



The Poems of St. John of the Cross

Juan de la Cruz , John Frederick Nims (Translator)

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San Juan de la Cruz, the great sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, is regarded by many as Spain's finest poet. Passionate, ecstatic, and spiritual, his poems are a blend of exquisite lyricism and profound mystical thought. In *The Poems of St. John of the Cross* John Frederick Nims presents his superlative translation of the complete poems, re-creating the religious fervor of St. John's art.

This dual-language edition makes available the original Spanish from the Codex of Sanlúcon de Barrameda with facing English translations. The work concludes with two essays—a critique of the poetry and a short piece on the Spanish text that appears alongside the translation—as well as brief notes on the individual poems.

The Poems of St. John of the Cross Details

Date : Published October 1st 1995 by University of Chicago Press (Chicago/London) (first published 1591)

ISBN : 9780226401102

Author : Juan de la Cruz , John Frederick Nims (Translator)

Format : Paperback 160 pages

Genre : Poetry, Religion, Classics, Christianity, Christian

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From Reader Review The Poems of St. John of the Cross for online ebook

Stephen says

Nims' translation mangles and domesticates John of the Cross as badly as the Church that dismembered his body after his death, sending an arm to Seville and a leg to Salamanca as sweet relics for the faithful.

The wild Spanish originals are amazing and well worth tackling in 16th century Spanish. These are not typically "pious" poems, if you're afraid to dive into religious poetry. John's lyrics are inspired both by personal visionary experience as well as by late-medieval love poetry and old Hebrew wedding chants going back to the Song of Songs. I remembered a few of these almost word for word from my college days a decade ago, they're that memorable, but it's certainly easy to drift off reading Nims' "translation" (actually a dainty rewriting). Nims hits a few sweet spots here and there with the archaic language he uses to capture the early Baroque flavor, but overall this is down there with, yes, David Hasselhoff's Broadway musical of "Jekyll and Hyde," if you want to talk about absurd renderings of classic masterpieces.

The one selling point of Nims' edition is Robert Graves' interesting if bizarre introduction, where he goes on about transvestite priests and the cult of virgin prostitution back in the days of the goddess Ashteroth. Graves sees a parallel with John of the Cross' donning female masks to enter into his mystical, erotically-charged tryst with God ("the lover" or "beloved", *el Amado*), seeking to be spiritually interwoven with divinity as closely as intricate Arabic script. Graves might well have been hallucinating when he wrote this essay, especially when he mentions Nims' "admirably close translation" (what?), but it's an interesting parallel, if probably irrelevant: I can't believe that John of the Cross was influenced by ancient fertility cults and temple prostitution. Graves also brings up Garcia Lorca on *duende*, the mysterious engagement with mortality and Eros that infuses the best Spanish poetry -- and flamenco. Alas, Graves' strange, trippy essay is all too short, before Nims extinguishes the mystic fire to give us a quaint exercise in taxidermy.

Gerald Brenan and Willis Barnstone's translations are also imperfect, but a step up from here for sure.

Guillem says

Escriu Machado: "Dante y yo trocamos el amor en Teología".

A la inversa, el que realitza St. Joan de la Creu en els seus poemes (més subtil i potser la clau oculta darrera de tot misticisme) és transformar la teologia en Amor.

Michael Morris says

Readers are likely to find the poems speak to the desire for connection with God (or God as one might think of Him, for non-believers) in a way that is accessible and, mostly, artful. Even if the reader is not Catholic, the verses communicate that one's most significant actions are those in search of and union with the Beloved Lord. The verses, however, are not didactic. We are looking, most often, at what seems deeply personal and

universal at the same time.

A stirring read.

Complete review at Monk Notes: <http://mnmwrite.blogspot.com/2011/06/...>

Anna says

Some of the most exquisite poetry I've ever read. They are written by a Spanish monk who articulated the feelings of ecstasy, pain, and longing that can come from deep connections with God. Written deep in allegory and symbolism the pictures are so long lasting that they will instantly resonate with your being.

Justine says

This is a ridiculous translation. I picked up this book wanting to read the poems, and darn, they're beautiful (so far as I understood them, in their 16th century Spanish and all). Amazing. Five stars to St. John, maybe even six.

1 star to Nims, the translations by others are better. The English version veers way far off of what is in the Spanish text; I gave up reading it very quickly, and became especially annoyed when the English text obviously skipped a reference to the Catholic mass, completely changing the meaning of the verse.

Choose your own adventure for translators here.

Conveniently, this poem is also one of my favorites from the collection.

Oh, and if reading them in Spanish, read them out loud. The rhythm and pace is lovely.

Nancy says

This is another favorite book from my college years. It was translated by Willis Barnstone, a professor of mine, who also wrote the introduction. St. John was a 16th century mystic whose poems can be read as simple love lyrics or as symbolism for spiritual union. He used physical love as a metaphor defining his mystical experience.

Anna Konovalova says

San Juan de la Cruz. Saint John of the Cross. A person with an incredible destiny, a canonized saint and the patron of poets. Too many mysteries are floating around his name, too many legends, but only one thing is certain: he was a real Poet with a beautiful mind.

...And sometimes I even think that he was the only one who knew what love really is.

Michael says

This is an excellent collection. If you pick it up, make sure you read the intro about St. John's life and background - it is really helpful in understanding some of the mystic imagery. Several of the poems were quite stunning and spiritually nourishing, but several others felt that they may have lost something in the translation (the originals are in Spanish). But the collection ended on a high note with 9 Ballads that cover the mystery of the Trinity, Creation, and finally the Incarnation. The way St. John tells the story of those events is refreshing and of a tone that inspires both mystery and familiarity. This is a great thing to have on your shelf for when you need a dose of mystic poetry.

Michael A. says

Ken Krabbenhoft translation. Passionate poetry with wonderful imagery, talking of wounds and love in relation to God. Religious or not, a must read.

Luis says

La muy breve producción poética de San Juan de la Cruz ha despertado la admiración de poetas de los siglos venideros por ser capaz de transmitir la mística bajo una poesía aparentemente pagana, una característica puramente renacentista.

Mientras se habla de la soledad, encuentro y unión de los amantes (y de la agonía y plenitud que conllevan esos estados) en medio de paisajes naturales ideales como reflejo divino, el poeta está en realidad dibujando una alegoría que se debe "leer a dos voces", pensando en como ello refleja cómo acude la persona a Dios. La innovación que se recogerá a partir de aquí por el uso alegórico tan brillante determinará nuevas concepciones líricas.

La presente edición de Cátedra realiza un análisis exhaustivo de los versos y de su contexto, para una obra que no llega a las cincuenta páginas.

g026r says

What a terrible translation, mangling phrases and even creating them from whole cloth just to fit the translator's rhyme and rhythm schemes. (The exception being those poems that borrow liberally from the biblical passages. You can always tell when you've reached such a poem, as all attempts at forcing the translation into a rhyme scheme disappear, even if the Spanish originals still rhymed.)

Emily says

I borrowed this book from the library, but will have to purchase it. I want to be able to re read theses verses over and over! I would like to compare translation though. I liked reading the Spanish on the left and English on the right, but sometimes in my opinion they did not match. Nims did say he was translating more than

words though and I respect his philosophy of translation.

James says

Any heart ardent with prayer will find an illumined and faithful companion in San Juan de La Cruz (Saint John of the Cross), justifiably honored within his tradition with the appellation Spiritual Doctor.

Many poets who write in Spanish consider San Juan to be first among poets in that tongue.

In San Juan's verse, divinity is often known simply as *el amado*, the beloved, the only balm able to cure the soul's gaping wound of separation from divinity. In his writing, San Juan finds himself in the predicament of having to invoke sensual images to convey what is beyond the senses. And, like his friend Teresa of Avila, he is painfully aware of the inability of words and concepts to express the divinity. In one passage he writes that it is precisely our limited conceptions of the beloved that wound and kill us daily, and that to blossom spiritually we must constantly transcend such arrows.

After all, Juan found himself incarcerated by a powerful institution in the business of producing limited conceptions of the beloved: the Church. They shoved Juan into a dark, cramped dungeon, where he subsisted on mere crumbs -- and divine mana.

His crime: to call for deeper prayer so that the soul can embrace divinity nakedly, without ecclesiastical middle men. But, San Juan's call came at a time when the Church favored rigid ritual and dogma over interior piety, which it disesteemed as an activity reeking of the practices of their great new challenge, Protestantism.

In the darkness of his dungeon cell, Juan became absorbed into the light of divinity. His verse is his testament to the fact that nothing in the world can bring peace to the soul except the embrace of the beloved, and that this is our true vocation.

In one verse he writes of the soul as white dove (*blanca palomica*):

*En soledad vivia
y en soledad ha puesto ya su nido,
y en soledad la guia
a solas su querido,
tambien en soledad de amor herido.*

A literal translation:

She lived in solitude,
and in solitude she made her nest
and all alone her lover
led her in solitude,
also wounded in solitude by love.

Nims' translation:

Hers were the lonely days;
in loneliest of solitudes her nest.
Her guide on lonesome ways

her love -- ah, loneliest,
that arrow from the desert in his breast.

Anyone with a little Spanish can see how severely Nims has departed from the meaning, for the sake of rhyme.

Verse, famously, is that which evades translation. The attempt, though, puts one in company with San Juan in his efforts to render the Word in mere words.

Effective translations re-imagine rather than merely attempt to recreate the original. What such a translator seeks, as does San Juan, is not *memisis* but a felt resonance between two souls, a spiritual harmony that transcends differences and details of embodiment.

Ezra Pound's translations of Chinese verse succeed in this, as do San Juan's "translations" of what lies beyond all knowledge.

Most translators -- of both verse and spirit -- lack Pound's and San Juan's gifts. Yet, we must laud them for bringing us into any degree of felt affinity with the forces that inspired their art.

If readers prefer a more literal translation, I suggest Willis Barstone's renderings, which have the same title as the one here under consideration.

Those who do not speak Spanish may wish to read both in order to have two lenses into San Juan's world.

Those who do speak Spanish will surely experience both spiritual and embodied bliss.

?tefan Bolea says

Vivo sin vivir en mí
y de tal manera espero,
que muero porque no muero.

Tr?iesc f?r? a tr?i în mine
?i a?a sper
S? mor pentru c? nu mor.
(San Juan de la Cruz)

Miguel says

COPLAS DE EL MISMO, HECHAS SOBRE UN ÉSTASIS DE HARTA CONTEMPLACIÓN

Entréme donde no supe
y quedéme no sabiendo,
toda sciencia trascendiendo.

1

Yo no supe dónde entraba
porque cuando allí me vi
sin saver dónde me estaba
grandes cosas entendí;
no diré lo que sentí
que me quedé no sabiendo,
toda sciencia trascendiendo.

2

De paz y de piedad
era la sciencia perfecta,
en profunda soledad
entendida vía recta,
era cosa tan secreta
que me quedé balbuciendo,
toda sciencia trascendiendo.

3

Estava tan embebido
tan absorto y ajenado
que se quedó mi sentido
de todo sentir privado,
y el espíritu dotado
de un entender no entendiendo,
toda sciencia trascendiendo.

4

Quanto más alto se suve
tanto menos se entendía
que es la tenebrosa nube
que a la noche esclarecía,
por eso quien la sabía
queda siempre no sabiendo,
toda sciencia trascendiendo.

5

El que allí llega de vero
de sí mismo desfallece
quanto sabía primero
mucho baxo le paresce,
y su sciencia tanto cresce
que se queda no sabiendo,
y su sciencia trascendiendo.

6

Este saber no sabiendo
es de tan alto poder

que los sabios arguyendo
jamás le pueden vencer,
que no llega su saber
a no entender entendiendo,
toda sciencia trascendiendo.

7

Y es de tan alta excelencia
aqueste summo saber
que no ay facultad ni ciencia
que le puedan emprender
quien se supiere vencer
con un no saber sabiendo,
yrá siempre trascendiendo.

8

Y si lo queréis oír
consiste esta summa sciencia
en un subido sentir,
de la dibinal esencia
es obra de su clemencia
hazer quedar no entendiendo,
toda sciencia trascendiendo.

COPLAS DE EL ALMA QUE PENA POR VER A DIOS

Vivo sin vivir en mí
y de tal manera espero
que muero porque no muero.

I

En mí yo no vivo ya
y sin Dios vivir no puedo
pues sin él y sin mí quedo
éste vivir qué será?
Mil muertes se me hará
pues mi misma vida espero
muriendo porque no muero.

II

Esta vida que yo vivo
es privación de vivir
y assí es contino morir
hasta que viva contigo.
Oye mi Dios lo que digo
que esta vida no la quiero

que muero porque no muero.

III

Estando ausente de ti
qué vida puedo tener
sino muerte padecer
la mayor que nunca vi?
Lástima tengo de mí
pues de suerte persevero
que muero porque no muero.

IV

El pez que del agua sale
aun de alibio no carece
que en la muerte que padesce
al fin la muerte le vale.
Qué muerte abrá que se ygual
a mi vivir lastimero
pues si más vivo más muero?

V

Quando me pienso alibiar
de verte en el Sacramento
házeme más sentimiento
el no te poder gozar
todo es para más penar
por no verte como quiero
y muero porque no muero.

VI

Y si me gozo Señor
con esperança de verte
en ver que puedo perderte
se me dobla mi dolor
viviendo en tanto pabor
y esperando como espero
muérome porque no muero.

VII

Sácame de aquesta muerte
mi Dios y dame la vida
no me tengas impedida
en este lazo tan fuerte
mira que peno por verte,
y mi mal es tan entero
que muero porque no muero.

VIII

Lloraré mi muerte ya
y lamentaré mi vida
en tanto que detenida
por mis pecados está.
¡O mi Dios!, cuándo será
quando yo diga de vero
vivo ya porque no muero?

OTRA DE EL MISMO A LO DIVINO

[...]

Cuanto más alto llegava
de este lance tan subido
tanto más baxo y rendido
y abatido me hallava
dixe: No abrá quien alcance.
Abatíme tanto tanto
que fuy tan alto tan alto
que le di a la caça alcance.

GLOSA A LO DIVINO. DE EL MISMO AUTOR.

Por toda la hermosura
nunca yo me perderé,
sino por un no sé qué
que se alcança por ventura.

I

Sabor de bien que es finito
lo más que puede llegar
es cansar el apetito
y estragar el paladar
y assí por toda dulçura
nunca yo me perderé
sino por un no sé qué
que se halla por ventura.

II

El corazón generoso
nunca cura de parar
donde se puede passar
sino en más difficultoso
nada le causa hartura

y sube tanto su fee
que gusta de un no sé qué
que se halla por ventura.

III

El que de amor adolesce
de el divino ser tocado
tiene el gusto tan trocado
que a los gustos desfallece
como el que con calentura
fastidia el manjar que ve
y apetece un no sé qué
que se halla por ventura.

IV

No os maravilléis de aquesto
que el gusto se quede tal
porque es la causa del mal
ajena de todo el resto
y assí toda criatura
enajenada se vee
y gusta de un no sé qué
que se halla por ventura.

V

Que estando la voluntad
de divinidad tocada
no puede quedar pagada
sino con divinidad
mas, por ser tal su hermosura
que sólo se vee por fee,
gústala en un no sé qué
que se halla por ventura.

VI

Pues, de tal enamorado
dezidme si abréis dolor
pues que no tiene sabor
entre todo lo criado
solo sin forma y figura
sin hallar arrimo y pie
gustando allá un no sé qué
que se halla por ventura.

VII

No penséis que el interior
que es de mucha más valía

halla gozo y alegría
en lo que acá da sabor
mas sobre toda hermosura
y lo que es y será y fue
gusta de allá un no sé qué
que se halla por ventura.

VIII

Más emplea su cuydado
quien se quiere aventajar
en lo que está por ganar
que en lo que tiene ganado
y assí, para más altura
yo siempre me inclinaré
sobre todo a un no sé qué
que se halla por ventura.

IX

Por lo que por el sentido
puede acá comprehenderse
y todo lo que entenderse
aunque sea muy subido
ni por gracia y hermosura
yo nunca me perderé
sino por un no sé qué
que se halla por ventura.
