

John of the Cross

Spiritual Canticle 19-21



John of the Cross : *'The Spiritual Canticle'*.

Stanza 19 (Transposed from Stanza 32 in the first version of the Canticle)

Composed while John was prior at Granada, 1582-1584

Hide Yourself, my Love;
Turn Your face towards the mountains
And do not speak;
But look at those companions
Going with her [my soul] to strange islands.

- 'God has shone in our hearts'(2Corinthians 4:6-7, referred to in 19.1).
- 'My dear Spouse, withdraw to the innermost part of my soul and communicate Yourself in secret'(19.3).
- 'She can be satisfied only with God's face, which is a communication of the essence of the divinity to the soul. This communication is brought about only through a certain contact of the soul with the divinity'(19.4).

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Hide Yourself, my Love;
Turn Your face towards the mountains
And do not speak;
But look at those companions
Going with her [the soul] to strange islands.

- She is beyond images and thoughts which cannot receive the communication which she desires (19.5).
- Fall in love with my soul which you have made beautiful with the graces ('**those companions**') which you have bestowed upon me (19.6).
- Let me go to You in ways that are beyond the scope of (**strange** to) imagination and thought (19.7).

‘Transforming her into his love, God gives her his own strength by which she can love Him. As if He were to put an instrument into her hands and show her how it works by operating it jointly with her, He shows her how to love and gives her the ability to do so’(Spiritual Canticle 38.4).

‘You must be content simply with a loving and peaceful attentiveness to God, and live without the concern, without the effort, and without the desire to taste or feel Him. All these desires disquiet the soul and distract it from the peaceful quiet and sweet idleness of the contemplation which is being communicated to it’(Dark Night I.10.4).

‘Pure contemplation lies in receiving’(Living Flame 3.36).

‘God is carrying you. That is why, although you are in fact moving at God’s pace, you do not experience moving’(Living Flame 3.67).

In general terms contemplation can be defined as 'A loving communion in which the heart is awake and attentive and the mind rests in knowing.' Authors distinguish three kinds of contemplation.

1. Aesthetic contemplation: the delight we have when we experience beauty and sense that we are one with it.
2. Intellectual contemplation: the delight we experience through insight, including the delight we experience in accepting the truths of faith and enjoying the light which they radiate.
3. God is experienced not as an object but as a subject. For we experience ourselves as being one in a communion of love with the source of our being.

‘Out of the darkness of the mystery there arises, through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, a confused light, an I-know-not-what, that makes one find peace and sweetness in the mystery, that holds faith there or brings it back, freeing it from the discursive operations of the intellect and causing it to find rest and support in this light beyond all distinct lights’(Marie-Eugène *I want to see God* page 463).

‘The soul finds itself calmed, enveloped by another in a mantle of recollection. A gentle force holds it in recollection ... The Master himself creates a disposition of silent attention and peaceful submission’(Marie-Eugène *I want to see God* pages 8-9).

‘This contemplative prayer begins with a passive experience of recollection, a gentle drawing of the faculties inward’(Kavanaugh, in his Introduction to The Interior Castle).

Our attention in contemplation is not focused on the insights received, important though these are.

Nor is our attention on the accompanying psycho-somatic phenomena, however impressive these might be.

Our attention is on God who brings about the transforming union effected by love. In contemplation we are purified, illumined and united to God in love. We are transformed into love by the all-consuming love which is God, like a log being transformed into flame by an all-consuming fire. In contemplation God communicates a secret wisdom which he infuses into the soul through love.

Contemplation is sustained above all by peaceful surrender and humility.

‘John of the Cross writes for contemplatives whom he wants to take by the hand at a definite point on their way: at the crossroads where most of them are perplexed and know not what to do, because in the way they have so far pursued they are suddenly confronted by insuperable obstacles. The new way that opens before them leads through impenetrable darkness - who would be brave enough to enter on it? The two roads in question are those of meditation and contemplation. So far the hour of meditation has been devoted to exercising the powers of the soul, perhaps according to the Ignatian method: we have used our senses, our imagination, memory, understanding and will.

(1) But now these refuse to work; all efforts are in vain. The spiritual exercises, until then a source of interior joy, now become a torment, unbearably arid and ineffective.

(2) On the other hand, there is no inclination either to take interest in worldly things.

(3) The soul would like best to be quite still without moving, letting all its powers rest. But this seems sloth and waste of time. This, roughly, is the state of the soul which God wants to introduce into the dark night.'

'Take pleasure in being alone and wait with loving attentiveness upon God, without making any particular meditation, in inward peace and quiet and rest'(Ascent II.13.4; see Dark Night I.9.8).

Contemplation: an experience of love

The experience of contemplative prayer is before all else an experience of love. We experience 'God's love which has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us'(Romans 5:5). Like a drop of water we are drawn into the ocean and absorbed into it. Being an experience of love, there is joy, a sense of belonging, communion, and peace. This is the love for which we are made and for which we long.

'The important thing is not to think much but to love much. Love does not consist in great delight but in desiring with strong determination to please God in everything'(Teresa: Interior Castle 4.1.7).

John of the Cross uses the image of light passing through a room (Ascent II.14.9).

If there is nothing to block the light, we do not see it. When there is dust in the air, the obstruction makes visible the direction of the beam of light. The obstructions are real, but let us not concentrate so much on them that we forget that we see them only because God is bathing us in his light. We are not to let distractions focus our attention. There is often nothing one can do about them. We are simply to continue to surrender ourselves into the arms of love. We are called to believe that God is shedding his light upon our souls at a level below experience.

Edith Stein in her book *The Science of the Cross* (pages 25-28) spells out elements of John's use of the symbol of night.

On the one hand, night envelops us and all things; it threatens to swallow us up; what it hides is still there but is indistinct, invisible, without form; it impedes movement and paralyses our faculties; it induces fear; it condemns us to solitude and is a foretaste of death.

On the other hand, night softens and smoothes what is hard, sharp or crude; it reveals subtle features which are lost in daylight; it drowns out the noises of the day; it quietens the spirit, freed from the busyness of the day and gives deep and gentle repose. So it is with the mystic night of contemplation which arises from within the soul.

John of the Cross : *'The Spiritual Canticle'*.

Stanzas 20-21 (Transposed from Stanza 29-30 in the first version of the Canticle)

(The Bridegroom speaks)

Stanza 20

Swift-winged birds

Lions, stags and leaping roes,

Mountains, lowlands and river banks,

Waters, winds and heat,

Watching fears of night.

Stanza 21

By the pleasant lyres

And the siren's song, I conjure you

To cease your anger

And not touch the wall,

That the bride may sleep in deeper peace.

- 'The Bridegroom speaks these two stanzas in which he completes the purification of the soul, strengthening and disposes his bride in both sensory and spiritual parts for spiritual marriage' (20.3).

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(The Bridegroom speaks)

Stanza 20

Swift-winged birds
Lions, stags and leaping roes,
Mountains, lowlands and river banks,
Waters, winds and heat,
Watching fears of night.

- 'She must hold the door of her will open to the Bridegroom that He may enter through the complete and true "Yes" of love'(20.2).
- 'Because God vitally transforms her into Himself, all her faculties, appetites and movements lose their natural imperfection'(20.4).
- God strengthens her against cowardice which causes her to hold back, and quietens disturbances and inordinate activity of the passions. Even recollection of sin no longer distracts or causes sorrow or grief (20.7).

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(The Bridegroom speaks)

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Mountains, lowlands and river banks,

Waters, winds and heat,

Watching fears of night.

- 'Your will be done'(Matthew 6:10; referred to in 20.11).
- 'A spring welling up to eternal life'(John 4:14; referred to in 20.11).
- 'All new joys and satisfactions serve to awaken her to a delight in what she already possesses and experiences within herself'(20.12).

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(The Bridegroom speaks)

Stanza 21

By the pleasant lyres
And the siren's song, I conjure you
To cease your anger
And not touch the wall,
That the bride may sleep in deeper peace.

- 'Do not disturb or awaken the Beloved until she wishes.'

(Canticle 3:5; referred to in 21.19).

Following these words of the Bridegroom, the bride enters the state of spiritual marriage. Stanzas 22-40 speak of this experience. It has been a long, courageous journey into the centre of her soul, made possible only because it has been, from the beginning, a journey of love.