

THE POEMS
of
ST. JOHN
OF THE CROSS

Third Edition

S-E
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ORIGINAL SPANISH TEXTS

AND

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

BY

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PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

The poems of San Juan de la Cruz have now been with me for over a quarter of a century. The first of these translations appeared in *Poetry* in 1952. The complete poems were published in 1959 and (revised) in 1968. Here they are again, with the greatest of them again reworked, in a way which I hope brings them closer to the passion and simplicity of the originals.

A poem, says Valéry, is never completed; it is abandoned—given over, after a time, to the flames or to the waste basket. Or to the public. Abandoned in something like despair, as the poet realizes that his words are not living up to what he expected of them. A translation of poetry—except for the occasional miracle—may lead to even more despair, since it is well known that “poetry cannot be translated.” The reason is that the poet is not only expressing ideas and feelings, but expressing them in sounds that are a kind of magical equivalent of what they say. The poet is uniting sound and sense. The first thing the translator has to do is wrench the sense from its sound, destroying the magical bond the poet had worked so hard for. When San Juan de la Cruz, for example, is describing a mystical trance of love in which the lover feels that all creation has disappeared and only uncreated beauty remains, he uses two simple words: *cesó todo*. Literally, “all stopped,” or “all ceased.” But that thought embodied in the languorous blur of *thay-só tóe-though* is not the same as it is when embodied in the abrupt monosyllables of “all stopped.” The first is like the soft dissolve of lyrical landscapes in a movie; the second like the bark of a traffic cop. The very sound becomes part of the meaning; it shows us the

manner in which things ceased to be. The poetry of two simple words, so easy to translate literally, is "lost in translation." But more about the translation of poetry—and about the life and work of San Juan—in the "Considerations" printed after the poems.

They have, most of them, been much revised. Some readers feel that revision, which plows and plods, is the enemy of inspiration, which strikes like lightning. Not true: revision is the desire to have a long love affair with inspiration and not just an evening's fling. The Spanish poems, even seen through hours of drudgery and over heaps of worksheets, have never lost their freshness; they seem as miraculous as ever. It is easy to see why so many Spanish poets, poets utterly unlike San Juan de la Cruz, have acclaimed him as the greatest poet of their language. In his far briefer flight, he touches on intensities which I think Dante himself has not ventured near.

At times the extraterrestrial flights of his poetry have reminded me of the imagery of science fiction; at other times of the dreamy sorcery of the surrealists. (No wonder Dali has been attracted to him.) But this year, when Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson have been given a Nobel Prize for their discovery of the lingering warmth of the explosion with which the universe began, another set of images suggests itself. For the poetry of San Juan is about what preceded the Big Bang, about how—to use only an image where we have no fact—a great hand opened in the timeless nowhere to release its rocketry of Time and Space and History, its expanding pyrotechnic display that, eighteen billion years later, is proliferating into new forms with undiminished versatility and brilliance. The great hand opened, San Juan would have said, out of the love and splendor that it wished to

share, and delight and ecstasy were what it had to offer, at least to anyone courageous enough to survive the Dark Night that is the dragon of this story. But the human mind is uneasy when it finds itself outside the pigeonholes of space and time—finds itself where words like *when* and *outside* and *where* have lost all relevance.

This is the problem that San Juan, as poet, was facing. The experience he wanted to describe is not a form of physical reality; not even the subtleties of the subatomic can approach it. The brain cannot reproduce it by any arrangement of its molecules. There are no words, no mental framework even, for what he had to say. And yet the poet, as García Lorca reminds us, is a professor of the five bodily senses. As poet, San Juan had to put into sensuous terms what was non-sensuous—and to most of us even non-sense. He had to see the unimaginable love between his Ineffable Someone and a human being in terms of the imaginable love between one person and another, between lover and lover, between bridegroom and bride. His precedent was the Song of Songs, the most loving and lovable part of the often dire Old Testament. The Song of Songs has always been suspect among the decorous because of its imagery, which is frankly amorous—Saint Teresa tells us that she even knew of religious who were shocked by it. The poetry of San Juan has been shocking to some for the same reason: how can the love of God for man, they wonder, be in any way like that of a human lover? The only bond, San Juan would have said, is in metaphor, which can suggest much by stating nothing. The Spanish poet and saint thought his metaphor a proper one, and was so complete a poet, so accomplished a professor of the five senses, that he never once, in the great poems, blurred his imagery, mixed his metaphor, by referring to God as *God* in the pastoral and romantic landscape

he created. God is nearly always *el amado*, the loved one, the one we might affectionately call our "love" or "lover." Or he is *aquel que yo más quiero* ("the one I love the most"), or *mis amores* ("my love"), or *vida mia* ("my life"), or even *carillo* ("darling")—and what puritan could address His Grandeur that way?

But, as the preacher tells us in his worldly-wise pages just before the Song of Songs, "a fool's voice is known by the multitude of words." On to the poems.

I

THE CODEX OF
SANLÚCAR
DE BARRAMEDA

CANCIONES DE

de el alma, que se goza de auer llegado al
alto estado de la perfeccion, que es la
union con Dios por el camino
de la negacion espiritual
De el mesmo

Au-
thor

En una noche obscura
Con ansias en amores inflamada
o dichosa uentura
sali sin ser notada
Estando ya mi casa sosegada

A escuras, y segura
Por la secreta escala disfracada
o dichosa uentura
a escuras y ençelada
Estando ya mi casa sosegada

En la noche dichosa
En secreto que nadie me ueya.
Ni yo miraua cosa
Sin otra luz y guia
Sino la que en el coraçon ardia

Aquesta me guiaua
Mas cierto que la luz del medio dia
adonde me esperaua
quien yo bien me sabia
En parte donde nadie parecia

THE DARK NIGHT

Songs

of the soul, which rejoices at having reached
that lofty state of perfection:
union with God by the way
of spiritual negation

Once in the dark of night
when love burned bright with yearning, I arose
(O windfall of delight!)
and how I left none knows—
dead to the world my house in deep repose;

in the dark, where all goes right,
thanks to a secret ladder, other clothes,
(O windfall of delight!)
in the dark, enwrapped in those—
dead to the world my house in deep repose.

There in the lucky dark,
none to observe me, darkness far and wide;
no sign for me to mark,
no other light, no guide
except for my heart—the fire, the fire inside!

That led me on
true as the very noon is—truer too!—
to where there waited one
I knew—how well I knew!—
in a place where no one was in view.

O noche que guiaste
 o noche amable mas que el aluorada
 o noche que juntaste
 amado con amada
 Amada en el amado transformada

En mi pecho florido
 que entero para el solo se guardava
 alli quedó dormido,
 y yo le regalava
 y el ventalle de cedros ayre dava

El ayre de la almena
 quando yo sus cabellos esparzia
 con su mano serena
 en mi cuello heria
 y todos mis sentidos suspendia.

Quedeme y oluideme
 El rostro recline sobre el amado
 cesò todo, y dexeme
 dexando mi cuidado
 Entre las açucenas oluidado.

O dark of night, my guide!
 night dearer than anything all your dawns discover!
 O night drawing side to side
 the loved and lover—
 she that the lover loves, lost in the lover!

Upon my flowering breast,
 kept for his pleasure garden, his alone,
 the lover was sunk in rest;
 I cherished him—my own!—
 there in air from plumes of the cedar blown.

In air from the castle wall
 as my hand in his hair moved lovingly at play,
 he let cool fingers fall
 —and the fire there where they lay!—
 all senses in oblivion drift away.

I stayed, not minding me;
 my forehead on the lover I reclined.
 Earth ending, I went free,
 left all my care behind
 among the lilies falling and out of mind.

OTRAS DEL MISMO A
lo diuino

Tras de un amoroso lance
y no de esperançã falto
bolé tan alto tan alto
que le di a la caça alcançe

Para que yo alcance diese
a aqueste lance diuino
tanto bolar me conuino
que de vista me perdiere
y con todo en este trançe
en el buelo quedé falto
mas el amor fue tan alto
que le di a la caça alcançe

Quando mas alto subia
deslumbrôseme la vista
y la mas fuerte conquista
en escuro se hacia,
mas por ser de amor el lance
di un ciego y oscuro salto
y fui tan alto tan alto
que le di a la caça alcançe

Quanto mas alto llegaua
de este lance tan subido
tanto mas bajo, y rendido
y abatido me hallaua
Dixe no aura quien alcançe

OF FALCONRY
a lo divino

Upon a quest of love,
hope sturdy and steadfast,
I flew so high, so high,
I caught the prey at last.

In this divine affair,
to triumph—if I might—
I had to soar so high
I vanished out of sight.
Yet in the same ascent
my wings were failing fast—
but love arose so high
I caught the prey at last.

Just when this flight of mine
had reached its highest mark,
my eyes were dazzled so
I conquered in the dark.
I gave a blind black surge
for love—myself surpassed!
and went so high, so high
I caught the prey at last.

The higher up I went
there, in this dizzy game,
the lower I appeared,
more humble, weak, and lame.
I cried, But none can win!

y abatime tanto tanto
 que fui tan alto tan alto
 que le di a la caça alcançe

Por una estraña manera
 mil buelos passe de un buelo
 porque esperança de çielo
 tanto alcança quanto espera
 esperè solo este lançe
 y en esperar no fui falto
 pues fui tan alto tan alto
 que le di a la caça alcançe

and sinking fast oh fast
 yet went so high, so high,
 I caught the prey at last.

Then—marvelous!—I made
 a thousand flights in one,
 for hope of heaven will see
 all it can wish, be done.
 I hoped for this alone;
 I hoped; was not downcast.
 And went so high, so high,
 I caught the prey at last.

OTRAS CANCIONES

A lo diuino (de el mismo autor)
De Christo y el alma.

Un pastorcico solo esta penado
ageno de plazer y de contento
y en su pastora puesto el pensamiento
y el pecho del amor muy lastimado
No llora por auerle amor llegado
que no le pena verse asi afligido
aunque en el coraçon esta herido
mas llora por pensar que esta oluido

Que solo de pensar que esta oluido
de su bella pastora con gran pena
se dexa maltratar en tierra agena
el pecho de el amor muy lastimado
Y dize el pastorcico, ay desdichado
de aquel que de mi amor a hecho ausencia
y no quiere gozar la mi presencia
y el pecho por su amor muy lastimado.

Y acabo de un gran rato se a encumbrado
sobre un arbol: do abrio sus braços bellos
y muerto se a quedado asido dellos
el pecho de el amor muy lastimado.

MADRIGAL

a lo divino:
of Christ and the soul

Once a young shepherd went off to despond:
how could he dance again? how could he sing?
All of his thoughts to his shepherdess cling,
with love in his heart like a ruinous wound.

The root of his sorrow? No, never the wound:
the lad was a lover and relished the dart
that lodged where it drank the best blood of his heart—
but sighing "Forgotten!" went off to despond.

For only to think it—forgotten by one
beautiful shepherdess!—drove him afar;
cost him a drubbing in foreigners' war,
with love in his heart like a ruinous wound.

The shepherd boy murmured: O curses descend
on the stranger who's stolen my pretty one: she
keeps a cold distance—stares stonily
on the love in my heart like a ruinous wound.

Time passed: on a season he sprang from the ground,
swarmed a tall tree and arms balancing wide
handsomely grappled the tree till he died
of the love in his heart like a ruinous wound.

CANTAR DE LA ALMA
que se huelga de conocer a Dios
por fee.

Que bien se yo la fonte, que mana, y corre:
aunque es de noche.

Aquella eterna fonte esta ascondida
que bien se yo do tiene su manida
aunque es de noche.

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

Se que no puede ser cosa tan bella
y que cielos y tierra beuen della
aunque es de noche.

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

Su claridad nunca es escurecida
y se que toda luz de ella es uenida
aunque es de noche.

Se ser tan caudalosos sus corrientes
que ynfiernos, cielos riegan, y las gentes
aunque es de noche.

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

SONG OF THE SOUL
whose pleasure is in knowing God
by faith

The spring that brims and ripples oh I know
in dark of night.

Waters that flow forever and a day
through a lost country—oh I know the way
in dark of night.

Its origin no knowing, for there's none.
But well I know, from here all sources run
in dark of night.

No other thing has such delight to give.
Here earth and the wide heavens drink to live
in dark of night.

Though some would wade, the wave's unforded still.
Nowhere a bottom, measure as you will
in dark of night.

A stream so clear, and never clouded? Never.
The wellspring of all splendor whatsoever
in dark of night.

Bounty of waters flooding from this well
invigorates all earth, high heaven, and hell
in dark of night.

A current the first fountain gave birth to
is also great and what it would, can do
in dark of night.

El corriente que de estas dos procede
 se que ninguna de ellas le precede
 aunque es de noche.

Aquesta eterna fonte esta escondida
 en este viuo pan por darnos vida
 aunque es de noche.

Aqui se esta llamando a las criaturas
 y de esta agua se hartan aunque a escuras
 porque es de noche.

Aquesta biua fuente que desseo
 en este pan de vida yo la ueo
 aunque de noche.

Two merging currents of the living spring—
 from these a third, no less astonishing
 in dark of night.

O fountain surging to submerge again
 deep in the living bread that's life to men
 in dark of night.

Song of the waters calling: come and drink.
 Come, all you creatures, to the shadowy brink
 in dark of night.

This spring of living water I desire,
 here in the bread of life I see entire
 in dark of night.