublin the authority of Damaso Alonso, *La Poesía de San Juan de la Cruz*, (Madrid: CSIC, 1942) (4th Edition, Madrid: Aigular, 1966, per Thompson at footnote 11 below).

⁶ JOHN FREDERICK NIMS (Translations), *The Poems of St. John of the Cross*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), 149.

author of the opening quatrain, who so closely shared the saint's genius. P.J. Kavanagh, in his Introduction to the versions by Roy Campbell⁷, says of the saint that the fact that

he 'used' popular poetry for his own purposes is beyond doubt. *Un Pastorcico sólo está penado* .. is discovered to be an already existing secular love-lyric.. which, with one or two emendations and the addition of a final stanza, St. John has turned into a surprising, and surprisingly successful, poem about Christ.

On the other hand, perhaps something may be made of the fact that M.C. D'Arcy, in his Preface to an earlier edition of the Campbell versions⁸, says that some of the saint's stanzas were written at a place he loved by the name of Baeza.

Baeza was where the saint was to be found in 1580. He was rector of a house of studies in Baeza. On outings from there he was seen to evince an intense love of nature. This was after his escape, about a year earlier, from long months of imprisonment in a dark and smelly cell, and from being subjected to daily humiliations and weekly whippings.⁹ From Baeza, the saint often travelled by foot with another friar to Beas, where he provided spiritual direction to nuns. As a young man of twenty-one he had written some songs in heroic verse in the pastoral style and now, as rector, he shortened the journey for himself and his companion by singing 'songs which he had composed'.¹⁰ It cannot, therefore, be excluded that *Not for All of Beauty*, in its entirety, was composed by the saint while he was in Baeza, but that he did not take it seriously enough to include in *Sanlucar*.

A relatively recent study of the saint's poetry by Colin Thompson states that the poem was one of several *coplas* or popular poems based on a short text, often of independent origin, and part of which acted as a refrain, the whole almost cer-

⁷ ROY CAMPBELL (Translations), *St. John of the Cross: The Poems*, (London: The Harvill Press, 2000), 14.

⁸ ROY CAMPBELL (Translations), *The Poems of St. John of the Cross*, (London: Harvill, 1951), 2.

⁹ RICHARD P. HARDY, *The Life of St. John of the Cross*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987), 66-68, 88.

¹⁰ DE JESUS, *St. John of the Cross*, 160, 220.

tainly intended to be sung to well-known tunes. Thompson would give its likely date of composition as after 1584 because it does not appear in *Sanlucar*.¹¹

Kavanaugh includes in a general picture of all of the authentic works the information that *Not for All of Beauty* was composed between 1586 and 1588 in 'Granada-Segovia?'¹² He later specifies that 'nothing certain can be said about the date or place of composition'.¹³

Enough external factors point to a strong presumption of authorship of the poem as a whole, with some question mark as to whether the opening quatrain originated elsewhere. Intrinsic factors might support the view that the saint composed the whole.

III. THE CONTENT AND DICTION OF THE POEM

The opening quatrain of *Not for All of Beauty* is to the effect that if the poet is going to lose himself it will not be for beauty but for the *I-don 't-know-what*. Each of the nine octaves that follow repeats in its ending the second half of the penultimate line and the last line of the opening quatrain.

The first octave begins with the word *sabor*, translated by Kavanaugh/Rodriguez as delight. *Sabor* in the world's good things only tires the appetite and spoils the palate.

The dictionary translation is 'taste', 'flavour' (including something with a 'feel to it'). The word *sabor* has the Latin root *sapor*.¹⁵ The English word 'savour' has the Latin root *sapero*, 'to taste'¹⁶. It is, therefore, a savouring (rather than an instant of delight) that will tire the appetite and spoil the palate. Saint John of the Cross found the word *sabor* useful more than once

¹¹ COLIN THOMPSON, *St. John of the Cross: Songs in the Night*, (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 61.

¹² KAVANAUGH/RODRIGUEZ, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 710.

¹⁴ Oxford Spanish Dictionary, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 662.

¹⁵ *Diccionario de la Lengua Espanola*, (Madrid: REal Academia Espanola, 1970), 1165.

¹⁶ Chambers Pocket Dictionary, (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1984), 663.

for the purpose of conveying his subtlety of thought: it is used also in his masterpieces *The Spiritual Canticle* (verse 28) and *The Living Flame of Love* (verse 4).

The second octave says that the generous heart eagerly goes from easy things to more difficult things. As with the first octave, there is a hint of a didactic tone which is not found in the masterpieces (*The Spiritual Canticle*, *The Dark Night*, *The Living Flame of Love*) but that is reflected somewhat in the doctrinal approach of the poem *Romances*.

The third octave of *Not for All of Beauty* says that one whom God has touched and who is sick with love finds his tastes so changed as to desire only the *I-don't-know-what*. The fourth explains that the sickness leads to one being withdrawn from all creatures. The fifth elaborates: the will can only be satisfied by God whose beauty is open to faith alone.

The sixth octave is startling if the reader has already noted the saint's appreciation of nature in *The Spiritual Canticle*. The *Canticle* brings sights such as doves, hills, woods, flowers, mountains and thickets to the mind's eye of the reader without, on the whole, extra words as visual aids (the major exceptions being the stag 'in flight' and the 'wounded' stag) until a turning point is reached. Then, when the poet 'no longer knew anything' and was in the place where 'He taught me a sweet and living knowledge', the *Canticle* conveys to the reader more of the poet's deep joy in the life that is found in the things of creation: swift-winged birds, leaping roe(buck)s, small white doves, olive branches, garlands of flowers and emeralds, green river banks, a place where the pure water flows.

Against this background, and even after the lead-in of the first and following octaves of *Not for All of Beauty*, the third line of the sixth octave of the poem comes as something of a shock. It reads (in the Kavanaugh/Rodriguez translation):

*Tell me, then, would you pity
A man so in love,
For he takes no delight
In all of creation;
Alone, mind empty of form and figure
Finding no support or foothold,
He tastes there I-don't-know-what
Which is so gladly found.*

*(Pues que no tienne sabor
Entre todo lo criado)*

Other translations of the 'no delight' line are available for comparison. Peers opted for 'Because no joy thou dost receive / From creatures but dost e'er aspire'.¹⁷ Campbell stresses the complete absence of competition: 'Tell me, if you would find great harm / If the servants He created / Did not rival Him in charm?'¹⁸ Nims uses a word with 'taste' as its Latin root: 'Then say; do humors grow / gloomy at refusing / gusto at things below?'

Thompson provides his own translation of those lines of the poems that he quotes but in his treatment of *Not for All of Beauty* he does not, unfortunately, offer a version of the 'no delight' line. However, he does say of the poem that 'the controlling metaphor.. is .. basic, food and eating' and he continues:

The rejection of grace and beauty seems to contradict its acceptance in CA24 [Commentary on the Canticles], but San Juan's meaning is carefully delineated. There, the *gracia y hermosura* of the soul is a divine gift, gratefully received.

Here it applies only to sensual appreciation, from which the soul must become detached if she is to enter into more enduring joys.²⁰

As the poem develops, the seventh octave affirms that the one living the so precious inner life tastes the *I-don't-know-what* beyond all beauty and what was/is/will be. The eighth again has a hint of the didactic; it says that one seeking to advance looks to what he has yet to gain and tends towards greater heights.

The ninth (last) octave picks up the theme of the opening quatrain. The poet will never lose himself for what the senses can take in – through the mind at its loftiest or (through what is) of grace and beauty – *But only for I-don't-know-what / Which is so gladly found.*

¹⁷ E. ALLISON PEERS (Translations), *The Poems of Saint John of the Cross*, (London: Burns Oates, 1947), 79.

¹⁸ CAMPBELL, *St. John of the Cross: The Poems*, 115.

¹⁹ NIMS, *The Poems of St. John of the Cross*, 93.

²⁰ THOMPSON, *St. John of the Cross: Songs in the Night*, 65.

Most tellingly, with regard to diction, other work shows that the saint had a fondness not only for the word *sabor* but also for a humble new noun, the *I-don't-know-what* – the noun that also appears in the opening quatrain that he is suspected of having borrowed. As noted by Thompson²¹, Verse 7 of *The Spiritual Canticle* uses the phrase *no sé qué* (*All wound me more / And leave me dying / Of, ah, I-don't-know-what behind their stammering*) (Kavanaugh/Rodriguez translation).

IV. THE THOUGHT WITHIN THE POEM

Literary assessments of the saint's poetry are restrained. M.C. D'Arcy²² quotes Menendez y Pelayo as saying that the poetry of Saint John of the Cross 'is hardly capable of being assessed by literary criteria. More ardent in its passion than any profane poetry, its form is elegant and exquisite....' One superbly qualified to attempt such an assessment, Michael Schmidt, has confined himself to the adjectives 'extraordinary' and 'astonishing' to describe Roy Campbell's versions of the poems.²³

The saint's own commentaries on his masterpieces may be used as an aid for understanding the thinking behind those poems (such as *Not for All of Beauty*) in relation to which he did not provide a commentary. That said, the saint himself has given permission to exercise freedom in the reading of any poem: Though we give some explanation of these stanzas, there is no reason to be bound to this explanation.²⁴

Sencourt paraphrases him thus:

The creatures, says San Juan, are as it were traces of the passing of God, for in them He has left pointers to His greatness, power, wisdom and other perfections. But the creatures are the *lesser* works of God, who made them as it were *in passing*. *The greater works*, wherein He revealed Himself most clearly and to which

²¹ Ibid.

²² D'Arcy's Introduction to Campbell, *The Poems of Saint John of the Cross* (1951), 1.

²³ MICHAEL SCHMIDT, *Lives of the Poets*, (London: Phoenix, 1999), 818.

²⁴ Saint John of the Cross quoted by Kieran Kavanaugh (Editor), *John of the Cross: Selected Writings*, (London: SPCK, 1987), 26.

He paid most heed, are those of the Incarnation of the Word and the other *mysteria* of the Christian faith...²⁵

...With San Juan.. his appreciation of nature was allowed only in so far as he looked through nature to the supernatural.. his soul grows radiant in his delight in nature, and nature's life, but always as revealing God within them.²⁶

The saint himself can be quoted to the effect that he would allow no comparison to be made between the traces of the passing of God in nature and contemplation of what lies beyond: 'All the being of the creatures' is 'nothing', 'All the beauty of the creatures' is 'deformity', 'All the grace and charm of the creatures' is 'disgrace and insipidity' compared to God's infinite being, beauty and grace.²⁷

Sencourt conveys a nuanced thinking when he says that, after the discipline of purging the senses and turning the mind inwards,

After the state of union has been reached.. the soul is able to see how all the creatures have their life and strength in God...[the delight] is not given back as a delight of the senses.. the pleasure that would naturally be felt by the senses is transmitted into a purely spiritual 'recreation and delight'.²⁸

In other words, there is not a reluctant wrenching from the things of creation but neither is there a spurning of or flinching away from the gifts of creation. It is a progression in fullness.

Thompson summarises the progression to the effect that one can distinguish between three phases in San Juan's teaching about attitudes to the created world: (1) detachment of the

²⁵ ROBERT SENCOURT, *Carmelite and Poet*, (London: Hollis and Carter, 1943), 140, 141..

²⁶*Ibid.*, 191, 192.

²⁷ As quoted by Brenan, *St. John of the Cross: His Life and Poetry*, 130.

²⁸ SENCOURT, *Carmelite and Poet*, 132.

²⁹ THOMPSON, *St. John of the Cross: Songs in the Night*, 217. Erich Fromm in *To Have or To Be?* (London: Abacus, 1976 at pp 26,27) contrasts a poem by Tennyson in which the poet reacted to a flower by wanting to have it with a haiku by a Japanese poet, Basho, in which all the poet does is look carefully to see the flower.

senses; (2) seeing creatures as images of God or of the 'places' where human love and divine Beloved are united; and (3) glorying in the whole creation because the soul sees [creation] as God does and not as something to be desired and possessed.²⁹

Crisogono de Jesus says: 'Once purification has been effected... the heart... not only can but must love all things.'³⁰

Whether one distinguishes between Thompson's second and third stages or prefers de Jesus's composite 'must', there is, in any event, a return to looking at and a time to savour (without desire to possess) the things of nature. The saint explains that after

a rest and silence in the divine light and in a new knowledge of God... the soul is allowed to see the wonderful harmony and order of the divine wisdom in the diversities of all its creatures and works... each individual creature raises its voice in its own proper way to announce how far God is within it...³¹

The saint speaks of the inadequacy of words for the light of God that gives the soul this vision:

However sublime the experiences God grants to the soul in this life, they are yet only brief, sudden appearances from afar... If we would now speak of the light of glory which God sometimes grants to the soul in this constant embrace, there are no words to give any idea of it...³²

and of the inadequacy of words for God's love:

... of the delicate love of God for the soul, I should not wish to speak, neither do I desire now to speak; for I see clearly I cannot say aught concerning it, and that, were I to speak of it, it would not appear as great as it is.³³

³⁰ DE JESUS, *St. John of the Cross*, 311.

³¹ As quoted by Edith Stein, *The Science of the Cross*, (London: Burns and Oates, 1960), 188.

³² *Ibid.*, 185, 192.

³³ As quoted in Kavanagh's Introduction to Campbell, *The Poems of Saint John of the Cross* (2000), 18.

It may be that the saint is thinking of the *I-don't-know-what* as the full selfhood of God³⁴, but perhaps only of a movement of the soul (granted by God) to a level that is upheld in a relationship of light and love – or, as theologians might say, a particular relationship of grace. This concept of movement to a new level in the union of the soul with God is found in Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection who has been translated variously as saying: 'It is rather a state of soul – if I can but find words – which is deeply spiritual...'³⁵; 'It is, rather, an "I-don't-know-what" of the soul...'³⁶; 'It is, rather, an "I don't know what" of the soul, gentle peaceful, spiritual, respectful, humble, and very simple, that upholds and incites it to love God, to adore him and even embrace him....'³⁷

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

It appears from the commentaries of Saint John of the Cross that, while the embrace of God is constant, the *I-don't-know-what* is more by way of an occasional gift from afar. Once experienced, it allows lasting insight into how 'each individual creature raises its voice in its own proper way to announce how far God is within it'. The narrative of the Incarnation has touched creation outside all constraints of time and place.

Not for All of Beauty does not go beyond the point of illumination and embrace in response. It stops at the turning point

³⁴ Una Agnew, in drawing one of several analogies between the saint's mysticism and that of Patrick Kavanagh, speaks of 'St John of the Cross's intuition of God as I-know-not-what': Una Agnew, *The Mystical Imagination of Patrick Kavanagh*, (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1998), 186. (In his much shorter book, Tom Stack also notes echoes of the saint's mysticism in Patrick Kavanagh's poetry: Tom Stack, *No Earthly Estate*, (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2002), 232.

³⁵ BROTHER LAWRENCE, *Spiritual Maxims and Gathered Thoughts*, (London: H.R. Allensen Limited, undated *Life and Heart* booklet), 19.

³⁶ DONALD ATTWATER (Translator), *The Practice of the Presence of God*, (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne Ltd., 1926), 57.

³⁷ CONRAD DE MEESTER (Editor), *Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, OCD: Writings and Conversations on the Practice of the Presence of God*, (Washington: ICS Publications, 1994), 39.

of the *I-don't-know-what*. It does not, as does the *Canticle*, develop ever richer insights through the medium of nature. Nonetheless, once the 'no *sabor*' is understood as 'no lingering, no savouring', all of the thought in the poem can be seen to be 'pure San Juan'.

It is true that the poem seems to Brenan to be poor, but the writings of a good poet are not always of even quality. Works that have been revised were once work-in-progress, and even later works can fail to convey the same inspiration as earlier work.³⁸

These points mean that some issue must be taken with Thompson, whose sole reason for excluding a pre-1584 composition seems to be an assumption that everything would have been included in *Sanlucar*. It is not surprising that Saint John of the Cross might have decided to exclude *Not for All of Beauty* from the pieces he approved for inclusion in *Sanlucar*, given that there was a more beautifully developed treatment of the same theme in the *Canticle*.

Moreover, Thompson seems to accept that the saint composed the titles to all of the poems.³⁹ The emotionally restrained titles *Not for All of Beauty*⁴⁰ and the other poems seem to carry such a continuity of tone as to imply that they were all composed at the same time in relation to a bundle of varied work composed over a longer period of time. Thompson himself might understand the use of an editorial pen: he says that 'no one would claim' that this and some other poems are 'great poems' though they do 'encapsulate in a direct and popular way San Juan's teaching...'⁴¹

In sum, Brenan's decision to exclude *Not for All of Beauty* from the poems annexed in translation to his book can be seen to rest rather more firmly on his own unhappiness that the saint he so admired was capable of middling work than on the

³⁸ For example, Thomas Merton might well have edited some of the later work from his – posthumously published – *Collected Poems*.

³⁹ THOMPSON, *St. John of the Cross; Songs in the Night*, 61.

⁴⁰ *Not for All of Beauty* is made carry the headings *Commentary Applied to Spiritual Things* (Kavanaugh/Rodriguez) and *With a Divine Intention*, by the same author (Campbell).

⁴¹ THOMPSON, *St. John of the Cross: Songs in the Night*, 65.

force of his doubts as to its authorship. Thompson, who was aware of Brennan's work in making the saint's verse known,⁴² rightly refrained from repeating those doubts.

For this essayist, the poem belongs to a rector trudging on the road from Baeza, gaily singing his treatment of 'Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it' (Psalm 139), and promising a lesson on 'Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them' (Psalm 111) if his companion's refrain is in tune.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 9.