



Fornication in Juan's Dark Night

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Abstract

The word fornication occurs once in the works of Spanish mystic Juan de la Cruz, but it occurs in a pivotal moment, as one of the three “spirits” sent by God during the *noche oscura*, the purgative process described by Juan’s poetic and prose works of the same name. Lust and romance seem to have a special, uncelebrated place in the dark night mostly overlooked by scholars. The topic of fornication is more than philological curiosity; its combination of literal and metaphorical seems to be the best heuristic to Juan’s mystical writing. The significance of *fornicación* becomes evident in light of the context of Juan’s writing: the Spanish contemplative tradition, biblical texts which influenced Juan, and fifteenth-century courtly love poetry. The three spirits of the dark night, including fornication are those areas of self that the spiritual aspirant cannot fix alone. Juan’s concept of the automatic nature of the purgation of the dark night refers to cognitive processes beyond will and reason. Both Juan’s poetic text and its prose explication signal the mystical connection between literal and metaphorical, the physical and spiritual.

Keywords *Noche oscura* · Metaphor · Sexuality · Mysticism

Introduction

Juan de la Cruz is best known for his widely anthologized poem about mystical union, “En una noche oscura,” and its posterior prose explication, *Noche oscura*. The latter prose treatise explains the dark night as a double purgation which spiritual adepts necessarily experience on the way to theosis. In a theistic paradox only a mystic could understand, the spiritual aspirant is made to face his greatest imperfection in order to overcome it. And, in the Early Modern Spanish contemplative tradition at least, one of the greatest expressions of imperfections is fornication. The point is clear from the outset of Juan’s treatise: the dark night purges imperfections (I.1.1), and melancholy is just such an imperfection, which Juan de la Cruz lists

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under the sin of lust (I.4.3). Immoderate passions such as lust can cause imbalances which lead to melancholy (Jackson 450). Lust and romance seem to have a special, uncelebrated place in the dark night mostly overlooked by scholars. The topic of fornication is more than philological curiosity; it seems to be the best heuristic to Juan's mystical writing.

Fornication, Literal and Metaphorical

The word fornication occurs once in the works of Spanish mystic Juan de la Cruz, but it occurs in a pivotal moment, as one of the three "spirits" sent by God during the *noche oscura*. These "spirits" refer to the three main kinds of purgative experience spiritual practitioners have when in the dark night. Juan de la Cruz calls them *graves trabajos y tentaciones*, meaning both that they require a response (*trabajo*) and that they arise outside of one's conscious control (*tentación*). Essentially, one's unexamined defects rise into conscious awareness for processing.

According to Juan de la Cruz, "a spirit of fornication" troubles "algunos" with "abominables y fuertes tentaciones", "feas advertencias y representaciones más visibles en la imaginación" (I.14.1). He writes that this sensual "whipping" can be worse than death (II.14.1). He cites 2 Corinthians 12:7, in which Paul writes of his suffering, comparing it to a thorn in his flesh sent by Satan. It seems fairly clear that, during the purgation of the senses (the first phase of Juan de la Cruz' dark night schema), any sensual habits such as lust will be activated as they are purged. In accord with the sense of 2 Corinthians 12, Juan de la Cruz elsewhere writes that it makes little sense for God to exalt us when we are not yet willing to give up our sins. (II.8). Though we can interpret *fornicación* figuratively, i.e., "spiritually," I cannot help but think of the sexual adventures of the *arcipreste* in Ruiz' *Libro de buen amor* or the sexual trysts of the *sacristán fornicario* in Miracle II of Berceo's *Milagros de Nuestra Señora*. Given that the poem on the dark night which originated the treatise on the dark night uses sexual union as the prime metaphor to explain mystical union, and that the poem has generic relations with the courtly love lyric tradition, Juan de la Cruz' use of the word *fornicación* becomes especially poignant and perhaps also literal. Is it possible that Juan de la Cruz is referring to what we would call a neurosis of a sexual sort? The topic is essential in the case of the dark night. The priority of the poetic metaphor of the female lover stealing out at night cannot be reduced to mere figural explication (sexual union) of an alleged non-physical experience (mystical union); the sexual metaphor is more than means to an end. The language of mysticism is part of the practice of mysticism; form and meaning are inseparable.

In the figure of the female lover as metaphor for soul, Juan de la Cruz performs a double renunciation, encapsulating the dark night in an operational explication. First, he emends both the biblical and the Petrarchan tradition from which his poetic figure emerges. Second, he performs exactly the renunciation of self that is required for the mystical union. As to the first renunciation, Juan de la Cruz does not describe the female protagonist of his mystical poem. He neither names her nor catalogues her physical features, as happens in *Song of Songs* and Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. Her only name is "I". The lyric voice of the *Song of Songs* also occupies the first person,

but is named “Shulamite”, circumscribed by her relationships, self-described physically as “dark,” and described by her lover as “dove-eyed” (4:1), with hair like a flock of goats (4:2), a neck straight like tower (4:4) and a cheek curved like a pomegranate (4:3) in a series of kinesthetic and tactile metaphors clearly designed to recall or even induce sensual pleasure in the poem’s audience. This “body-parting” is often criticized in the Petrarchan tradition and in popular culture by scholars focused more on a feminist agenda than the religious uses of the bible, on the exigencies of verse, or on the gender-inclusive nature of sexual desire, and this last is precisely Juan de la Cruz’ point—sensual pleasure is madness. It is the point of all higher contemplative traditions—liberation is liberation not only from pain but also from pleasure. The dark night is the giving up of those identity structures designed to guarantee pleasure and ward off pain. This was also the renunciation that impeded Petrarch’s spiritual progress although Petrarch’s renunciation was quite literal—woman—whereas San Juan’s is merely figured as a woman, referring to the spectrum of sensual pleasures that includes sexual pleasures as exemplary. The figural woman in San Juan’s poetic text becomes the resting of the senses, made clear by San Juan’s lexical choice “sosiego” in “casa sosegada” of the poetic text and “apetitos sosegados” (I.14.1) of the prose text. “Sosiego” is the result of facing the three spirits of the dark night.

San Juan’s use of fornication as a literal-metaphor grows out of a tradition. Both Paul and Augustine write of fornication. Paul of course prescribes marriage as a way to avoid fornication in 1 Corinthians 7, and speaks of fornication as worse than other sins for its being “against the body itself” (1 Corinthians 6). Augustine confessed to being a great fornicator, admitting that he loved love itself in the *Confessions* (III.1: “nondum amabam, et amare amabam”), which, in context, sounds like an admission of fornication and romance, what the DSM V (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed.) calls hypersexuality. Augustine uses the word fornication in a non-literal way.

Confessions II.vi, p. 86: “Thus the soul is guilty of fornication when she turns from You and seeks from any other source what she will nowhere find pure and without taint unless she returns to You.”¹

However, the most likely source for San Juan’s *espíritu de fornicación* is 15th-century proponent of *recogimiento* Francisco de Osuna’s *espiritual fornicación* (16.7), a phrase Osuna uses to paraphrase the commandment not to commit adultery in exhorting love of God above all else. Osuna’s lexical choice of “fornication” for Latin *moechor* (Exodus 20:14: “non moechaberis”) is meaningful. Osuna’s use of the word fornication here is not physical; it refers to infidelity, yet he focuses on the physical aspect of marital infidelity. Perhaps the use of the word *fornicación* is rhetorically stronger than *adulterio*. More tellingly, in the second chapter of the fifth treatise of his “best-selling” *Tercer abecedario espiritual*, Osuna writes that one’s inveterate sins (*envejados pecados*) are brought to the light for processing (“[Dios]

¹ “Ita fornicator anima, cum avertitur abs te et quaerit extra te ea quae pura et liquida non invenit, nisi cum redit ad te.”

trújolos al sentido reprobado”) in a process he calls internal warfare (*guerras interiores*) and a war of thoughts (*guerras de pensamientos*). Of all the possible sins that are brought to the surface in this becoming-aware process, the first is fornication. In this instance, it seems clear Osuna means sexual misconduct. The misconduct starts in thought, as *malas cogitaciones y pensamientos*. Given Osuna’s great popularity and known influence on San Juan’s spiritual colleague Teresa de Jesús (Teresa of Avila), it seems reasonable that San Juan borrowed Osuna’s use of *fornicación* to refer to wandering from the love of God; the difference is that for Osuna, the wandering is still in the realm of choice. For San Juan, one has not actually wandered but rather feels that way due to the *sequedad*, the anhedonia that those in the dark night suffer. And of course spiritual problems have their physical correlate. *Fornicación* can also mean coitus, as it does for Osuna. In sin, the spirit becomes flesh and metaphor becomes literal. In sanctification, the opposite process is true. In the mystical process, the literal/metaphorical Gestalt collapses into non-dualism. The great paradox of the dark night is that while the adept works for self-improvement, he seems to get worse; San Juan makes it clear that this process is necessary (I.14.4) and automatic.

Something Beyond Free Will: Automaticity

What distinguishes the dark night from ordinary moral living or self-improvement is its automaticity, which San Juan calls “passivity” (I.3.3).² San Juan writes that the transformative process is an infusion, and, like a patient receiving a treatment, it is best to stay still: “los bienes que Dios por medio de aquella paz y ocio del alma está sentando e imprimiendo en ella” (I.10.5). According to San Juan, God communicates to the soul by means of “espíritu puro” (I.9.8), leaving the understanding without support, the will without strength, and the memory without reason (I.9.7). One does not understand what is happening as it happens. This is what surely feels like madness, so much so that the aspirant will leave the spiritual path unless someone tells him what is happening (I.10.2).³ To discover that your human psychological faculties cannot help you would lead you to doubt your mental health.

Chadwick, a psychologist whose own psychotic breakdown has formed part of his research, writes subtly and understandingly about the difference between mysticism and psychosis in ways reminiscent of Juan de la Cruz. “The particular motivational

² The automaticity of the mystical experience is commonplace in mystical writings. For example, Eckhart von Hohenheim writes about the need for passivity on the part of man and the compulsion of God to act when man is ready in Predigt 103. Eckhart explains that man must take his attention off what we would call sense experience, and that, having done so, God must “pour” himself into man at this time: “Wâ oder wenne dich god bereit vindet, sô muoz er wûrken und sich in dich ergiezen” (485: Where or when God finds you ready, he must then work and pour Himself in you”).

³ Teresa de Jesús writes very humanly about abandoning spiritual exercises when it become difficult: “Todos decimos que lo queremos; mas como aun es menester más para que del todo posea el Señor el alma, no basta decirlo, como no bastó al mancebo cuando le dijo el Señor que quería ser perfecto” (3 M 1.6). Teresa de Jesús is referring to Matthew 19: 16-22, a story about renunciation.

quality that mediated the switch from the mystical to the psychotic in my case was undoubtedly self-doubt" (Chadwick 86).⁴ What San Juan calls "infusion" by "pure spirit" has a clinical correlative: Deikman and Frith both suggest that psychosis is caused by the failed functioning of a hypothetical mechanism, "a stimulus barrier" or some kind of cognitive inhibitor, which filters out enough extraneous information to make focused attention possible (cited in Claridge 98). In such a schema, the ego would thus be a kind of focus, a fictional apparatus set in place to focus experience into a coherent self, or functional narrative.⁵ The philosophers, psychologists, and others working under the auspices of "cognitive science" have called into question the unity of the self, conscious choice, and other hallmarks of the common sense view of self. In a widely-disseminated 1999 paper, Bargh and Chartrand argue that "conscious choice and deliberate intention" play a minimal role in our actions and thought, and argue for environmental and other influences. The authors review scores of experiments in which subjects' behavior was primed and influenced from the outside beyond their conscious awareness for good and ill. The passivity of San Juan's dark night recalls the automaticity of our daily functioning—something other than conscious choice and deliberately-willed actions guides us. According to Bargh and Chartrand, we are hardwired to imitate and to automate, as these serve socially adaptive functions (467). As a religious text promising the kind of extraordinary freedom and happiness that religions promise, San Juan's *Dark Night* is meant to guide one through an awareness of one's programming. The proper response to the dark night is the realization and yielding to the automaticity of the self. Seeing the self as programmed automaticity contradicts the foundational Western concept of free will but fully accords with Vedanta, Mahayana, and other Eastern philosophical and religious traditions, and has "gone mainstream" in writers such as Sam Harris (see, Harris' *Free Will*). The reason for the passivity of the soul in the dark night is, according to San Juan, because the soul cannot purge itself.

[Dios] sana el alma de todo lo que ella no alcanzaba a remediarse; porque, por más que el alma se ayude, no puede ella activamente purificarse de manera que esté dispuesta en la menor parte para la divina unión de perfección de amor.
(I.3.3)

The complete lack of control of self, the inability to fix oneself, resembles the compulsivity of addictions insofar as the will is useless. The three spirits of the dark night, including fornication are those areas of self that one cannot fix alone. Folk psychology does not have a place for motivation beyond the individual will except the subconscious, but traditional Christian psychology is radically oriented toward precisely this place. The loss of will power is pathological in the DSM; it is called

⁴ Chadwick's poignant admission helps us value Juan de la Cruz' treatise not so much as a guide for Catholic saints as it is for those who, through inevitable human development, reach a state of ego-breakdown, a high state of personal development discussed by humanistic psychologists like Abraham Maslow and transpersonal philosophers like Ken Wilber.

⁵ I am borrowing and adapting liberally from Daniel Dennet's theory of the self as a fiction (see Dennet, Daniel. "The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity." *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives*. Eds. F. Kessel, P. Cole and D. Johnson. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum 1992).

“impulse disorder” and leads to “substance dependence,” and one of the criteria for the latter is “a persistent desire or unsuccessful efforts to cut down or control substance use” (181), which sounds like a cultural equivalent of San Juan’s *apetitos y pasiones*.

San Juan’s *negarse a sí mismo* (or Osuna’s *vaciarnos de nosotros mismos*) is not an act of will power, but a relinquishment of the will. It is an abandonment of self to a larger identity structure. The leitmotiv of the treatise is its automaticity, which Juan de la Cruz explains in the Catholic terms of God’s will, writing that it is God who puts the aspirant into the dark night (I.1.1, etc.). In modern psychological terms, we might say call these developmental stages. The lustful preacher is an archetype in Western culture; perhaps behind the archetype is a cognitive truth—what Freud called drives cannot be fixed through the will but only through a deeper process.

Integration of Opposites

In another section San Juan discusses *lujuria spiritual* (I.4), including *movimientos torpes* caused by one’s habituated likes (I.4.2) or by the devil (I.4.3) or by fear (I.4.4). This also recalls Osuna, who wrote that either the devil or one’s habits can lead to bad thoughts (VII.2: *malas cogitaciones y pensamientos*). What are these *movimientos*, *representaciones*, *actos torpes* to which San Juan refers? Are “movements” bodily, such as nocturnal emissions or erections? Does “representations” refer to sexual desire or fantasy? If so, “acts” must refer to sexual misconduct. San Juan makes it clear that these do not arise on their own but passively (one is not at fault: I.4.4), and that they do not go away ordinarily without a change in “humor” or unless one undergoes the purgation of the dark night (I.4.3). The lack of immediate culpability is clear in San Juan’s explanation that it is often during ritual communion that sensual desires arise (I.4.2). San Juan distinguishes between the higher and lower selves; as the higher self receives delight from prayer, the lower self likewise delights as it is able, i.e. in carnal pleasure (I.4.2).

The failure to integrate lower and higher leads us back to a necessary consideration of the ontological status of metaphor. The development of San Juan’s primary metaphor (*noche*) in the poem “Noche oscura” has been attributed to a Muslim folklore tradition (López-Baralt 205), ideas borrowed from Teresa de Jesús (Castro Sánchez 292), and to his incarceration in Toledo (Rodríguez),⁶ to name just three recent theories. The point is that the metaphors, for as much as literary scholarship might be habituated to think of them as mental operations free of anything material,

⁶ “Y si llegó a escribir las ocho canciones del poema de la Noche en la cárcel, tendríamos la narración anticipada de la fuga de la cárcel con no pocos de los detalles que se dieron en su evasión: sale en noche oscura, sale sin ser notado, es decir, detenido por quienes dormían a la puerta de su cárcel, estando ya su casa sosegada. Es fray Juan en persona quien comentando los últimos versos de la primera canción nos pone la clave autobiográfica en las manos: «Toma por metáfora el mísero estado del cautiverio, del cual el que se libra tiene por dichosa ventura, sin que se lo impida alguno de los prisioneros» [543]. A través de la letra de sus poemas compuestos y transcritos en la cárcel toledana hemos podido captar, al menos atisbar, las vivencias impresionantes de nuestro prisionero” (Rodríguez, Kindle locations 4613–4619).

are precise indicators of embodied experience.⁷ San Juan's mystical truth shows that the body and spirit are entangled. One cannot progress in spirit without the body. Fornication forms part of the textual heuristic because coitus becomes moral only by the interior motivations and contextual relations that make it vicious or virtuous or pathological or beautiful or whatever. Fornication, like the dark night, is a spiritual experience, with a physical correlate, which can never be causal. In its essence, fornication is yielding; yielding is worship, and San Juan's mystical truth is that one should only yield to that power capable of integrating higher and lower, spiritual and physical.

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⁷ Lakoff and Johnson make a lengthy case for the embodied foundation of abstract thought.