

## A Spiritual Reading of the “Dark Night”

Fr. Eamon Carroll and I were classmates in the Carmelite seminary system from first year high school through novitiate to ordination and beyond (1935–1947). Both of us were lucky enough to be sent on to graduate studies in theology in Rome and to spend most of our lives in theological education. But our paths diverged along the way. Eamon stayed teaching in academe right to the end, retiring from Loyola University of Chicago in January, 2000. I left the confines of academic theology in the seventies to engage in what Bernard Lonergan called the specialty of communication. For me this meant speaking and writing in what I like to think has been what the French call *haute vulgarisation*, popularizing theology in adult education, retreats, seminars, and workshops. My tribute to Fr. Eamon is to share something of this experiences specifically my recent use of the poetry of St. John of the Cross in retreats. I want to present a spiritual reading of the poem “Dark Night” as a way of leading into the experience of God.

John’s poetry has come into prominence for its pastoral application only recently. Its literary excellence has been recognized at least since the middle of the 20th century through the discoveries of outstanding literary critics like Damaso Alonso and Marcelino Menendez y Pelayo. John is now regarded as one of Spain’s greatest poets. The use of this poetry as the first and most important window into the Saint’s mystical experience is another matter. This is a later development.

A sign of this new appreciation is in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*<sup>1</sup> in the translation of Kieran Kavanaugh. The earlier editions located the poetry at the end of the volume along with the letters and minor works. The 1991 edition places the poems in the front to remind the reader that the Poetry is John’s first statement of his experience; the prose treatises come afterward. The poetry is the first place to look for an understanding of the saint’s teaching.

Poetry is a privileged entry into human experience. Great poetry captures profound and universal experiences that come from the deepest layers of the soul. It shares these experiences through primordial imagery that resonates with those depths. Great poetry is catholic, defined by James Joyce as “Here comes everybody,” and it speaks with a universal ring. John’s poetry is like that. It is

exalted religious poetry and unequaled mystical poetry. One of my teachers, the great Hispanicist scholar, Helmut Hatzfeld, held the opinion that a poem is mystical in proportion as it reaches the heights (or the depths) of John’s “Spiritual Canticle.”

By definition mystical experiences are ineffable, i.e., they cannot be put into words. This quality refers to matter of fact prose. Poetry uses metaphors and symbols, “figures, comparisons, and similitudes” (“Spiritual Canticle,” prologue 1) to evoke the deep experiences of the spirit. John chooses poetry as the primary medium to express and celebrate his experience of God. His poems are art-objects that represent the inexpressible. Later on and usually by request he unpacks some aspects of the poetry in prose commentary. Even then his commentaries are at their best when they are poetic themselves, as is the case of much of Sacred Scripture. Thus he waits for the right moment, when he is “deeply recollected” (“Living Flame,” prologue 1) and moved with fervor to write about the outpourings of the spirit.

Our task is to familiarize ourselves with the poem “Dark Night,” to read it over and over and let it speak to our own hearts, thereby drawing us into John’s experience as well as our own of dark night (see Appendix A).<sup>2</sup> For those who do not know Spanish, the

English translation of Kavanaugh is recommended. Any translation, of course, is a limitation. Poetry is words and sound, the rhythm and sound being an important part of the communication. Even the literal transcription of Kavanaugh in blank verse or no verse at all loses the sound and has its own words. The substance of the poem is salvaged through the message and the images. Some translators of the poetry, like Roy Campbell, Willis Barnstone or Frederick Nims, create new images, hence equivalently new poems. This approach in my judgment is less helpful. One valid way of compensating for the loss of the melodious Spanish is to utilize a musical accompaniment along with the English translation, such as the work of John Michael Talbot who puts some of the Kavanaugh translations to music. Music connects us to the nuns and friars of John’s day who sang the lyrics for recreation and devotion. Those with even a modicum of knowledge of Spanish will find it helpful to listen to readings or to read aloud the Spanish text.

### **The Poem as End and Beginning**

St. Teresa of Avila wrote that “it is one grace to receive the Lord’s favor; another, to understand which grace or favor it is; and a third to know how to describe and express it.” (*Life* 17.5) John illustrates this natural order. He is first a gifted mystic, then an insightful theologian who understands his religious experience especially from the Sacred Scriptures (see *Ascent*, prologue 2), and finally a great poet who can create a beautiful icon of his experience. The poetic quality of the Scripture helps him interpret his own experience and gives him a language for his poetry. The language of his greatest poems comes from the *Song of Songs*. Thus his own poetry is doubly indebted to Scripture in the second and third steps of the process.

The poem in turn is our door to the experience of God according to John of the Cross. We start with the poem and work our

way back through the reflections to the experience. It is important not to circumvent the process, especially the first step, the mastering of the poem. We are tempted to go immediately to the commentary as if this would give us the full understanding. The poem gives a “feel,” an intuition, and an emotional quality that escape the rational explanation. There is more in the poem than can be captured in a prose statement. A poem “is,” and it represents an excess of meaning that is appropriated only by wrestling with the text.

John Welch has an excellent chapter on directives for unpacking the poetry in his book on John of the Cross, *When Gods Die*.<sup>3</sup> He follows Carl Jung’s understanding of poetry as images and stories that arise from the collective unconscious and therefore from the common patrimony of humanity. The language of poetry is the language of the imagination, and therefore poetry will reveal its secrets by the same tools that interpret any work of the imagination. Welch applies Robert Johnson’s four steps in dream analysis to the poetry. So the poem is to be (1) amplified by similar images and stories drawn from other sources such as Sacred Scripture; (2) related to one’s personal growth; (3) interpreted in understandings and laws of life; and (4) expressed in a ritual, such as prayer. John of the Cross himself did this kind of analysis in his commentaries. We are invited to engage in this reflection, interfacing the poem and our own lives. The reader and the poet are in dialogue with each other, and who can predict the outcome of a conversation?

### **The Story of the “Dark Night”**

We start with the story line and the images of the poem. This is the literal sense of the poem. The “Dark Night” is a human love story, a human drama—involving lover and beloved, bride and bridegroom, that is a story all in itself. On another, second level, the bride is humanity or the individual soul;

the bridegroom is Christ. A non-believer could appreciate the first level without any interest in the second, spiritual level. At times there is a break through of the theological intent. Thus in stanza five of this poem the bride cannot contain herself and abandons the human metaphor in favor of a spiritual statement about God: “O guiding night!/ O night more lovely than the dawn!/ O night that has united/ the Lover with his beloved,/ transforming the beloved in her Lover.” The indication of this exception in Kavanaugh’s translation is the capitalization of Lover. Elsewhere the personal nouns and pronouns are in lower case because they refer to the human protagonists. Later in this paper I state that human love works a similar transformation in two human beings, so that the passage could be interpreted along the same lines as the rest of the poem. In any case it would be a mistake to skip this human story in favor of an immediate, spiritual reading, since the human love story is the vehicle for communicating the beauty of the love–relationship between Christ and the soul.

John wrote “Dark Night” after his escape from the prison cell in the Toledo monastery in August 1578. Other poems preceded it, notably his longer and more famous “Spiritual Canticle,” which was composed in large part during the incarceration. The memory of his liberating escape is still fresh in his mind: the exhilaration of taking the chance, moving out unseen in the pitch blackness, the rope ladder down the side of the building, scurrying along parapets and ledges, and finally freedom at last, “my house being now all stilled.” These memories are the content of the first two verses. A hidden message of those two verses is the passage from “urgent longings” to “my house being now all stilled.” We address this purifying experience later in the paper.

The inner experience of that wondrous night and the eventual encounter with the beloved make up the rest of the poem. This

part too is full of excitement and Joy. There is nothing lugubrious about this dark night, contrary to impressions associated with this night in the popular mind. The negative side is only one small part. The night is a Joy, because of the inner light and fire that burn in the heart of the escapee (stanzas 3–5) and the term of this light and love, which is the uniting of bride and bridegroom in a magnificent encounter (stanzas 6–8). The whole poem is the bride’s perspective; it is her monologue. The bride stands for the soul in its search for God, and as such there is usually no hesitation in men identifying with the feminine figure. Not only do men have a counter–sexual, feminine side, but before God, as the Fathers of the Church used to say, all souls are feminine.

The night is a cover that protects the bride from any outside interference, obstacle, or competition, and it allows full sway to the light within as guide to the beloved. Alone with each other the two embrace, and in an idyllic pastoral setting they express affection and consummate their union (stanzas 6–8). Here is the surrender of perfect human love, made possible in the story because of the external liberation and the release of profound inner life. Divine love follows the same pattern. Love for God finds its fulfillment when it passes through the three stages of the spiritual life called purification, illumination and union.

### The Night as Symbol

The major symbol of the poem is the night. The whole poem takes place within the “one dark night” that goes from dusk to dawn. The symbol evokes the richness of darkness. Darkness makes possible the freedom *from* outside influence and inner weakness, and freedom *for* the pursuit of one’s dream. The liberated bride describes her happy state in a series of epithets that indicate autonomy: she goes forth unnoticed, anonymous, concealed, disguised (stanzas 1–2), “in secret, for no one

saw me/ nor did I look at anything” (stanza 3), all because her house is “now all stilled.” The darkness allows her to attend to her heart’s desire (stanzas 3–4), to pursue the encounter and absorption in her lover (stanzas 5–8). Her inner life takes over and thrives, transcending the constraints of the human condition. She is full of joy; the dark night is a glad night, because it brings bride and groom together.

The darkness has another function in the poem. It points up the fact that the journey is uncharted, like the path of the just man on the summit in John’s sketch of Mount Cannel, for whom “there is no law, he is a law unto himself.” In the darkness there is no need for maps or directives; other people do not get in the way, because they are either absent or they cannot see. There is no place for misguided opposition or human respect or envious competition. A whole new world is available by leaving the brightness of daytime and entering the night.

Some of John’s poems are adaptations of secular verses that were being sung in the streets. John took them and gave them a religious turn, and the new poem was said to be *a lo divino*. We could convert the contemporary lyric, “Music of the Night” from the play “Phantom of the Opera,” into a religious hymn to darkness *a lo divino*. The phantom, who has a disfigured face but a beautiful voice, is trying to lure the singer Christine into the darkness where music reigns. He portrays the riches of the darkness in these words:

Night–time sharpens,/ heightens each  
sensation...  
Darkness stirs and:/ wakes imagination...  
Silently the senses/ abandon their  
defenses...  
Slowly, gently/ night unfurls its splendor...  
Grasp it, sense it—/ Tremulous and tender...  
Turn your face away/ from the garish light  
of day,  
Turn your thoughts away/ from cold,  
unfeeling light  
And listen to/ the music of the night...

The song continues in this vein, celebrating the beauty of life in darkness. A similar darkness with a different agenda is the environment for the love story of the “Dark Night.”

### Themes in the “Dark Night”

Various reflections are suggested by the different sections of the poem. The first two verses are particularly rich, enough to occasion the five books of commentary that make up *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and the *Dark Night*. John got no farther than the first verse of the second stanza in these two commentaries.

“Love’s urgent longings” in the first stanza represents unbridled desires for the beloved that are full of ego. They are beginning love or a new burst of love that gets one started on the pursuit and moves one into a new level of relationship. The love at this point looks perfect, but it is excessively emotional and impetuous. Romantic love has a long way to go before it is mature and integrated. The latter goal happens when “my house [is] all stilled” and there is peaceful possession of both the love and the object. This movement from imperfect to perfect love is the process of purification, the subject of John’s two commentaries

Others write their own commentaries. Jessica Powers, the Carmelite poet, muses on the “before” of the process in her poem, “The House at Rest.”<sup>4</sup> In the brightness of daytime each part of the house looks for attention, causing a certain distraction, fragmentation and many–mindedness:

How does one hush one’s house,  
each proud possessive wall, each sighing rafter,  
the rooms made restless with remembered laughter  
or wounding echoes, the permissive doors,  
the stairs that vacillate from up to down,  
windows that bring in color and event  
from countryside and town,  
oppressive ceilings and complaining floors?

Darkness allows the shift from multiplicity to simplicity, from distraction to stillness, from noise to quiet. How does that happen? The darkness makes the parts invisible; it neutralizes them. But darkness is only a cover; real healing comes from within: “Virtue it is that puts a house at rest.” Virtue does not destroy the parts. It integrates them, so that “when the call is heard,” the tenant “is free to take his kindled heart and go.”

Thomas Tyrrell makes *Urgent Longings*<sup>5</sup> the title of his excellent book on the passage from infatuation to contemplative love. Urgent longings mark the experience of infatuation that happens in young adulthood and often again in mid-life. The desires are good, but they need reordering. Desire is not taken away; it is shorn of self-serving. Romantic love becomes contemplative love, which loves people and God as they are, without projection. The love is still full of passion; it is more passionate in Teresa of Avila’s view, more genuine and more profitable than lesser degrees, because “It is what love really is” (*Way of Perfection* 6.7). [Peers translation]. Contemplative love is surrender of the whole person, not the furtive search for indulgence and self-satisfaction. Covert selfishness is the basic enemy of both human and divine love. Tyrrell elaborates this truth in the light of contemporary psychology, while John’s commentaries are more theological.

One final take-off from these two verses is the subject of violence. Violence, according to the famous French anthropologist René Girard, comes from mimetic desires, viz., desires born of competition and invidious comparison. Mimetic desires quickly become covetous. They are the root of violence toward oneself and others and come to term in murder as with Cain and Abel. More distressing still, violence, spawned by desires, is the foundational principle of human cultures throughout the world. The prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures and above all the life

and teaching of Jesus Christ stand against this culture of violence. A popular presentation of these theses can be found in Gil Bailie’s, *Violence Unveiled*.<sup>6</sup> A fruitful dialogue might occur between the teaching of the poem on personal autonomy as noted above—the bride proceeding in secret and by inner direction—and the theories of René Girard. In his teaching on love and desires John of the Cross offers the antidote to the destructive quality of mimetic desire.

### The Middle Stanzas, Three to Five

The night as guide, darkness as cover for the inner light of faith, is the theme of these three stanzas (3–5). This “glad night” is “more lovely than the dawn,” immensely more revealing and rewarding than human lights and resources, because the soul is participating in the light of God, which paradoxically is the bright darkness of human unknowing. The soul is experiencing enlightenment, illumination, and the source is living, loving faith, the faith “which expresses itself through love” (Gal 5:6). Such faith is God’s work, beyond the possibilities of human imagining and thinking. It is the surrender that costs, as T. S. Eliot has said, no less than everything, and the reward is a new identity, expressed eloquently by St. Paul in Galatians 2:20–21: “I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me. I still have my human life, but it is the life of faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

This participation in divine life has a human analogue. A Persian fable describes a young suitor going to the home of his beloved. He knocks on the door, and a voice from within asks, “Who is there?” He responds, “It is I.” His beloved refuses to open the door, indicating that he does not love enough. He goes away, pines after her and returns a second time; the same conversation ensues: “Who is there?” “It Is I.” “You do not love me enough.” The suitor becomes desperate. He spends months thinking and suffering in

his great love. Finally he returns to the house and knocks. "Who is there?" asks the lady within. "It is thyself" is the response. The bride-to-be opens the door and says, "Now you truly love me." When the "other" becomes one's very self, when the alchemy of love transforms one's very being and gives a new identity, the love is perfect. So it is in this blessed night "that has united/ the Lover with his beloved,/ transforming the beloved in her Lover" (stanza 5).

Pure faith connects the person with the real God, not the God of one's own fashioning, one too small for the unspeakable Mystery that is Father, Son and Spirit. T. S. Eliot captures this thought in the following words from "East Coker":

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
For hope would not be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love  
For Love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope are in the waiting.  
Walt without thought, for you are not ready for thought:  
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.<sup>7</sup>

These words are commentary on faith as a leap in the dark, a free fall that lands one in the arms of God. The God of true faith is not our own construction. The real God is not the answer to our questions, a God brought down to our own level. The prayer of the mystic is that God be God in her experience. The result is "transluminous obscurity," the darkness of God, the third night of St. John of the Cross, which is eminently "more lovely than the dawn."

### Final Stanzas, Six to Eight

The poem culminates in the intense exchange of love between bride and bridegroom. The transformation that is the

goal of Christian faith is not a static condition, an ontological reality that just sits there. The transformation calls for expression and the nuptial imagery of the poem suggests contemplative presence of the two lovers one to the other. The picture is nuptial lovemaking, the bride caressing her lover in a setting of cool, refreshing breezes. The poem ends in the self-oblivion of a love that forgets everything other than the beloved; it is the ecstasy of abandonment, a going out of from oneself that "leav[es] my cares/ forgotten among the lilies."

The reader may feel that the exalted love celebrated in these last stanzas is matter for admiration but beyond imitation. This would be a mistake. Every person of faith is gifted with the same transformation in love, though not necessarily in the same degree. The least amount of grace achieves the divinization and participation in God's life that are the foundation for the lovemaking of this poem. Only the degree of that possession is different. The poem describes the fullest measure of new life in Christ. John of the Cross' experience is ordinary experience "writ large." Christian experience is the same in kind for all in the state of grace. We go to John to see the possibilities of grace, to be challenged and inspired to enter into loving conversation with God.

Prayer is not the only expression of this new Life. The winning essay in a competition sponsored by *Spiritual Life* magazine was entitled "John's 'One Dark Night': Romantic, Political or Mystical?"<sup>8</sup> The author shows that the poem is both the celebration of mystical love and the story of romantic, human love. But it is more. Sophisticated hermeneutics and literary criticism expand the horizons and show how the whole life of John is involved in the poem. There is the dimension of suffering that culminated in the Toledo prison cell and the politics of struggle in living in a conflicted Order. There is also the whole venture of

searching for the truth. All these factors are part of the drive to self-transcendence in the poem. Thus the poem is about community and ministry, about interpersonal relationships and societal commitment as well as contemplative union with God. The poem is about a whole life.

I end this essay in the way I began. I thank God with my classmate, Eamon Carroll, that we have been privy to these secrets and I ask the grace for both of us and for all who read this piece to be faithful to their inspiration.

Ernest E. Larkin, O. Carm

### Appendix A: 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 oscuras y segura,  
por la secreta escala disfrazada,  
¡oh dichosa ventura!  
a oscuras y en celada,  
estando ya mi casa sosegada.
3. En la noche dichosa,  
en secreto, que nadie me veía,  
ni yo mlraba cosa,  
sin otra luz y quía  
sino la que en el corazón ardía.
4. Aquésta me guiaba  
más cierto que la luz del mediodía,  
adónde me esperaba  
quien yo bien me sabía,  
en parte donde nadie parecía.
5. ¡Oh noche que guiaste!  
¡Oh noche amable más que el alborada!  
¡Oh noche que juntaste

Amado con amada,  
amada en ei 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. Quedéme y olvidéme,  
el rostro recliné sobre el Amado,  
cesó todo y dejeme,  
dejando me cuidado  
entre las azucenas olvidado.

### Appendix B: The Dark Night

Songs of the soul that rejoices in having reached the high state of perfection, which is union with God, by the path of spiritual negation.

1. One dark night,  
fired with love's urgent longings  
—ah, the sheer grace!—  
I went out unseen,  
my house being now all stilled.
2. In darkness, and secure,  
by the secret ladder, disguised,  
—ah, the sheer race!—  
in darkness an concealment,  
my house being now all stilled.
3. On that glad night  
in secret, for no one saw me,  
nor did I look at anything  
with no other light or guide  
than the one that burned in my heart.
4. This guided me  
more surely than the light of noon  
to where he was awaiting me  
—him I knew so well—  
there in a place where no one appeared.

5. O guiding night!  
O night more lovely than the dawn!  
O night that has united  
the Lover with his beloved,  
transforming the beloved in her Lover.

6. Upon my flowering breast,  
which I kept wholly for him alone,  
there he lay sleeping,  
and I caressing him  
there in a breeze from the fanning cedars.

7. When the breeze blew from the turret,  
as I parted his hair,  
it wounded my neck  
with its gentle hand,  
suspending all my senses.

8. I abandoned and forgot myself  
laying my face on my Beloved;  
all things ceased; I went out from myself,  
leaving my cares  
forgotten among the lilies.

<sup>1</sup> *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, edited by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> The Spanish text of the “Dark Night” and an English translation are reprinted with permission from *The Collected Works*, pp. 50–52.

<sup>3</sup> John Welch, O.Carm., *When Gods Die* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), chapter two.

<sup>4</sup> *Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers*, edited by Regina Siegfried and Robert Morneau (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1989), p. 122.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Tyrrell, *Urgent Longings* (Whitsunville, Massachusetts: House of Affirmation, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled* (New York: Crossroads, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1958), pp. 126–127.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Frohlich, “John’s ‘One Dark Night’: Romantic, Political or Mystical?” *Spiritual Life*, 37 (Spring, 1991), 38–47.

“Spiritual Reading of ‘The Dark Night’, A, “**Mother Behold Your Son: Essays in Honor of Eamon R. Carroll, O. Carm.**, D.W. Buggert, O. Carm., L.P. Rogge, O. Carm., M.T. Wastag. O. Carm, eds., Washington, D.C., 2001: The Carmelite Institute) 357-371.

John of the Cross chose poetry to express his experiences of God. Poetry with its “primordial images” was John's first statement: his prose treatises explicating the poems’ meaning came later. John's use of metaphors and symbols, his “figures, comparisons and similitudes” evoke a sense of his mystical experiences. Fr. Larkin also explores the story line of “The Dark Night”—that of the *Song of Songs*, John’s use of night as symbol, and the theme of “urgent longings” transformed by purification into the peaceful possession of perfect love.