

Saint John's Nocturnal *Amada* Could Have Been Named Layla

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The love poetry of Saint John of the Cross never describes the external appearance of the beloved, as this would mean an element of separation in a poetry which aims, in fact, at the fusion of identities. The transforming love trance between the lovers therefore constitutes the supreme union with God. These traits are highly present in Sufi poetic tradition, which rescues the feminine figure from an ancient Bedouin legend, Layla, to describe the union of the lovers. Layla, which means “night”, anticipates Saint John's beloved seeking her lover in the midst of darkness. Thus, Saint John's “dark night” distances itself from the European neo-Platonism, which rejects carnal love, to continue with the erotic-mystical tradition of Sufism, much closer to the concept of love union as ascension to absolute knowledge.

To Clara Janés, for her *Ópalo de fuego*.
To Ahmad Taherí, welcome to Spanishness.

Saint John of the Cross drapes a veil of mystery over his poetic protagonists' signs of identity.¹ He erases not only their faces, but also their names: when they commence on their urgent path of love – recall both the *Cántico espiritual* and the *Noche oscura del alma* – these lovers do not reveal any signs of personal identity other than their own feverish amorous passion. We do not know if the owner of the voice that moans “Where have you hidden away, my love?”² (“¿Adónde te escondiste, Amado?”) or the woman who stealthily descends a ladder to her eerie nocturnal date is a blond woman with light eyes (falling within Renaissance

taste) or a dark-haired woman with dove eyes, lips like a crimson thread and a stylized nose that stands out against Mount Lebanon, like the Shulamite of the *Song of Songs*. But when Saint John paints the features of his ardent females, he turns his back not only on Petrarch and Garcilaso but also on the *Song of Songs* that he loved so deeply.

We are unaware of the names of these women, so intrepidly in love; they could equally have been Elisa, Celia, Dorotea or Laura. (I do not add to my hypothetical list the disdainful “Galatea” because there is nothing more foreign to these love-stricken women than the af-

1. A longer version of this article was published in Pablo Beneito (ed.), *Mujeres de luz, la mística femenina y lo femenino en la mística*, Madrid, Editorial Trotta, 2001, pp. 235-267.

2. *The Poems of Saint John of the Cross*, English versions and translations by Willis Barnstone (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1968), 42.

factive indifference of the celebrated maritime nymph, who is associated with the effervescent foam of the ocean.) Saint John hides, then, all the possible distinctive traits that could have permitted us to create an accurate idea of the appearance of his feminine alter-egos or of their precise identity.

Nothing could be more relevant for a mystical poem like the *Noche oscura del alma* or *Dark Night of the Soul*. The invisible corporality of Saint John's protagonists agrees with their condition of emblems of the intangible soul in the trance of mystical union. This is a superb poetic intuition on the part of the poet:³ by erasing the faces and names, he frees his feminine alter-egos from ontological limitations, so they could better be associated with a spiritual trance that is lived outside the realm of the oppressive coordinates of space-time. It stands to reason that insisting on dividing signs of identity is out of question here: what the poet wants to convey is the supreme mystery of the fusion of the self into the Divine that occurs in a true mystical experience. Despite all this, there is a name that could very well suit the protagonist of the *Noche oscura*. Our incognito female could have been named Layla. Incorporal and intangible like her counterpart, the protagonist of the *Cántico*, the emissary of these nocturnal verses, embarks on her flight surrounded by the darkness of the night. She will end up gradually identified with the night that protects her spiritual departure from her internal self. Night is the symbol of the locus of the theopathic union in the poem *Noche oscura*: we will return to this in more detail. For now, let us note that the symbolic space of the unifying transformation with "Love that moves the Sun and the other Stars" always corresponds to the internal self, to the deepest recesses of the

soul. The mystic achieves self-knowledge and discovers that his identity is infinite because he shares the prodigious abyss of the Divine. *In interiore hominis habitat veritas*, preached Saint Augustine, and Master Eckhart supported this idea with a daring proposition that Ernesto Cardenal renders in a powerful verse, "Why kneel in front of the altar, when He is inside us?" ("¿Para qué genuflexión, si está dentro de uno?").⁴ We will now see how in his *Noche oscura* Saint John identifies the sacred space of the *scintilla* of the soul with the night and, therefore, with the lover. She serves as a metaphor of the ecstatic soul that morphs before us in the initiation night of the Incognizable that clouds reason and the senses. The protagonist in flight, paradoxically so sensual and given to physical touch, will come to be the mystical night in a very profound sense.

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The emissary of these verses is not, however, the first literary woman to personify the experience of human and divine love under the metaphorical disguise of night. There is Layla, Majnun's beloved, symbol of impossible love in pre-Islamic literary tradition, whom the Sufis converted into an emblem of the process of transformation in God. The mystical rewriting of this profane love profited from Layla's name, which is enormously suggestive: in Arabic, *Layla* means *layl* or night. We will see shortly how the enveloping nocturnal abyss that erases images and forms is, in its utter indeterminateness, a perfect symbol for a limitless spiritual experience.

3. *Asedios a lo indecible. San Juan de la Cruz canta al éxtasis transformante*, Madrid, Trotta, 1998.

4. The verse is by Ernesto Cardenal (*Telescopio en la noche oscura*, Madrid, Trotta, 1993). English rendition of the verse is by Luce López-Baralt.



Saint John of the Cross (Roger Viollet/Contacto).

But it is important to remember that before constituting the emblem of the locus of the soul in mystical union, Layla was also a woman. Let us follow her tracks in the burning deserts of Arabia in the 7th century.

Ancient Bedouin history describes how Layla and Qays, the “Romeo and Juliet” of Islamic literature, love each other from their early childhood onward. One version of the legend says that the girl’s parents prohibit their relationship because Qays celebrates their love in improperly feverish verses. Another more prosaic version suggests that Layla comes from a superior social and economic class and that she has another suitor more to the liking of her parents. When Qays asks for Layla’s hand, the family refuses him. The young man, desperate, withdraws to the desert, where he shares

the company of wild beasts while singing his spiteful poems to the sands and the wind. Now he is no longer Qays; he becomes Majnun, or “madman.” Literally, “possessed by the *jinn*s.” In Spanish, *enduendado*. The three-letter Arabic root associates the name of our famous protagonist with *jinn*, a mischievous spirit that enters through the veins and seizes the being, like the one that used to visit Federico García Lorca in poetic trances. Thus Qays becomes “Majnun Layla,” meaning “possessed (bewitched) by Layla” or “crazy for Layla.” We must note that the young Bedouin comes to take the name of his beloved; transformation has commenced for one of the members of the couple, insinuated by the usurpation of the beloved’s name. All of this will prove very useful for the mystics of Islam in their spiritual

re-elaboration of the history of love, unhappy yet at the same time deeply suggestive. Layla's parents force her to marry the affluent suitor, who in some versions of the legend is named Ward. Towards the end, she becomes a widow and turns to the desert in search of her mad lover, who continues to claim her with the inexhaustible wellspring of his verses. To our great surprise, by now Majnun has no need to see her again. Another Layla, transmuted into poetry and turned into an immaterial idea, lives in his heart forever. Her physical presence is no longer necessary, as the chaste neo-Platonic poets would have known. They would have fully understood Lucretius's ancient lesson: the flesh is always divisive. Majnun knew that he must reject Layla's physical body that comes in search of him. Centuries later, the deeply enamored Pedro Salinas also felt obliged to translate into incorporeal poetry his beloved's inciting body in order to save it from time in his *La voz a ti debida*. Juan Ramón Jiménez, that other singer of the ineffable, also claimed that he forgot the corporeal beloved (*amada*) who was by his side while thinking of her true immaterial essence. The body surrenders at this point in the case of all these poets because only when the lovers de-materialize can they fuse and enter into transparency, into the ontological Nothingness that is the sheer totality of being. Majnun renounced his corporeal beloved for a deeper, more enduring love. In her *Diván del ópalo de fuego* Clara Janés imagines Majnun's words for Layla: "Turn away, beloved, / do not distract the image of yourself that I shelter" ("Apártate, amada, / no distraigas la imagen que de ti cobijo.")⁵

Layla, the corporeal lover, is therefore an impediment to the inextricable amorous union that Majnun obtained in his interior heart. He

has forever assumed the image of Layla in his innermost being. She, having no reason to live, dies in the desert, and he, in turn, exhales his last breath over her tomb: their bodies surrender and turn into dust, but love lives on forever in the interior of their immortal souls, which have become one due to their perfect transformation in love.

The impact of Majnun's verses has been immense, although Juan Vernet considers Majnun to be "a counterfeiter from the seventh century" ("falsario del siglo VII.")⁶ We owe the earliest account of the legend to Ibn Qutayba (d. 889), who elaborates it in his *Kitab al-s'hir wa l-shuara*. But the celebrated love story surpasses the frontiers of the Arabic lyric to be amplified by Persian and Turkish authors like Nizami (11th century), who gave coherent, organic form to the legend in his epic romance titled *Layla and Majnun*. Amir Husraw Dihlawi, Jami, Junus Emre and Fuzuli (14th century), among others, must have imitated him.

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The mystical rewriting of the Bedouin legend is what most interests us here. The figure of the crazed Majnun, lost in contemplation of his impossible Layla, served as an emblem for numerous Sufi poets who sang of divine love, which was equally transcendent. The parallels between the two amorous discourses – the erotic/contemplative discourse of Majnun and the ecstatic discourse of the authentic mystic – are indeed very close. Disheartened by his unfruitful search for Layla, Majnun opts for the interior path and acquires his real consola-

5. *Diván del ópalo de fuego, o, La leyenda de Layla y Machnun*, prologue by Luce López-Baralt, Murcia, Consejería de Cultura y Educación, 1996, p. 21. English translation of the verse is by Luce López Baralt.

6. *Literatura árabe*, Barcelona, Labor, 1972, p. 70.

tion when he encounters his lost love within his own heart. He no longer needs the “real” Layla of flesh and bone because he and Layla have transformed into one entity, forever residing in the insurmountable depths of his immortal spirit. That is how the Persian poet Jami (d. 1492) understood union in his rewriting of the legend, in which the real desire of Majnun is not union with Layla but union with God. Ibn ‘Arabi had foreseen the same lesson in his *Taryuman al-ashwaq* or *Interpreter of Desires*. In his erotic-mystical verses, he claims that his beloved Nizam is but an epiphany of the One, and feels that his bold spiritual proposition is confirmed by other sages who had also experienced this transforming love: “We have a pattern in Bishr, the lover of Hind and her sister, and in Qays and Lubná and in Mayya and Ghaylan.”⁷ Intoxicated by a love that surpasses the senses, Qays and these legendary Islamic lovers lose consciousness of themselves, offering a supreme lesson of self-liberation to true mystics.

The Persian poet Rumi notes how the lover should embrace the metaphoric “night” that leads to the intuition of the essential unity of God: “Take the Leyla ‘Night’ (*leyl*) on your breast, o Majnun: / The night is the secret chamber of *towid* [Unity of God], and the day idolatry (*sherk*) and multiplicity.”⁸ Rumi employs, as do many of his fellow poets, a play on words using the feminine name of Layla, through which he does nothing less than simultaneously embrace the dark night of his own soul. The beloved body volatilizes in the moment of the embrace and becomes invisible: it is at once a carnal and mystic embrace. As we will see, Rumi anticipates the passionate nocturnal caresses of Saint John’s lovers, especially

the moment in which the Beloved rests on his lover’s breast. It is striking that the Sufis sang the leitmotiv of the mystic night – as Saint John of the Cross would centuries later – under the cover of human love.

Yet the Persian poet is not alone in his codification of the mystical Layla. The anonymous author of *The Book of Certainty* also associates the name of this Muslim Beatrice or Juliet with this spiritual night: “[...] in Arabic stories and lyrics the beloved is so often named Layla (Night) for the night is above all a symbol of the Passive perfection of Beauty [...] the lover’s desire may [...] be taken to represent [...] his aspiration to the Truth itself.”⁹

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The Islamic mystics made use of the nocturnal name of Majnun’s beloved with such insistence because they had already codified the “night” as a mystic symbol throughout many centuries. As mentioned, the all-encompassing night blurs the features and represents the infinite Unity into which these identities are fused. The Sufi mystics sang in verse of a “luminous night,” or a “dark midday”: Darkness was for them an excess of light that implies transcendent knowledge of God, which one does not obtain through discursive reason. This constitutes a literary leitmotiv of Sufism; it is difficult to think that Saint John would have invented it in isolation.

Miguel Asín Palacios was the first to recognize the presence of the metaphor of the night

7. *The Tarjumán al-Ashwáq: A Collection of Mystical Odes*, R.A. Nicholson, trad., London, Royal Asiatic Society, 1911, p. 67 (reprinted: London, Theosophical Publishing House Ltd., 1977).

8. A. Schimmel, *The Triumphal Sun: A Study of the Works of Jalaloddin Rumi*, London/The Hague, East-West Publications, 1978, p. 346.

9. *The Book of Certainty*, prologue by Abu Baku Sirach al-Din, London, Rider & Co., pp. 63-64.

amongst the Sufis when he associated Saint John's dark night of the soul to that of Ibn 'Abbad of Ronda and Abu-l-Hasan al-Shadili in his essay "Un precursor hispano-musulmán de San Juan de la Cruz"¹⁰ and in his posthumous book *Shadiliés y alumbrados*.¹¹ The medieval Muslim mystics elaborated on the symbol of the night obsessively, making it their own and endowing it with intricate and recognizably Islamic hues, which are not traceable to Western neo-Platonic sources, as Asín points out. In a separate study,¹² I have updated Asín's pioneering research with numerous additional cases: Rumi, Sabistari, Najm al-Din al-Kubra, Lahiji, Ibn 'Arabi, Suhrawardi, Simnani, and Niffari. In my *Asedios a lo indecible. San Juan de la Cruz canta al éxtasis transformante*, I contrasted the Sufi metaphor of the night with the *tribulationis nox* from Saint Gregory's *Moralia*, with the *divina caligo* or "luminous dark" of Pseudo-Dionysius, and with the symbolic darkness of Saint Gregory of Nisa. No doubt, the allegories of the European spiritual teachers look pale and imprecise set against the detailed Islamic symbol, which was part of the codified discourse of a mystical school that re-elaborated it throughout many centuries. When a Sufi sang of the night of an amorous encounter, his mystical companions were capable of decodifying the veiled mystic meaning of the symbol. As Lahiji, Shabistari's commentator, said: "a simple allusion to [the night] is enough."

For the Sufi mystics, a simple allusion to the Night – Majnun's beloved – was indeed enough. With her symbolic, nocturnal name, Layla became a true herald of the mystical

experience. In the codified language of the Sufis, to embrace Layla meant embracing the dark night that represented union with God. The fused name Majnun-Layla stands for the spiritual transformation of the lover into the Beloved: the supreme mystery of the *Unus-Ambo* of Divine Union.

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Let us see if something like this occurs with the poetic protagonist of the *Noche oscura* by Saint John of the Cross. We shall accompany her in her hasty flight and will try to see if we are able to baptize her with the mystic name Layla:¹³

*On a black night,
Starving for love and dark in flames,
O lucky turn and flight!
Unseen I slipped away,
My house at last was calm and safe.*¹⁴

As in the *Cántico*, the feminine voice of this protagonist, so flagrantly Eastern, has no qualms in showing her agitated emotional state, so foreign to that of the inaccessible women of the neo-Platonic paradigm sustained by so many devoted Renaissance poets. We must also note that Saint John, contrary to most neo-Platonic and Sufi poets, is identifying here with his female (not male) poetic persona, so that

10. *Al-Andalus*, I, 1993, pp. 7-79.

11. Prologue to the first edition of the book (Madrid, Hiperión, 1990).

12. *San Juan de la Cruz y el Islam*, Madrid, Hiperión, 1989, and the cited *Asedios a lo indecible. San Juan de la Cruz canta al éxtasis transformante*.

13. I quote from the *Obras completas de San Juan de la Cruz*, which I published in collaboration with Eulogio Pacho (Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1991).

14. Barnstone, 39.

the nocturnal symbol is rendered even more complex. The feminine lover, as I will try to demonstrate, is Layla or night *ab initio*, and will soon discover that she shares her nocturnal identity with her Beloved. Yet, the conclusion will be the same as in Majnun's case: both couples experience an otherworldly love union that transcends the self.

The *Noche's* lover finds herself "con ansias" and ablaze "en amores." A sincere, almost blunt admission. We almost hear the labored breathing of an authentic lover, in the trance of negotiating a clandestine but happy end for the passion that consumes her. The incognito lady also tells us that her adventure begins "en" (in) a closed night: in a locus that is simultaneously temporal (the nocturnal hour) and spatial (under the protective cover of total darkness).¹⁵ The first – and exceedingly important – word that inaugurates the *Noche* suggests a spatial preoccupation, as in the case of the *Cántico*. The poet does not say that the action occurs "de noche" but "en una noche." We already know that Saint John usually expresses his altered state of conscience in terms of his metaphorical entry into a novel and strange space: "I came into the unknown / and stayed there unknowing, rising beyond all science."¹⁶ ("Entréme donde no supe, / y quedéme no sabiendo, / toda ciencia trascendiendo.") The Reformer maintains an internal dialogue in his work and constantly recasts his most important symbolic motifs. It would seem that the anxious question that opens the *Cántico* – ¿Adónde te escondiste, amado...? – would seem to be answered in the first verse of the *Noche*: "En una noche oscura..." The space-time of night will have radical importance for a profound

understanding of this poem. At this symbolic temporal point, which at the same time is a sacred space, we must return, not only because this is where the mysterious poetic protagonists fuse into one, but also because they will become the very night – Layla – that they embrace and that protectively surrounds them. For now, it will suffice to note that the dark night strongly contrasts with the sudden light of the flames that ignite the ardent heart of the fleeing woman. From the first instant, Saint John paints a chiaroscuro contrast that will also be highly significant for the comprehension of the poem.

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As I have mentioned, Saint John gives us no details about the identity of his protagonist; we do not know her name, nor do we receive any information about her physical appearance. For the moment, however, we see – or rather, we surmise amidst the shadows of the night – the figure of the lover, who stealthily creeps (as once did Ovid's Tisbe or the Wife of the *Songs*) to an encounter that we suspect to be secret. The poet repeats in the "Noche" a verb that is quite meaningful in his poetic universe: "salí." In the *Cántico*, the female protagonist leaves "clamando," while here, she departs "sin ser notada," although with the same "ansias" of her previous counterpart. However, when one of Saint John's female protagonists sets out on a journey, the reader must be on guard, as his poetic protagonists do not usually follow a linear trajectory covering successive distances.

15. As Bernard Sesé senses in his lucid essay, "Estructura dramática de la *Noche oscura*. Tres aspectos del poema", in A. García Simón and S. Ros (eds.), *Actas del Congreso Internacional Sanjuanista*, Valladolid, Junta de Castilla y León, 1993, vol. 1: "La noche oscura viene, pues, a ser a la vez el lugar temporal y espacial de esta acción dramática" (p. 250). ("The dark night thus becomes at once the temporal and spatial place of this dramatic action.") English translation of the sentence by Leyla Rouhi.

16. Barnstone, 59.

Rather, they pursue circular or ontologically nonexistent paths. We will see if the *Noche* is or is not the exception to this rule, – to this uncanny, otherworldly – rule that places us at the threshold of the mystical experience.

An attentive reader cannot avoid feeling on guard when faced with the verse that inaugurates the poem – “En una noche oscura” – which Saint John will hammer over and over again as a refrain throughout the subsequent *liras* of the poem. His excessive insistence is suspect. Saint John implies that the fact that the lovers meet specifically at night is somehow extraordinarily important.

José Nieto declares that nighttime does not seem symbolic in the context of the poem because Saint John alludes to “a” concrete night and not “the” Night.¹⁷ However, I believe that the insistent repetition of the nocturnal point in time during which the amorous union takes place is too heavily emphasized not to raise suspicion. We should remember that Jean Baruzi and Dámaso Alonso proposed that Saint John’s night is typically a symbolic night, through which the poet instinctively intuits the nocturnal abyss of transcendent experience. We agree on the fundamentals: Saint John’s characteristic night begins in the poem as a simple allusion to a moment in time, during which an amorous tryst occurs, yet becomes an extraordinarily complex symbol. The night and its enshrouding shadows, to which he obsessively alludes, continue to enrich and even slowly undermine the brief story of carnal love, which can no longer remain merely that (although it never ceases to be a love story).

But this night that many critics do not hesitate to deem symbolic is much more complex than scholars have realized until now. Baruzi

suspected that the metaphorical night that imposed itself as a symbol over Saint John’s intuition and language was perceived *ex nihilo* by the poet. His supposed “originality” perplexed the illustrious French Hispanist, who preferred to ignore the problem of the possible literary heritage of the mysterious metaphor: “It is not necessary to invoke any literary tradition to be able to follow the poet.”¹⁸ We now have more information on the nocturnal symbol than Jean Baruzi had in 1924. The night viewed as a milestone on the mystical path was assiduously codified in spiritual literature long before the saint’s lifetime, above all by the Islamic mystics, as we have seen. This fact escaped Baruzi and Alonso, but today we must acknowledge that from the outset of the poem, the rich literary contextuality of the term “night” widens the semantic range of the verses from the start. Let us not forget that the poem would have been read in monasteries, where a codified poetical language was not an oddity.

The night and its enshrouding shadows continue to enrich and even slowly undermine the brief story of carnal love, which can no longer remain merely that (although it never ceases to be a love story)

But we cannot lose track of our anxious inamorata, who continues her furtive path in the second stanza of the *Noche oscura*:

*Blackly free from light,
Disguised and down a secret way,
O lucky turn and flight!
In darkness I escaped,
my house at last was calm and safe.*¹⁹

17. J. Nieto, *San Juan de la Cruz, poeta del amor profano*, Madrid, Torre de la Botica-Swan, 1988, pp. 51 ff.

18. J. Baruzi, *San Juan de la Cruz y el problema de la experiencia mística*, Valladolid, Junta de Castilla y León, 1992, p. 347. Translation of the lines into English is by Luce López-Baralt.

19. Barnstone, 39.

The poetic protagonist repeats the phrase “a oscuras” to underscore the darkness that surrounds her and gives her a paradoxical sense of security. She surreptitiously slides down a ladder that would appear, in every respect, to be provisional and clandestine – “a portable and supporting tool” (“instrumento portátil y arimadizo”)²⁰ such as the one that Calixto would use to reach the garden and Melibea in Fernando de Rojas’ *La Celestina*. This ladder, by which the protagonist descends instead of ascends, was for José Nieto one of the internal keys of the poem that would reveal her profane and not mystical condition. Nieto claims that some mystics allude to ascents of the spirit by means of ascensional ladders, but never to descents on a horizontal plane by way of these same ladders. I am not so sure. In the first place, the fact that our female lover could have gone *up* a ladder to a hypothetical amorous encounter in the high ground of the garden in no way guarantees the mystical implication of the poem. Numerous lovers in Renaissance literature – Calixto is merely the most obvious case – gain access to their rendezvous by way of an ascending ladder, yet that does not automatically cause their texts to acquire a contemplative dimension. In the second place, the mystics utilize both the symbol of ascent and the symbol of descent to show their encounter with the Absolute, as in the Augustinian dictum: “Do not yearn to go outside [of your own self], rather enter your own self, for Truth resides in the man’s innermost being.” (*Noli foras ire, in te ipsum redi, in interiore hominis habitat veritas.*) We will see that this symbolic descent, and not a hypothetical ascent, on the part of our inamorata suits better the totality of the poem. The fact that the protagonist descends is suspiciously indica-

tive of a downward journey into the depths of the spirit, into true love, which – whether it be human or divine – is always experienced in the interior of the soul.

The mask that conceals our mysterious protagonist does nothing less than point to the unfathomable abyss of her true identity

The messenger of the verses provides us with another unsettling piece of information: she leaves “disfrazada” (in disguise) and “en celada.” From the mere sound of the words we can infer that she proceeds “en celo” – *encelada* – (“in heat”, “excited”). Her “celada” or sallet, on the other hand, alludes to the ancient piece of armor used to protect the head. The term also refers to an ambush or secret quest: it is a truly polyvalent word in Spanish. The mask that conceals our mysterious protagonist does nothing less than point to the unfathomable abyss of her true identity, as Nietzsche reminds us. At any moment we expect to find out more about this woman’s authentic being, which for now just escapes us. We anticipate that shortly, the entire poem will revolve around this jubilant encounter with herself, with the ultimate culmination of her identity. To love – as we have already insisted – means nothing less than to accede to our own deepest being. We will now see if this incognito woman has the capacity to discover her real identity under the patronym “Layla.”

Let us hear Saint John’s lover is next mysterious utterances:

*On that happy night – in
secret; no-one saw me through the dark –*

20. M.J. Mancho Duque, *El símbolo de la noche en San Juan de la Cruz*, Salamanca, Universidad de Salamanca, 1982, p. 174.

*and I saw nothing then,
no other light to mark
the way but fire pounding my heart.*²¹

The protagonist now announces that the night is, in effect, incredibly dark, that “nadie me veía / ni yo miraba cosa.” No one can see this furtive female in her fleeing trance, but – and this is of utmost importance – she has also remained completely in the dark on her amorous path, which she undertakes *de nocte et nullo videntek*, as Raimundo Martín commented when speaking of an equally nocturnal – and spiritual – journey. The protagonist admits that she “no ve cosa”: she walks blindly. This is a marvelous intuition on the part of the poet: the lover directly experiences the night in its absolute lack of light, she herself is the very night that protectively swaddles her. She begins to become Layla. But where is she headed? This is an extraordinary problem, for her only guide is a light that burns deep in her heart, which, in the first *lira*, was likewise “inflamado” (ablaze) with love. An interpretation from a “profane” or literal point of view could lead us to the conclusion that the fugitive is well aware, in the depths of her psyche, of where the nocturnal date with her awaiting Beloved will take place. But if we read the poem with implacable logic, we realize that her metaphoric torch is really a light that burns in her interior. And where could this light guide her, other than toward herself?

Suddenly we begin to suspect that we and our silent traveler are following a path that leads nowhere, that cannot really be trodden, because it simply reverts back to herself, to the torch that has set ablaze her innermost being. And that lighting guide directs her toward her own interior, not outside of it. One correctly suspects

that she was descending toward herself, toward the light that will now lead her in the symbolic night of her own self and with which she has just established joyful contact. The literary contexts of universal (and especially Islamic) mysticism silently become active and begin to operate on their own in the poem.

*We and our silent traveler are following
a path that leads nowhere, that cannot
really be trodden, because it simply
reverts back to herself*

The mysterious lover continues celebrating the luminous condition of her innermost heart, which takes her on a mysterious, circular, and redundant path:

*That flaming guided me
more firmly than the noonday sun,
and waiting there was he
I knew so well – who shone
where nobody appeared to come.*²²

The light of her heart guides her, paradoxically, clearer than daylight (“más cierto que la luz del mediodía”) in the contrasting darkness of the night. The protagonist oscillates between her total blindness to exterior things and the interior light that she celebrates and which guides her with enviable certainty. Seemingly, she perceives with only one symbolic and illuminated eye. She herself is the illuminated eye, which has been endowed with a supernatural vision. The poet’s spiritual clue is of paramount importance: the ardent heart has become an eye that is capable of infinite contemplation. The image of this self-contemplative eye, through which the mystic can contemplate God and himself in God, is evident in spiritual litera-

21. Barnstone, 39.

22. Barnstone, 39.

ture of all time, from Plato to Saint Augustine and the Sufis.²³

Saint John provides us with another crucial clue: we are in the dark in every sense. We cannot see *where* we are headed with such joy and purpose, nor do we know exactly with whom the deeply desired encounter will ensue. It seems that, along with our protagonist, we are beginning to experience the famous night of the senses, the “noche de los sentidos.” The shadowy darkness obscures not only our field of view, but also our very intellectual powers, since we cannot even be certain of this new reality into which the poetic protagonist is preparing to enter. We only know that this reality is impenetrably dark, like the fog that clouded Majnun’s rationality and senses when he renounced his Layla of flesh and bone. We have already seen that she lived in the dark and innermost recesses of his heart.

God is an Unspeakable Light that renders into darkness our understanding and our senses

The clues have been given: everything seems to persuade us that the poem of the *Noche oscura* is celebrating an altered state of consciousness. We may reasonably infer that Saint John is sustaining a dialogue with the rest of his work, in which he alerts us over and over that neither reason nor the senses allow one to perceive God: He is an Unspeakable Light that renders into darkness – “anochece” – our understanding and our senses. Together with the emissary of the verses, we participate in the very essence of the dark night in which she moves in an enigmatic, circular path: the

poet has obfuscated our field of view and our cognitive capacity.

In the first line of the poem, Saint John’s “noche” seemed like a point that was simultaneously spatial (a tenebrous and protected area) and temporal (the wee hours of a clandestine encounter). Now it would seem that the protagonist can truly affirm: “la noche oscura *c’est moi*,” it is my interior space without confining limits and free from successive time. The depths of her soul have been rendered infinite thanks to the Unspeakable encounter she has experienced, necessarily blind to reason and to the tragic space-time coordinates.

The sharpening of the sense of touch, which makes the “Noche” the most sensual poem of the Spanish Renaissance, also allows the poet to indicate that the fusion of the lovers occurs, paradoxically, on a plane in which the body begins to fade. The poetic protagonist does not see; we know this already because she is moving by feel in the night, and she caresses an unknown face. Her lover would seem to be equally blind in the confining nocturnal darkness, since he never tells us whether his valiant lady is fair or whether her curly, dark hair recalls a herd of goats climbing Galaad Mountain much like the Shulamite’s. Nor does he reveal whether her “pechos floridos” look like little twin goats grazing among the lilies. He merely insinuates that, in the process of falling asleep, the Beloved must have felt his lover’s caresses without seeing her. Yet, there is more: the man summoned by love cannot see, not only because it is night, but also because once he closes his eyes, he reaffirms the tenebrous abyss of his visual field. This fact has additional implications. In the most impassioned erotic moments

23. L. Schrader, “Les yeux de l’âme et de l’esprit, métaphore de la littérature religieuse du Siècle d’Or”, in A. Redondo (ed.), *Le corps comme métaphore dans l’Espagne des XVIe et XVIIe siècles*, Paris, Éditions de la Sorbonne, 1992, pp. 203-214.

of the poem the Beloved abandons his body: he sleeps, passing to another level of consciousness where, by force, he will need to be rendered oblivious to the caresses of his lover. It is astounding that the Beloved, so vigorously sought, would give himself up passively into sleep in the first image of him that we see. But it is precisely his sleep – his submerging into the night and his escape of his body – that could have a more important symbolic meaning in the context of the poem.

Indeed, we must ask ourselves: where does the mysterious Beloved lose his visual field and surrender his consciousness? “*Allí*,” his partner tells us: “en mi pecho florido.” A magnificent clue, since it was precisely *allí* where she felt aflame with love, *allí* where the luminous torch that led her toward herself was burning, *allí* where this guiding light transmuted into that other guide, the night. It is appropriate to recall Rumi’s verse: “Take the Leyla ‘Night’ (*leyl*) on your breast, o Majnun: / The night is the secret chamber of *towid* [Unity of God], and the day idolatry (*sherk*) and multiplicity.” In the central space of the deep psyche of Saint John’s feminine lover, as well as in the symbolic heart of Rumi’s “spiritual” Majnun, everything seems to converge and transform joyfully into one; the burning heart of light, the dark night, the inexistent path, and, now, the Beloved himself, resting in this privileged space that is none other than the lover’s innermost self. The transforming apotheosis remits us once again to the Petrarchan verse, which now we find imbued with an ever deeper meaning: “*amada en el Amado transformada*.”

Yet, Saint John is different from the chaste Florentine poet in important ways. Whereas Petrarch physically renounces his lover, Saint John, like the Majnun of Rumi’s mystical version, does not renounce the beloved’s body, but rather he merges with it in an erotic embrace. It is merely that tangible, physical presence volatilizes in the embrace and becomes a quintes-

sential spiritual experience. Embracing Layla means embracing the dark night of the soul: the two embraces merge into one, curiously without either one losing its evocative force in the poetry. This is an important novelty to neo-Platonic discourse: love here is both erotic and mystic. There is no need to renounce the body, because that joyful corporality is precisely the gateway to transcended Love that one experiences beyond the senses. Surprisingly, the Sufi mystics – and, along with them, Saint John – have surpassed the heroic “bewitched” who renounced Layla in the desert of Bedouin Arabia, as well as Petrarch and all the chaste poets who adhered to the *dolce stil nuovo*. They contemplated human nuptial rites unforgivingly, while Saint John and the Sufis appear to bless them because they lead to a supreme otherworldly embrace.

The transforming apotheosis remits us once again to the Petrarchan verse, which now we find imbued with an ever deeper meaning: “amada en el Amado transformada”

At this point in the poem, the nocturnal path has closed up once more. The protagonist was correct in celebrating the night, because in myriad simultaneous ways, she has found love in the night. And, upon doing so, she has found herself, since precisely in her deepest self everything converges: light, darkness, and love. Once again, *la noche, c’est moi*. The lover has tossed aside her metaphorical mask and from underneath her disguise emerges her true marvelous identity. She was always a Night – Layla – of divine, infinite overtones. Such ontological wonders do not usually happen to a simple female in the context of human love.

And the lover sings on:

*Wind from the castle wall
while my fingers played in his hair:*

*its hand serenely fell
wounding my neck, and there
my senses vanished in the air.*²⁴

The poetic protagonist continues caressing the object of her desire, who remains unable to respond to her because he has fallen asleep on her breast. A mysterious element takes his place, “el aire del almena,” which in turn caresses the poem’s emissary, who ends up alone in the space of love. Curiously, the “aire del almena” gives the lover the best caresses, the ones that the Beloved could have given her: “con su mano serena / en mi cuello hería / y todos mis sentidos suspendía.” Once more, the mysterious woman does not see her darkened surroundings, but rather she limits herself to perceiving through her skin, which is a very eloquent manner the poet has of reinforcing the fact that she is still blind.

It would seem that we are in the oneiric passage of an altered state of consciousness. But the “aire” – which the “ventalle” anticipates and underscores – is another theologically coded word that cultured conventual readers at the time would have been able to recognize with ease. Dámaso Alonso reminds us that “in the cryptic symbolism of Saint John [the air] alludes to the most intimate and subtle operations of Divinity in the last trances of perfect union [...]”²⁵ The correspondence is so universal that it is shared equally by the mystics of the East and the West, who associate Divinity with the air, the *pneuma*, the *logos* / creator, the breath, the osculation, the *prana*, the *ruh* of the Sufis, the *ruah* of the Jews. The metaphorical wind implies, therefore, the “awakening” of the soul

to its true ontological condition: once more, the lover of the *Noche* has tossed aside her disguise and recognized herself in her authentic state, nocturnal and infinite. An invisible and transcendent hand has provided the caresses; the body begins to vanish before our eyes, precisely in the most erotic lines of the poem. (Exactly the same happened to Rumi’s Majnun, who discovered the infinite Night while embracing Layla – the night.)

*The Sufis anticipated by many centuries
St. Teresa’s castles and the cercos sosegados
of Saint John’s Cántico. Castle for them
meant protection around the soul, as well
as the nuptial condition*

But the caressing air emerges “del almena.” Perhaps those first readers of the *Noche* would have also known that every word associated with “almena,” or “fortified castle,” in the context of a spiritual text also held a codified meaning. The Sufis articulated these protective fortifications “a lo divino,” anticipating by many centuries St. Teresa’s castles and the *cercos sosegados* of Saint John’s *Cántico*. Castle (*hisn* in Arabic) for them meant protection around the soul, as well as the nuptial condition.²⁶ The “almenas” of the “Noche” therefore could have meant for Saint John’s readers the symbolic, protected space of spiritual matrimony, caressed by divine winds. These fortifications also describe a ring or circle around what they protect: what we have here is a sacred representation of the Infinite.

The caresses that the nocturnal lover receives cause her to depart from herself: “y todos mis

24. Barnstone, 41.

25. “[...] en la crítica simbólica de San Juan de la Cruz, [el aire] alude a las más íntimas y sutiles operaciones de la Divinidad en los últimos trances de la unión perfecta [...]”, D. Alonso, *La poesía de San Juan de la Cruz*, Thesaurus, Boletín del Instituto Caro y Cuervo, vol. IV, 1948, p. 54. English translation of sentence by Leyla Rouhi.

26. I have updated my previous studies on St. Teresa’s castles in my essay “Teresa de Jesús y el Islam: el símil de los siete castillos concéntricos del alma”, in Pablo Beneito (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 53-76.

sentidos suspendía.” She has been transported to the very margin of her exacerbated sensorial capacity. She has ended up outside of her body, like that Layla whose beloved corporality the deeply enamored Majnun would erase from his presence forever. By losing her body, Saint John's feminine lover becomes identified – once again – with her Beloved, who lies reposed over her, beyond any possible physical call. Now it is she who must accompany him in that ultimate flight from the flesh:

*I lay. Forgot my being,
and on my love I leaned my face.
all ceased. I left my being,
leaving my cares to fade
among the lilies far away.²⁷*

How well the poetic protagonist did to search for her Beloved “en una noche oscura”: she was the very night of her frantic search. She needed only to find her infinite Love within herself, without the exterior mask – the *celada* disguise – that was enshrouding her true self. Because He, too, like she, was Night. She continues to caress him, blinded by the night's darkness – the exchange of souls through the gaze has commenced – until she is suspended and surrenders her corporality over the inert body of her beloved one. The shadows have also engulfed her consciousness: the two lovers are one in the dark night that has become symbolic precisely for its unifying ability. The lovers have achieved the night of the senses and the night of rational consciousness. They have achieved nothingness; yet to achieve Nothingness is to attain Everything. When the lover says, “cesó todo,” there is a latent glorification of the black void into which she has just plummeted. It is neither negative nor intimidating; it is “amable

más que la alborada,” and it has guided her, in fact, “más cierto que la luz del mediodía.” Mysteriously, Saint John of the Cross's accomplice night has led the protagonist of the *Noche* both to love of the senses and to love beyond the senses. However, above all, it has brought her to herself, to discover that her nocturnal ipseity was not only shared but had no limits.

The lovers have achieved the night of the senses and the night of rational consciousness. They have achieved nothingness; yet to achieve Nothingness is to attain Everything

And precisely on that note of light the *Noche oscura* ends. The protagonist, in her radical abandon of her being, relinquishes her “cuidado / entre las azucenas olvidado.” The white lilies provide a point of radiance at the end of a poem that has been fundamentally submerged in the dark, however glorious that darkness may have been. It is as if the lovers, by closing their eyes to life and consciousness, could at last see the light. Their fused being is surrendered amidst those singular flowers: the poet seems to say that it is “allí” – on her breast (now we know exactly why it had to be “florido” like the “bed” of the *Cántico*)²⁸ – where we find the true light of transforming union. Curiously, the three-letter Arabic root *z-h-r* can mean equally “illumination” or “flowering.” The Sufis would have been more than willing to agree with Saint John that the heart or “pecho florido” must also have been, necessarily, illuminated. Zen Buddhism also symbolizes mystical illumination with a white lotus unfurling. There is no doubt that the polyvalent image of illumination and flowering has a markedly Eastern flavor. Whether Saint John

27. Barnstone, 41.

28. “Nuestro lecho florido,” says the feminine protagonist in one of the key verses of the *Cántico*.

is conscious or not of the ancient Eastern roots of his mysterious symbology, certainly we better understand now why the “noche” that he celebrated in the first *liras* of the poem had to be luminous. He was leading us to the enlightened consciousness that is reached when one closes one’s eyes to the visible.

Saint John forges a splendid symbol for the organ of mystical perception: the space of a black abyss that he renders infinite

The emissary of the poem surrenders her consciousness amidst the mysterious white lilies. A Sufi would have immediately recognized what Saint John meant here: in the secret language or *trobar clus* of Islamic mysticism, white lilies represented the ultimate mystical stage, in which language fails. For these mystics, the white lily “breathless with adoration and silent with ten tongues,” in the words of Annemarie Schimmel,²⁹ glorifies God in silence with the ten forcefully mute tongues of its petals. If we pay attention to these possible Islamic literary referents, the *grand finale* of the poem seems deliberately underscored, and the selection of this specific flower seems more artistic and intentional. I suspect that more than one Spanish contemplative contemporary to Saint John must have understood the “secret” significance (or, perhaps, for them, not so “secret”) of the lily as the flower of utmost surrender to God, and must have enjoyed those final *liras* with more intimate knowledge than we modern readers.

We have passed, then, from the celebration of the body to the sudden celebration of a level of existence that surpasses the body, as if Saint John were telling us: to lose one’s identity in the Beloved is to gain it back again, infinitely transformed. In order to achieve such a level of amorous union or *theopoesis* one must lose not only the physical body but also one’s selfness – the exteriorizing disguise – since only in that way can symbolic lovers transform into one in the unifying night. Saint John forges a splendid symbol for the organ of mystical perception: the space of a black abyss that he renders infinite because it has no limits circumscribing it. In this transcendent “ojo del alma” that pulls us ardently toward interiorization, all opposites converge. *Allí* – and I use the deictic now with full consciousness of its meaning – darkness coexists with radiant light and the body is celebrated and yet transcended. The lover is saved from time, because she *is* time (the night as a point in time), and saved from space, because in this area of protective darkness that swathes her, she need not cover any distance, since her goal is *herself* in participatory union with that which she loves most. The ardent *liras* of the *Noche oscura del alma* permit us, then, to conclude that the most adequate name for our poetic protagonist could well have been Layla or “Night.” *En* this sacred night, a nameless, faceless lover set out in search of her Beloved, a risky adventure that for her ended in venture. An abysmal ontological discovery awaited her: she was her Beloved.

29. A. Schimmel, *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1975, p. 172.