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Metaphors for Metamorphosis: The Poetics of *Kenosis* and the *Apophasis* of Self in Saint John of the Cross

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Abstract: Spanish mystic Saint Juan (John) of the Cross (1542–1591) began writing poetry while imprisoned by his own monastic order. He developed manuals for contemplation, in part, in the form of commentaries on his principal poems. Their first-person narrators were women who underwent metamorphoses in order to pursue love: one became a dove in her despair; another became flame itself; the last disguised herself as a knight. Juan explained that all three represented the soul that is seeking God. For readers, these metaphors could engender cognitive dissonance, through which they might step outside of themselves and move closer to union with the Divine. This process of human self-emptying and self-negation mirrored the self-emptying (*kenosis*) of Christ in traditional Christology and the negation (*apophasis*) of human pretense at knowledge about God in apophatic (“negative”) mysticism.

Keywords: poetry; metaphor; mysticism; apophatic; *kenosis*; gender; othering; Golden Age Spain; union with God; dark night of the soul

1. Introduction

“A poem should not mean/but be”, declared Archibald MacLeish, articulating an absolute esthetic, moral, and hermeneutical stance on poetry (MacLeish 1985). When confronted with questions of human origins and eternal destinations, bluegrass virtuoso Iris DeMent similarly committed to “let the Mystery be” (DeMent 2022). By contrast, many centuries of Jewish and Christian commentators on the biblical Song of Songs have insisted that it provides a glimpse of the inexhaustible fullness of God’s love, despite the fact that the love poem never mentions God (Fishbane 2015, pp. 270–75). Some have concluded that the image-rich dialog between the Song’s male lover and female beloved offers unparalleled insight into the relationship between God and the beloved souls of devoted individuals (Pardes 2019, p. 16). This strand of interpretation provided the foundation for what has become known as “bridal mysticism” (Susan E. Hames, C.S.J., in Downey 1993, p. 106).

Such was the approach of Spanish mystic Saint Juan de la Cruz (also known as John of the Cross, 1542–1591). Moreover, he stood in the tradition of apophatic (“negative”) mysticism, which emphasizes the intellectual unknowability and indescribability of God, and asserts, paradoxically, that humans can achieve intimate spiritual union with God (Cross and Livingstone 2005, pp. 88–89). The primary purpose of Juan’s writings was to guide others, devoted lay people and fellow Discalced Carmelites alike, toward such a union. To that end, each of Juan’s major works also functioned as a prose commentary on one of his poems.

Ostensibly, Juan began writing poetry without that purpose in mind. After deciding that the Discalced reform was a divisive threat, the leadership of the established Carmelite



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order undertook punitive measures against reformers, such as Juan. They kidnapped him, confined him to a small cell, and pressured him to recant. One of his jailers eventually showed some mercy and permitted Juan some paper and a pen. In the privations of those nine months of confinement, Juan began writing poetry. Following his escape, manuscripts in hand, and in the course of his subsequent pastoral duties, he expanded his poems, including the one that was an overt adaptation of the Song of Songs. He wrote new ones, too, and sang old and new alike for the nuns in his care. They sang with him and asked questions about what the lyrics meant (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez in [John of the Cross 1991](#), p. 42). In that communal context, Juan realized that his poems were viable vehicles for guiding others on their contemplative journeys—the highest heights of which he personally claimed to have attained ([Thompson 2008](#), p. 116; [John of the Cross 1991](#), p. 461). Proper theologian that he was, Juan would let neither the Mystery nor his own poems be.

The journey toward union with God inevitably inflicted pain upon all who attempted it. Highlighting this, Juan's prose alternated between expounding the contours of humans' potential upward ascent and troubleshooting potential pitfalls along the way. His metaphors connected the realm of the senses with the Ineffable, facilitating his task as contemplative spiritual director par excellence. Indeed, the darkness of night and the steepness of a mountain were two of the dominant metaphors in his corpus. As shorthand, later commentators labeled the spiritual trials he charted as the "dark night of the soul" ([Peers 1944](#), p. 80).

Even though there will always be a gap between what a mystic knows and what they can explain, they may use poetic language to capture more than ordinary prose would allow. In the prolog of his *Spiritual Canticle* (Redaction B), Saint Juan explained why:

Who can describe in writing the understanding [God] gives to loving souls in whom [God] dwells? And who can express with words the experience [God] imparts to them? Who, finally, can explain the desires [God] gives them? Certainly, no one can! Not even they who receive these communications. As a result[,] these persons let something of their experience overflow in figures, comparisons and similitudes, and from the abundance of their spirit pour out secrets and mysteries rather than rational explanations ([John of the Cross 1991](#), p. 469).

Juan's explanation conveys the kind of "unsaying" that scholar of mysticism Michael Sells identified: "Rather than pointing to an object, apophatic language attempts to evoke in the reader an event that is—in its movement beyond structures of self and other, subject and object—structurally analogous to the event of mystical union" ([Sells 1994](#), p. 10). In this way, mystics may speak not so much to convey information as to make the Mystery more fully present to their listeners.

Juan's particular brand of unsaying engendered a kind of *kenosis*, a self-emptying that paralleled that of Christ, who, in the words given by the Apostle Paul, "though He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied [*ekenosen*] Himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. [...] He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:6–8, NRSVUE). According to subsequent theologians, *kenosis* could involve anything from Christ emptying Himself of His divinity, to Christ simply taking on physical human limitations ([Cross and Livingstone 2005](#), p. 928). According to Juan, those who would follow Christ to the utmost and become one with Him were similarly required to empty themselves.

In effect, this was an *apophasis* ("negation") of self. By definition, apophatic mysticism consists of the personal pursuit of God in the face of the fundamental intellectual unknowability of God; however rich this pursuit may be affectively, it entails a denial

of the possibility of affirmative knowledge about God, hence the title of the anonymous 14th-century *Cloud of Unknowing* (Harvey D. Egan, S.J., in Downey 1993, pp. 700–1). One distinctive element of Juan’s apophaticism was its orientation toward the human who was seeking God. Those who would draw near to God must not merely forget what they think they know about God; they must unknow themselves.

One needed to become a new creation. Consistent with Juan’s scholastic psychology, this purification process emptied the lower operations of the soul (*psyche*): the passions, affections, appetites, bad habits, and senses; and reoriented the higher faculties of the soul to the theological virtues: the intellect to faith, the memory to hope, and the will to love (John of the Cross 1991, pp. 167–68, 552–53). Once purified—or, as Juan variously put it, “emptied”, “darkened”, “made naked”—these faculties could be united with each other and with God (San Juan de la Cruz 2007, pp. 204–7). The process had an active phase, in which one was to do deliberately the work of emptying oneself; and a passive phase, in which God did the work, to which a willing soul would submit, no matter the cost. Both oneself and God needed to peel away one’s old self. This was consistent with Juan’s Aristotelean conviction that “two contraries cannot coexist in one subject” and that, in order for the soul to achieve union with God, God and the virtues needed to expunge the soul’s imperfections, even the things that had made her who she was (John of the Cross 1991, p. 402). How could it not hurt? In effect, in order to become one with the Unknown who was God, one needed to become unknown, estranged from all created things and a stranger to one’s former self.

This self-estrangement implicitly entailed a reorientation toward the Other, whether toward an animal, toward an inanimate object in the process of becoming a force of nature, or toward one’s fellow humans who least resembled oneself. The fundamental purpose of this essay is to make explicit that theme, which runs implicitly throughout Juan’s work. The narrators of Juan’s major poems were women in processes of becoming and unbecoming. They were partially interchangeable, for each personified the soul who was seeking God. In the “Spiritual Canticle”, she transformed into a dove and back. In the “Living Flame of Love”, she became fire itself. In the “Dark Night”, she disguised herself as a knight in order to join her male lover on the ramparts. Regardless of the genders of Juan’s readers, he set them up to identify with the Other through her. It was one thing for the Apostle Paul to state as a vague generalization that, “in Christ, there is neither male nor female” (Galatians 3:28). Juan provided guidance for how one might apply such realizations to oneself.

As metaphors for the soul, these women and their (un)becoming recall the observation of Paul Ricoeur that metaphors stand in dynamic and multivalent relationships to what they represent (Ricoeur 2003, p. 76). In each instance, the narrator both was and was not the reader’s soul and herself and whatever she was in the process of becoming. Juan’s conflicting layers of meaning invited readers’ imaginations to embrace Otherness and in-betweenness, even to the point of abandoning imagination altogether. In that process, Juan’s metaphors could serve as midwives to readers’ intellects, memories, and wills, unifying them in faith, hope, and love. Only then could the emptied and integrated soul become filled with God.

2. She (Un)Sees

Juan’s metaphors could engage, alienate, and transform readers whether they realized it or not. This becomes clear in the context of Juan’s extensive teachings on imagery. Because Ultimate Truth lay beyond what the senses or intellect could grasp, sensory experiences and their intellectual representations could get in the way. Visions from God were no exception. Juan proclaimed, “individuals must not fix the eyes of their souls on that rind of the figure and object supernaturally accorded to the exterior senses, such as [auditory]

locutions and words to the sense of hearing; visions [...] to the sense of sight; fragrance to the sense of smell; [...] and other delights” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 209). One needed to strip the intellect of all images, whether as perceived by the senses or received supernaturally. Even when these were of Divine origin, they still concerned the mere surface of things. Troubleshooting such potential distractions was a focus of much of the *Ascent of Mount Carmel*. That Juan peppered his exhortations with souls’ eyes, the “rind” of reality, supernatural light, and other vivid metaphors was an ironic but strategic choice on his part, as the below discussion will reveal.

Juan cautioned that “a soul must strip [her]self of everything pertaining to creatures [...] so that when everything unlike and unconformed to God is cast out, [she] may receive the likeness of God” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 163). Yes, “God is ever present in the soul” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 163). But to receive the requisite grace and love to experience the fullness of union with God, one needed to “strip off all that is not of God” (San Juan de la Cruz 2007, p. 205). To embrace this union with the One-who-is-already-within, a person needed to step outside of themselves, cease self-seeking activity, and stop pursuing what was no longer spiritually nourishing:

Seeking oneself in God is the same as looking for the caresses and consolations of God. Seeking God in oneself entails not only the desire to do without these consolations for God’s sake, but also the inclination to choose for love of Christ all that is most distasteful[,] whether in God or in the world; and this is what loving God means (John of the Cross 1991, p. 170).

Paradoxically, while stepping outside of oneself, one needed to avoid filling one’s intellect with conceptions of external, perceptible things. These would be impediments for intellects that would be filled with the presence of God:

Before dealing with faith, the proper and adequate means of union with God, we should prove how nothing created or imagined can serve the intellect as a proper means for union with God, and how all that can be grasped by the intellect would serve as an obstacle rather than a means if a person were to become attached to it (John of the Cross 1991, p. 173).

One needed to become estranged from one’s very perceptions of the world.

Through what process should this detachment occur? Those who wished to make progress needed to cease their habit of praying in words and through meditating on specific images, whether in their mind’s eyes or with their body’s. Apophatic after all, Juan was unyielding in asserting the limits of discursive meditation: “Those who imagine God through some of these figures (as an imposing fire or as brightness, or through any other forms) and think that [God] is somewhat like them are very far from [God]” (John of the Cross 1991, pp. 186–87).

Ironically, contemplative souls who were nearing union with God were especially likely to receive visions and locutions. Juan advised his readers to ignore them: “remain detached, divested, pure, simple, and without any mode or method” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 201). Let them do their passive work. But do not hold onto them. “These visions cannot serve the intellect as a proximate means for union with God because they deal with creatures, which bear no proportion or essential conformity to God. [...] Souls should not store up or treasure the forms of these visions impressed within, neither should they have the desire to cling to them” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 243). Contemplatives had more important things to do:

It is more exact to say that [...] the work is done in the soul and the knowledge and delight are already produced [by authentic visions and locutions], than that the soul does anything besides attentively loving God and refraining from the

desire to feel or see anything. In this loving awareness the soul receives God's self-communication passively, just as people receive light passively without doing anything else but keeping their eyes open. This reception of the light infused supernaturally into the soul is passive knowing (John of the Cross 1991, p. 198).

Otherwise, one would find oneself meditating on the message rather than the Messenger.

That danger was real. Speaking of those who exulted in visions, Juan explained thus: "They think something extraordinary has occurred and that God has spoken, whereas in reality little more than nothing will have happened, or nothing at all, or even less than nothing. For whatever does not engender humility, charity, mortification, holy simplicity, silence, and so on, of what value is it?" (John of the Cross 1991, p. 257). Due to certain popular currents in Spanish mysticism at the time, such as the heretical *Alumbrados* ("Illuminated Ones"), Juan was especially keen to belabor the point (McGinn 2017, pp. 45–50, 238; see also Brennan 1973, pp. 96–98). The true path of faith was not bright or ostentatious. For this reason, Juan spoke of "the abyss of faith" and "the darkness of faith" experienced by those en route to union with God (John of the Cross 1991, p. 257).

Why, then, did Juan write manuals for contemplation in the form of commentaries on poems so overflowing with discursive images? The explanation most consistent with Juan's theology is that his poetic imagery functioned like natural and supernatural imagery. After all, if a poem were divinely inspired, then its imagery, too, would be supernatural, at least in part. This is consistent with what we know of Juan's practice of writing. For instance, he wrote the "Living Flame of Love" during a period of sustained contemplation (Brenan 1973, p. 104).

Juan's poetic images would have their effect, but contemplative readers should let them be and remain indifferent to them. Otherwise, they risked worshipping created things or, at the very least, being distracted by them, rather than stepping closer to their Creator through them. Readers needed to break free "from the fetters and straits of the senses" (John of the Cross 1991, p. 384). That was Juan's austere stance. Trust not your eyes, ears, smell, taste, or touch. They cannot save you. Trust alone in your God. This leap of faith was the price of spiritual liberation.

3. She Flies

That Juan's imagery invited readers' intellects to let go of images becomes clear in the sweep of the "Spiritual Canticle". Juan began writing the poem in prison and expanded it afterward, building one *Spiritual Canticle* commentary around an earlier version (A) and another around a reordered redaction (B, the version used here throughout) (Brenan 1973, p. 102; John of the Cross 1991, p. 467). In many ways, the *Spiritual Canticle* is the optimal starting point for analyzing the relationship between Juan's poetry and his contemplative theology, for it alone among Juan's works represents a proper commentary and charts the full sweep of the contemplative journey, from outset to consummation. Juan provided an explanation of some of the spiritual significance of the elements of each stanza, often revealing multiple layers of meaning relevant to those seeking union with God.

A dialectic of presence and absence runs throughout the "Canticle". This is fitting for, from a Christian standpoint, faith, hope, and love are each in their own ways defined by absence. The Epistle to the Hebrews explained that "faith is the evidence of things unseen" (Hebrews 11:1). The Apostle Paul insisted, "hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what he already has?" (Romans 8:24). Love, too, in the form of Divine *eros* in Juan's bridal mysticism, fundamentally represented a longing for the One whose presence was presently perceived as absence, a source of anguish for His beloved.

Stanza 1 opened with her lament:

Where have you hidden yourself

my Beloved? You left me groaning.

Like a stag, you fled,

leaving me wounded behind.

I went after You but You were gone (San Juan de la Cruz 2007, p. 568; translation mine and in all subsequent).

As with all his prose commentaries, Juan quickly revealed that the narrator represented the soul in search of union with God. As noted above, God was already present within her. Yet she perceived God as absent. It would be an error, Juan explained, for her to seek God anywhere outside of herself. Although Juan metaphorically depicted her search as an outward journey through distant landscapes and “through borderlands”, she really needed to seek God within (San Juan de la Cruz 2007, p. 568; John of the Cross 1991, p. 480).

God needed to wound the soul in order to purify her, so that she could embrace the fullness of God’s presence. Juan explained the process thus:

The pain and sorrow I ordinarily suffer in your absence was not enough for me, but having inflicted on me a deeper wound of love with your arrow, and increasing my desire to see you, you flee as swiftly as the stag and do not let yourself be captured even for a moment (John of the Cross 1991, p. 484).

Here, Juan mixed the metaphor. God was at once the hunter and the hunted. Presenting himself as an exemplar for others seeking union with God, Juan spoke to God directly as if God were his husband:

My Spouse, in that touch and wound of your love you have not only drawn my soul away from all things, but have also made [her] go out from [her]self—indeed, it even seems that you draw [her] out of the body—and you have raised [her] up to yourself while [she] was calling after you, now totally detached [from everything else] so as to be attached to you (John of the Cross 1991, p. 485).

Juan here emphasized that this detachment would cause excruciating pain for a not-yet-consummated bride of Christ.

In stanza 2, the ardently searching narrator asked for help from those who might have seen her Lover:

Shepherds, you who are going

up through the hillside corrals,

if by chance you see

the One I love most, tell Him

that I am ill, in pain, and dying (San Juan de la Cruz 2007, p. 568).

Juan offered multiple possible meanings of “shepherds”. They could represent the soul’s “desires, affections, and moanings”; or they could represent “hierarchies and choirs of angels”, especially in their role as messengers between God and the soul. Regarding this plurality of possibility, Juan concluded, “Whether, then, these shepherds refer to the affections or to the angels, the soul longs that they all be helps and intermediaries with her Beloved” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 487).

A comparable multiplicity of meaning appears later in the commentary. In stanza 30, “cool mornings” could be the soul’s “time of youth”, “acts of love” pleasing to God, and/or “works done in difficulty and dryness of spirit” (San Juan de la Cruz 2007, p. 716; John of the Cross 1991, p. 592). In stanza 36, a “thicket” could be God’s “splendid works and profound judgments”, “God’s wisdom”, and/or a “multitude of trials and tribulations” that were “delightful and beneficial” to the soul, as she immersed herself in God’s wisdom (San Juan de la Cruz 2007, p. 740; John of the Cross 1991, pp. 613–15).

According to the author himself in these examples, Juan's work was no straightforward allegory in which each image had a 1:1 correspondence with one and only one specific deeper meaning. This represents further evidence that Juan chose his own imagery-filled poems as points of departure for guiding others in their contemplative journeys because of imagery's passive, cumulative impact on readers, especially amid the divergent interpretations Juan offered. This plurality of meaning engenders cognitive dissonance, which mid-20th-century psychologist Louis Festinger defined as a disruption in the harmony for which humans strive in trying to make sense of the world; in literary studies, dissonance theory has arisen to analyze cultural manifestations of this (Syed 2019, pp. 4–5). Although arrived at independently, some of the following analysis adopts a similar approach.

In his commentary on the ensuing stanzas of the "Canticle", Juan explained that all prior steps had been preparation for the soul's journey into union with God. Knowledge of self was an important starting point. Then came knowledge of other created things. Only on those foundations was knowledge of God possible (John of the Cross 1991, p. 494). According to Juan, the kind of knowledge that contemplatives achieved of such things was *conocimiento*, a knowledge of tacit personal familiarity distinct from informational, discursive knowledge and from wisdom (John of the Cross 1991, pp. 387, 439). Juan's metaphors propelled readers from self-knowledge, through self-alienation by means of creature-knowledge and self-identification with other creatures, toward union with God, even to the point of leaving knowledge of creatures and themselves behind.

Later still, Juan admitted that an inarticulable something from God lay beyond all language—something lethal to souls who were not ready to receive it:

Besides the fact that these creatures wound me with the thousand graceful things they explain about [God], there is a certain 'I-don't-know-what' that one feels is yet to be said, something unknown and still to be spoken, and a sublime trace of God as yet uninvestigated but revealed to the soul, a lofty understanding of God that cannot be put into words. [. . .] If what I understand wounds me with love, what I do not understand completely, yet have sublime experience of, is death to me (John of the Cross 1991, p. 502).

And so, the soul needed to prepare herself.

Reiterating her woundedness, she lamented in stanza 9:

You wounded this heart.

Why won't you heal it?

You stole it from me.

Why abandon it like this?

Why not keep what you stole? (San Juan de la Cruz 2007, p. 569)

The poem labeled the divine Lover as a thief. Juan's commentary on the stanza further depicted the "soul wounded by love" as "a stag wounded by a poison arrow", restless and searching for a remedy (John of the Cross 1991, p. 504). Juan's mixed metaphors become paradoxes: she lacked her heart, because it had been stolen; yet she still possessed it, wounded, poisoned, and in need of healing; but the poisoner Himself was the cure. She spoke the dissonant language of distraught love.

Their positions reversed in stanza 13. The soul, in its despair in God's apparent absence, would leave the body (John of the Cross 1991, p. 520). Representing this, the narrator gave up her search, transformed into a bird, and flew away—only for her Lover, finally, to break His silence mid-line:

Turn your eyes away, Beloved
for I go to fly!

Come back, my dove,
for the wounded stag on the hillside
glimpses the wind of your flight,
breathes the fresh air (San Juan de la Cruz 2007, p. 570).

Like her, He had been wounded by His love's absence (see also San Juan de la Cruz 2007, p. 736; cf. John of the Cross 1991, p. 609). And Juan also depicted Him as a dying, hunted animal. That fluidity of identity, even between species, struck at the edge of what Juan ultimately succeeded in articulating, as did the mutuality of their love and of their woundedness. Though glimpsed only fleetingly, if at all, God was close—a source of pain for those who loved God, just as they, too, were sources of pain to God in God's love for them.

For the narrator-bride, the painful disorientation of alienation gave way to the blissful reorientation of union. Roughly mid-poem, in double stanza 14/15, her Groom became one with their shared landscape:

My Beloved is the mountains,
the solitary forest valleys,
the undiscovered islands,
the singing rivers,
the whistle of the loving winds,
the peaceful night
at the rising of the dawn,
the muted music,
the sonorous solitude,
a feast that inspires love and restores (San Juan de la Cruz 2007, p. 570).

Juan's commentary explained that each nature image in the double stanza stood for some attribute of God, who possessed the "height[. . .] vast[ness, and] beaut[y]" of mountains and the "strange[. . .] singular" otherness of foreign islands (John of the Cross 1991, pp. 527–28). Juan went further, quoting the Gospel: "Inasmuch as the soul in this case is united with God, she feels that all things are God, as St. John experienced when he said: [. . .] That which was made, in him was life[']" (John of the Cross 1991, p. 527, quoting John 1:4). At this point in her journey, the soul did not see God directly. Yet God had, in effect, enabled her to perceive God in all things. In Juan's words, "the soul feels that God is all things for her" (John of the Cross 1991, p. 527). In their shared wilderness retreat, she perceived the beautiful landscape, its sounds, and even the growing light as synonymous with her Beloved. As depicted by Juan, such were the power of true love and the beauty of God.

In a handful of stanzas, His voice provided the narration. The most notable example is the only other double stanza, stanza 20/21:

To the flitting birds,
lions, stags, bounding bucks,
mountains, valleys, riverbanks,
waters, winds, fires,
and the fears of the vigil nights:
by the lush lyres
and sirens' song I command you:
cease your tumult

and touch not our wall,
that my bride might sleep more secure (San Juan de la Cruz 2007, p. 667).

In a reversal of her perceptions of Him, He perceived her remaining “imperfections, rebellions, and imperfect habits” in the landscape around them, especially her “digressions”, “the acrimony and impetuosity of the irascible [i.e., contrary to love] power”, “concupiscible [i.e., misguided in love], appetitive power”, and “cowardice” in the forms of various fauna (John of the Cross 1991, pp. 551, 553).

She perceived Him in the world around her and He perceived her in the same, but with far different results. Distinctness within mutuality defined their relationship. In this union, she recognized in herself a regal and martial aspect. Quoting the Bridegroom’s declaration in Song of Songs 6:4, “You are terrible, like an army in array”, Juan noted that she was now dressed as a warrior queen, even amid the flowers (John of the Cross 1991, p. 595).

After the narrator–soul of the “Canticle” had grown further in her love, she forgot all else but her Beloved, even losing “the flock I was following” (San Juan de la Cruz 2007, p. 703). Readers discover that she had been a shepherdess. She admitted, as if with a shrug, “I no longer watch my flock./I have no other task,/no other duty, but to love” (stanza 28 verses 3–5, San Juan de la Cruz 2007, p. 708). Her sheep should have been following her, not the reverse. Juan explained that the flock represented “appetites, satisfactions, and other imperfections” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 580). Rather than merely reverse this dynamic, such that her sheep would follow her, Juan called for the complete abolishing of such distractions. Hers was an all-consuming devotion: “in order not to fail God she failed all that is not God” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 590).

4. She (Un)Imagines

The metamorphoses of the “Canticle”—of the narrator into a dove and back, and of her Beloved from a stag into a man—invited not only readers’ intellects to turn to faith, but also their memories to turn to hope by means of imagination. In Juan’s scholastic psychology, the faculty of memory included imagination (part of which consisted of what Juan called “phantasy”, a distinction that need not concern us here). Imagination relied on the raw material of memory. One could not imagine something the likes of which one had not seen, so the thinking went. At the very least, whatever one might imagine, each of its elements would be cobbled together from what one had encountered in real life, one way or another (John of the Cross 1991, p. 239).

That imaginative capacity of memory brought the soul hope at an essential stage in the process of purification. The narrator of the “Canticle” not only found her Beloved; once she found Him, she could not stop finding Him everywhere and in everything, just as He, too, saw her everywhere. He was her sustenance—“a feast” (stanza 15 line 5). Readers could look forward to that blessed perception, even if they did not yet perceive it. They could imagine a time when they, too, would find the One for Whom they longed. As part of their spiritual growing pains, they had lost the feeling of God’s love. But they would not only find God’s love, they would also experience it beyond all limits. That was the hope against all perceptions and all sentiments, the promise that extended through the earliest phases of the image-filled “Canticle” and its commentary.

But after a point, imagination, too, needed to cease. As Juan proclaimed, “The Bridegroom conjures and commands the useless wanderings of the phantasy and imaginative power to cease once and for all” (John of the Cross 1991, pp. 552–53). From then onward, the ground rules shifted:

when a soul treading the spiritual road has reached such a point that she has lost all roads and natural methods in her communion with God, and no longer seeks [God] by reflections or forms or feelings or by any other way of creatures and the senses,

but has advanced beyond them all and beyond all modes and manners, and enjoys communion with God in faith and love, then it is said that God is her gain, because she has certainly lost all that is not God (John of the Cross 1991, p. 590).

Not all who have lost their way have lost the Way. Juan described the requisite reorientation toward inner stillness still more starkly elsewhere:

Since God is formless and figureless, the memory walks safely when empty of form and figure, and it draws closer to God. The more it leans on the imagination, the farther away it moves from God and the more serious is its danger; for in being what he is—unimaginable—God cannot be grasped by the imagination (John of the Cross 1991, pp. 694–95).

Imagination would cease. Useless wandering and wondering would cease. But hope would prevail in the memory, guiding the soul deeper into Love.

Juan wrote primarily for “beginners” (actually somewhat advanced) and for the “proficient” who had not yet arrived at a state of spiritual wholeness and maturity, which Juan called “perfection” (John of the Cross 1991, pp. 119, 639). It was for such intermediate readers that images and imaginings still had some utility. It was for them that Juan painted so vividly and, by his own admission, so inadequately—as any human words must be—the stages of spiritual development in and beyond which all images and imaginings would become irrelevant.

5. She Burns

The “Living Flame of Love” described the final stage of a soul’s journey toward union with God. Written toward the end of Juan’s life, the poem depicted a love as all-consuming as a fire transforming wood into flames (Brenan 1973, p. 104). Juan’s *Living Flame of Love* commentary explained that the soul “become[s] God through participation in God” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 671). Human *eros*, physical fire, and divine Love here operated as simultaneous layers of meaning.

Even at the outset of the “Living Flame”, the terms had shifted since Juan’s less advanced works. Still grammatically feminine, the soul (*alma*) was herself. Yet she also inhabited the realms of physical fire and violent passion. Stanza 1:

O living Flame of Love,
 You who tenderly pierce
 my soul to her innermost core!
 Because You are not rough,
 go ahead and finish if You so desire.

Rend the veil of this sweet encounter! (San Juan de la Cruz 2007, p. 778).

The commentary confirmed that God wounded the soul by penetrating and burning her, as per her request: “With ardent desire the soul tells the flame, the Holy Spirit, to tear the veil of mortal life now by that sweet encounter in which [the Holy Spirit] truly communicates entirely what [the Holy Spirit] is seemingly about to give each time [the Holy Spirit] encounters [her], that is, complete and perfect glory” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 641). The “Flame of Love” in “the soul transformed in[to] love” was “the Spirit of the Bridegroom”, which was synonymous with the Holy Spirit (John of the Cross 1991, pp. 641–42). He burned and consumed her, even as He refreshed and transformed her.

Juan then explained that the soul was, in fact, being drawn further into God: “But once it has attained the final degree, God’s love has arrived at wounding the soul in [her] ultimate and deepest center, which is to illuminate and transform [her] in [her] whole being, power, and strength, and according to [her] capacity, until [she] appears to be God”

(John of the Cross 1991, p. 645). The soul's center was her teleological destination, like a center of gravity external to herself until her purification was complete. No mortal could arrive at that deepest center until after death, but a foretaste of it was the ultimate goal for any human in this life.

Complete union with God was as delightful as it was final, according to Juan. God was gathering the soul deeper into Godself, transforming her into Him. Then, her pain would be over, and her joy would reach its highest heights: "This delight is so much more intense and tender the stronger and more substantially the soul is transformed and concentrated in[to] God" (John of the Cross 1991, p. 646). Just as they prefer the neutral pronouns "it" for the soul, Juan's standard contemporary English translators Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez prefer the more restrained "transform *in* God", as in this quotation, as if the change were merely a matter of location. However, indicative of the radical nature of Juan's vision, one might better render *transformar en Dios* (which appears throughout his corpus) as "transform *into* God" (emphasis mine). This is consistent with the only sensible way to translate *transformar en* in the 16th century Spanish edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Ovid 1589, pp. 83, 126, 172 et al.; cf. San Juan de la Cruz 2007, pp. 213, 603, 776 et al.; see also John of the Cross 1991, p. 307, where Juan quoted Ovid).

In a paradoxical reversal, Juan explained that to be penetrated by God was to penetrate God:

Before the divine fire is introduced into the substance of the soul and united with [her] through perfect and complete purgation and purity, [her] flame, which is the Holy Spirit, wounds the soul by destroying and consuming the imperfections of [her] bad habits. And this is the work of the Holy Spirit, in which [the Holy Spirit] disposes [her] for divine union and transformation in[to] God through love.

The very fire of love that afterward is united with the soul, glorifying [her], is what previously assailed [her] by purging [her], just as the fire that penetrates a log of wood is the same that first makes an assault on the wood, wounding it with the flame, drying it out, and stripping it of its unsightly qualities until it is so disposed that it can be penetrated and transformed into the fire (John of the Cross 1991, p. 648).

Such was the logic of the convergence of opposites:

For (O wonderful thing!) contraries rise up at this time against contraries—those of the soul against those of God that assail it. [...] They war within the soul, striving to expel one another in order to reign. That is: The virtues and properties of God, extremely perfect, war against the habits and properties of the soul, extremely imperfect; and the soul suffers these two contraries within itself (John of the Cross 1991, p. 649; cf. p. 402).

The soul was a battlefield. She would have peace only once God had defeated her imperfections. Then, the "darkness of God" would become light to her (John of the Cross 1991, p. 651; cf. Psalm 139:12).

Until then, various "veils" blocked her perceptions: "the temporal veil, comprising all creatures"; "the natural [veil], embodying the purely natural inclinations and operations"; and "the sensitive [veil], which consists only of the union of the soul with the body, that is, the [sensory] and animal life" (John of the Cross 1991, p. 653). The veils existed because the soul's union of flesh and spirit separated her from God. Culminating in the death of the ascending soul's mortal body, God needed to "tear" the veils or "burn" them away (John of the Cross 1991, p. 653). This concrete imagery evoked a kind of violent deflowering, while, at the same time, evoking spiritual purification. The veils, then, function as further equivocal metaphors.

The valorization of sexual violence is inherent in the imagery. At the literal level, the issue was not that Juan's narrator failed to provide consent. Her request was clear. The issue was that Juan reinforced the pervasive and longstanding trope that women, even virgins, by default, were hungry for rough sex. One might have the impression that her consent almost went without saying. This might have seemed less fraught had Juan's narrator been someone of his own gender: a woman speaking as a woman, or a man speaking as a man, rather than in the often compelling but always complicated in-between.

The deeper issue is that this imagery is indicative of the ways in which Juan's version of God perpetrated violence. Juan's commentary underscored the issue: "The more wounded the lover, the healthier the lover is, and the cure caused by love is to wound and inflict wound upon wound" (John of the Cross 1991, p. 660). This abuse was not purely rhetorical. In an era of colonization, Juan's theology assumed the logic of absolute domination. The inner conquest of the soul by God paralleled the global conquest sought by the Spanish empire, in which Church and Crown worked as one (Cervantes 2021, pp. xv–xviii, 19–20, 33). One glimpse of Juan's enthusiasm for this enterprise may be evident in the "Canticle". Kavanaugh and Rodriguez propose that the "undiscovered islands" (stanza 14 line 3) may represent somewhere in the Philippines or the Americas (San Juan de la Cruz 2007, p. 570; John of the Cross 1991, p. 527). Contemporary interpreters should not take for granted that Juan's conceptualization of God was a God of hierarchical domination. This default in Juan's context and in much of Juan's corpus makes his deviations from it stand out all the more boldly. Such is the case of Juan's vision of God's suffering, noted in the above discussion of the *Canticle*. Saints may deviate from the oppressive norms of their day, even if inconsistently.

6. She (Un)Loves

The soul's process of purification culminated in the harmonization of the faculties of the soul with the theological virtues. Intellect, memory, and will became one in faith, hope, and love. The orientation of the will wholly toward love entailed the complete conquest of the lower operations of the soul. Involuntary habits, the senses, and appetites were brought under submission (John of the Cross 1991, pp. 648, 704, 714). The affections were made pure and given wholly over to God, the solitary object of desire (John of the Cross 1991, pp. 657, 708–9). In effect, the soul became unloving toward all else.

Juan concluded that the union between God and the soul "is more wonderful than all that can be said of it", reminding readers of the limits of language (John of the Cross 1991, p. 595). Comparing God's love for the beloved soul to "the love that Jonathan bore David [...] so intimate that it knitted his soul to David's" in 1 Samuel 18, Juan asserted:

If the love of one man for another was that strong, what will be the tie caused through the soul's love for God, the Bridegroom; especially since God here is the principal lover, who in the omnipotence of his fathomless love absorbs the soul in[to] himself more efficaciously and forcibly than a torrent of fire would devour a drop of morning dew that usually rises and dissolves in the air! (John of the Cross 1991, p. 596)

In order to fully receive that love, the will needed to rein in the lower operations of the soul and turn away from all that was not God: "Just as approaching God through the affection of the will gives rise to every good, so withdrawal from [God] through creature affection breeds every harm and evil in the soul" (John of the Cross 1991, p. 297). Every potential action, even the decision not to act, was a step toward or away from the way of God. Only a soul governed by a purified will could consistently remain on that path. And later, God "purges" even the affections from the will (John of the Cross 1991, p. 410).

7. She Becomes Him

A forbidden romance provided Juan's most enduring metaphor for the soul's pure and austere pursuit of and union with God. The narrator of the "Dark Night" left home surreptitiously:

1. On a dark night,
anxious, enflamed [*inflamada*] by love
—oh blessed fate!—
I went out unnoticed [*sin ser notada*]
while my house slept.
2. Into the darkness and certain [*segura*]
by the secret ladder and disguised [*disfrazada*]
—oh blessed fate!—
into the darkness and in a masked helm [*en celada*]
while my house already slept (San Juan de la Cruz 2007, p. 68).

Based on the feminine *-a* adjective endings, the narrator's gender was obvious in the Spanish original. As British theologian and literary scholar Colin Thompson has noted, "A male author recounting a sexual encounter from the female point of view is not uncommon in the traditions of *cancionero* poetry", a genre that influenced much of Juan's style (Thompson 2008, p. 86). Thompson and numerous other commentators acknowledge her gender, though English translations inevitably erase it from the text of the poem itself, a result of the language's lack of gender inflection.

The narrator's gender has theological significance. American philosopher Daniel Dombrowski has rightly insisted that Juan's personification of the soul as feminine served to highlight not any kind of presumed weakness, but rather her complete and uncompromising devotion: "This 'woman' detaches herself from things so as to be attached to her lover and enter the spiritual marriage" (Dombrowski 1992, p. 100). If this were the only gendered element of the soul's personification in the "Dark Night", then it would have been especially simple for the nuns in Juan's care to identify with her. His fellow monks and other male devotees, too, would long have been accustomed to identifying with the female beloved in the standard medieval Christian interpretations of the Song of Songs (Susan E. Hames, C.S.J., in Downey 1993, p. 106).

However, hers was no straightforward femininity. In order to pursue her love, the narrator of the "Dark Night" changed her outward appearance. Her specific attire, which no standard English translations acknowledge, was not a generic disguise, whatever that might be, but a suit of armor. She wore a sallet, a helmet noteworthy for restricting vision to a narrow slit when paired with a visor. That is the best literal translation of *en celada* (stanza 2 line 4), which Kavanaugh and Rodriguez render "in concealment" (John of the Cross 1991, p. 535). Other English translators make similar choices (e.g., Nicholson's "concealed" in Brennan 1973, p. 145). It is as if, by default, commentators have been in a rush to explain away the literal meaning in order to arrive at the allegorical. One ought not use the literal to exclude other layers of meaning, but neither ought one ignore it.

Juan's *Dark Night* commentary confirmed that the narrator-soul was wearing armor, elaborating the significance of its various parts: she wore "the white tunic of faith"; atop this, she placed "a green coat of mail", representing hope; and then she covered these with the "precious red toga" of charity (John of the Cross 1991, pp. 447–48). Her disguise allowed her, at once, to "represent and signify [her] heart's affections" and to "better dissemble [herself] from [her] enemies" (John of the Cross 1991, p. 446). Her disguise affirmed and revealed her but also hid and protected her, misleading her enemies. Moreover, this attire is

consistent with the rhetoric Juan used in one of his letters, when he referred to his nuns as “strong soldiers” called to “dryness and emptiness in all things so they might be victorious in battle” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 740).

Her sallet was of particular significance because, according to Juan, it was the “helmet of salvation” from 1 Thessalonians 5:8. It provided protection, but its visor limited her vision and, therefore, meant that she “may look toward heavenly things, and no more” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 447). Lest readers identify themselves too fully with masculine chivalry, in the same breath, Juan likened the soul’s focus on God to that of a “handmaid toward her mistress” (John of the Cross 1991, p. 447, citing Psalm 123:2). Yet Juan’s description of the soul-as-woman-in-armor was so intertwined with his description of the soul-as-bride-of-Christ that, throughout their translation of the relevant commentary (*Night II.21*), even Kavanaugh and Rodriguez cannot escape referring to her with “she/her” pronouns. Toward the climax of her process toward union with God in Juan’s commentary, the erasure of her gender becomes rhetorically impossible—ironic, given the passage’s potential to negate or at least trouble the readers’ own gendered self-understandings.

The narrator’s disguise would have been readily recognizable to Juan’s original readers, due not only to Juan’s commentary but also the fact that armor was a standard disguise for women in that era. Women dressed as knights were a common feature in medieval Spanish lore. For example, according to local legend, Jimena Blázquez, the wife of the mayor, led the women of Ávila to disguise themselves in their husbands’ armor in order to intimidate the Muslim army besieging the city (O’Keefe 2020, p. 25). The *mujer varonil* (baron-like or knightly woman) blossomed into a widespread character trope in Golden Age Spanish theater (McKendrick 1974, pp. ix–x). In addition to the widely publicized account of Catalina/Antonio de Eruaso (d. 1650) in the subsequent generation, Juan’s contemporaries included Inés Suarez (d. 1580) and María de Estrada (b. 1547), real life “women who fought or dressed as men”, in the words of language and literature scholar Eva Mendieta (Mendieta 2009, p. 168). Juan’s contemporaries possessed numerous precedents for the liminal gender role played by the narrator of the “Dark Night”.

Juan found in the first two stanzas such a wellspring of meaning that he built two prose works around them: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, which digressed from the poem and functioned more properly as a manual for contemplation, or more specifically for navigating the active night of the senses and the active night of the spirit; and *The Dark Night*, which commented again on the first two stanzas, as well as part of the third, but now in reference to the passive nights of the senses and of the spirit (John of the Cross 1991, pp. 101, 353). The complementarity of the two treatises was such that Juan once referred to them in one breath as *The Dark Night of the Ascent of Mount Carmel*, perhaps reflecting a composite vision for a unified work that never came to be (John of the Cross 1991, p. 651). Without naming them by name, the insights of the *Ascent* and *Dark Night* into the purification of the intellect, memory, and will have been discussed extensively above. The consensus is that Juan must have written the poem shortly after his escape from prison (John of the Cross 1991, p. 102; Brennan 1973, p. 103). One may perceive a coded prison break in the plot of the opening stanzas.

On the one hand, as Juan’s literary interpreters and a handful of theologians have noted, the poems have a life of their own, rich in potential meaning beyond anything touched in the commentaries (Tavard 1988, p. 57). Some have gone so far as to suggest that the “Dark Night” should be interpreted as a secular love poem, independent of any religious referent (José Nieto in Thompson 2008, p. 85). On the other hand, even though Juan’s commentaries on the “Dark Night” draw short of anything beyond the third stanza, his Discalced Carmelite heirs Kavanaugh and Rodriguez insist that “we can suppose than an explanation of the remaining stanzas would have drawn [Juan] into a lengthy

elaboration of the life of union, a subject whose features he treats extensively in other works" (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez in [John of the Cross 1991](#), p. 354). In other words, one may surmise an interpretation of the remaining stanzas wholly consistent with Juan's teachings elsewhere.

Like her identity, the narrator-soul's path was a secret. She stepped out at night and ascended by a hidden way:

3. Into that blessed night
in secret, that no one might see me
and that I might look at nothing
no guiding light, other than
the one burning in my heart.

4. That light guided me
more surely than the noonday sun
to where One was waiting
Whom I knew well

where no one else would be ([San Juan de la Cruz 2007](#), p. 68).

Protected from any potential dangers and distractions, she chose to ignore everything except for her Lover. This was consistent with the darkening of the senses and of the intellect already so extensively expounded by Saint Juan, as summarized above.

The poem continues thus:

5. O night how you guided me!
O night more lovely than the dawn!
O night that united
Lover with beloved,

transformed beloved [*amada*] into Lover [*Amado*]! ([San Juan de la Cruz 2007](#), p. 68)

She became Him in their union. Even at the level of grammatical gender in the poem, the feminine (*amada*) became masculine (*Amado*).

In the medieval European conceptualization of gender, the transformation of a woman into a man was analogous to a human soul's transformation into God. Historical theologian Nicole Reibe has noted, "in the Middle Ages there was only one gender; men represented its completion, while women represented a not fully formed version of it" ([Reibe 2023](#); cf. [Laqueur 1990](#), pp. 25–27). Indicative of this, Aquinas explained as follows: "As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten" ([Aquinas 2012](#), p. 418). Women were, by definition, incomplete. By contrast, men represented perfection. Even if one should discard its original premises, that analogy's conclusion was consistent with Juan's schema: all human souls were incomplete and only found their fulfillment in union with God.

Her solitary purpose paralleled that of the narrator-soul in the "Canticle", as if the same basic plot played out in a different genre and setting: rather than a pastoral scene, in which the passionate love-seeker abandoned her flock, the beloved donned the masculine trappings of chivalry and snuck to the ramparts. The poem ends as follows:

6./7. Upon my flowery chest,
saved for Him alone,
He remained asleep
and I watched Him
and my visor let in the wind of cedars

the wind of the battlement
 when I parted His hair
 with His serene hand
 on my neck He wounded
 and transfixed all my senses.

8. I stayed and forgot myself
 bent over my Lover.
 Everything stopped.

I abandoned myself, abandoned

my caution, forgotten among the lilies (San Juan de la Cruz 2007, pp. 68–69).

Jarring dissonances and questions abound. Were the lovers still one? Had the couple transcended beyond merely physical union to the metaphysical? *Unum ad perpetuum*? Her visor was letting in the wind. Had she left her helmet on? Did she put it back on? Or was she now seeing the world through His eyes?

If one may suspend disbelief—or, perhaps better said, embrace the possibility of union—one may claim that she was herself but also Him. Her perspective was at one with His, yet to her anguish. She was losing her existence as a separate self. However ill-advised that dynamic may be in a romantic relationship between two literal humans, this was Juan’s ideal for humans entering into union with God. As in the “Living Flame”, this transformation explained her pain.

Her Lover slept and somehow still wounded her, even to her delight. Some translations blame the wind (Kavanaugh and Rodriguez in John of the Cross 1991, p. 51; cf. Nicholson in Brennan 1973, p. 147). The Spanish was ambiguous but, in the end, it did not make a difference. If the transformation of the narrator’s perceptions in the “Dark Night” was consistent with that in the “Canticle” and its comprehensive commentary, her Lover was everything. God was the ultimate source, goal, and destination of this all-consuming, all-demanding, excruciating, and exquisite love. Resting in His embrace was the only thing that mattered. As in the “Living Flame” and its commentary, arriving at that destination would cost her everything, even her very self.

8. Conclusions

A lovelorn maiden wandered far and turned into a dove in her despair. Only then did she spy her Beloved in the form of a dying deer. Together, they bore witness to and healed each other’s wounds. She saw His perfection in the beauty of the landscape around them. He saw her imperfections in the same. In the solace of their wilderness solitude together, they became one. That was the version of the story told by the “Spiritual Canticle”.

Someone—another woman, the same woman, or perhaps a smaller flame, in any case likened to kindling—became consumed by a raging fire, which was at once the fire of Love, who was God. He hurt her, but she invited Him, pleaded with Him to consume her, to enter her, even as she entered Him. The imagery and the emphasis were different, but the “Living Flame of Love” captured the end of a story with the same basic trajectory.

A woman snuck out at night, disguised as a knight. She knew where her Lover would be. On the ramparts, they became one. Without meaning to, He wounded her, even as she forgot all else and her every perception became consumed with her awareness of Him. No matter how different in the telling, at least in Juan’s interpretation of it, scratch beneath the surface and the narrative formula was fundamentally the same: ardent desire, earnest search, excruciating purification, and blissful union.

The would-be dove, the flame soul, and the woman in armor wore different metaphorical skins. The details of their struggles bring a striking distinctness to Juan's respective works, which are complementary rather than redundant, even given their voluminousness. Some might need hope in the midst of despair, even as they consider whether flying from this life would be preferable. Some might be ready to plunge into spiritual self-effacement, a kind of consummation as conflagration. Others might be in search of a protective disguise that is also a form of self-affirmation. These differences and the metaphorical women who embodied them mean that Juan can speak of the plight of individuals in very different circumstances.

But, according to Juan, each of these women represented the same thing: a soul that was seeking God, en route to union with Him. In Juan's commentaries, then, these women were three-but-one, humanity as Trinity. Rather than being co-equal to each other as different people, they simply represented outwardly different protagonists in complementary versions of the same basic story. Just as the Incarnation, God becoming human, is at the heart of Christian theology, humans becoming divine through Christ is at the heart of Christian mysticism. Like other bridal mystics, Juan devoted his life to telling that love story.

Juan's brand of poetic narrative lent itself to readers' self-emptying (*kenosis*) and self-negation (*apophasis*). As one of his consistent mystical-pedagogical tactics, he developed metaphors that lent themselves to generating cognitive dissonance for his readers. The metamorphoses of his narrator-protagonists represented the fullest embodiment of this. How could she be a human and yet fly away as a bird? How could she burn and yet somehow remain herself, even as she was part of the greater Flame? How could she put on armor without rousing her whole house? Juan's explanations of these images raised further questions. How could she live and yet be on the edge of death from a broken heart? How could she become one with God and retain distinctness in any meaningful sense? Such dissonant imagery and dissonant interpretations represent potential catalysts for spiritual-intellectual-psychological detachment and purification, which are essential for integration and union with God. With their premium on consistency and conciseness, abridgements and translations tend to minimize these aspects of Juan's work. The more's the pity. Sometimes, a superficial inconsistency is an integral aspect of the whole. The abundance of discursive (i.e., representational) imagery and divergent proposed interpretations in Juan's commentaries was a deliberate overabundance.

Metaphors, in general, have the power to draw readers outside of themselves, immersing them in the perspectives of others and calling superficial perceptions into question. Along with many poets and other artists before and since, Juan tapped into those powers. In virtually every art is the potential to broaden minds, change hearts, and invite a wide spectrum of people to identify with those unlike themselves, exploding the boundaries of any narrowly defined identity.

Juan's metaphors, in particular, have the power to disorient readers and dislodge their perceptions from "1:1", "1 = 1", "1 ≠ 2", "either/or" logical formulae. The impact is analogous to that of Zen *koans*, paradoxical statements designed to jar a practitioner from complacency, from attachment to the physical world, from their perceptions, and from self, so that they might transcend to something beyond (Radcliff and Radcliff 1993, pp. 8–9, 100). This functional similarity between Juan's spirituality and Zen lends further credence to the longstanding assertion of mutual compatibility (e.g., Gulligan et al. 1994, pp. 92–114). The veritable deluge of images and proposed meanings facilitates readers' moving past mere appearances, abandoning all else in favor of the Real. Whatever constituted the contents of the intellects, memories, and wills of beginners—to say nothing of their appetites and other lower operations of their souls—all these needed to be purged according to Juan.

This self-emptying and self-negation, this contemplative human *kenosis* and *apophasis*, were the ends that Juan's metaphors served.

All that you are is on the chopping block, so to speak, if you would undertake the path to union with God. All assumptions are called into question, including concepts generally assumed to be integral to human identity, like gender. Different societies may conceive of gender in different ways. The aforementioned "single gender" conceptualization of the Middle Ages differs from the predominant conflicting conceptualizations today (e.g., "two only" vs. "infinite possibility"). There are irreconcilable differences between these approaches. $1 \neq 2 \neq \infty$. But that does not diminish the universal applicability of the gender dynamics in the "Dark Night".

That poem poses different invitations for different kinds of readers. Are you a woman? Imagine yourself clad in armor, disguised as a man. Are you a man? Imagine yourself as a woman disguised as a man. No matter who you are, pursue God as if pursuing a clandestine tryst. Just as the transformation into a white dove and into flame, the woman in armor invited readers to let go of themselves and their familiar perceptions (incl. of themselves) in order to draw closer to God, with all of the growing pains entailed in each step.

The *amada* of the "Dark Night" became the *Amado*, just as the soul "has become God through participation in God, being united to and absorbed in[to] [God], as [she] is in this state" (John of the Cross 1991, p. 671). One may be tempted to conclude with medievalist and novelist C. S. Lewis that "what is above and beyond all things [, i.e., God,] is so masculine that we are all feminine in relation to it" (Lewis 2003, p. 313). That is one possibility.

However, like the Bible, Juan used metaphors for God and for the soul that were at times masculine (stag, soldier, lover [*Amado*], Father, Son), at times feminine (beloved [*amada*], bride, handmaiden, mother hen as in Matthew 23), and sometimes neither (flame, door, vine). Juan occasionally used metaphors that were both (woman warrior, *amada en Amado transformada*). In some circles in the preceding centuries, feminine conceptualizations of Christ had proliferated, as chronicled in Caroline Walker Bynum's aptly titled *Jesus as Mother* (Bynum 1982, pp. 129–46). Another possibility, in light of this, is that gender binaries themselves were among the things that an ascending soul needed to abandon.

Rather than assert one possibility or another as definitively *sanjuanist*, much less as verified truth, it is perhaps best to acknowledge the fundamental ambiguity and uncertainty of what must remain open questions: Who am I? Who is God? Who is God to me? Who am I in God? (And what, if anything, does gender have to do with any of this?) The point is not to answer the questions or to arrive at informational certainty. The questions, any questions, matter from a *sanjuanist* standpoint as nudges along the journey, as means to the only Answer that matters.

Historical and literary context illuminate this further. As with Juan's other dominant metaphors, even prior to her moment of union, the narrator-soul as woman-in-armor represented a multivalent wealth of meaning. To some extent, she represented a familiar part of the original readers themselves, a readily recognizable stand-in for the soul. At the same time, she was not simply submissive in her devotion and ardent in her seeking; she was at war and engaged in subterfuge, in which her gender expression was both misrepresentation and an act of becoming: she was not a knight, but, as Juan's commentary explained, the battle she engaged in was very real. Just as species in the "Canticle" and physicality in the "Living Flame", her gender and her expression of it in the "Dark Night" were malleable, negotiable, and a useful means to the only meaningful End.

Far along the path toward that destination lay a point at which distinctions of gender, species, metaphor, and physicality itself faded to irrelevance according to the implications of Juan's poetry and commentaries. The whole process of arriving there, by definition,

transcended and abolished whatever one thought one knew. It invited, too, the realization that each of us could represent part of the divine Mystery, even in our own eyes.

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