

## Symbolism of Wound in the Spiritual Canticle of St. John of the Cross

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### Introduction

An accomplished Spanish poet, mystic and reformer of the 16th Century, John of the Cross utilized symbolism in his exploration of Spiritual Life.<sup>1</sup> Analysis of the works of John of the Cross reveals that poetry can be understood as being the primary mode through which he presents his doctrine of the processes characterizing the Spiritual Life. It has to be noted; that it was only after requests for explanations of the poetry that John of the Cross, wrote prose as explanatory notes to his poetry.

### Spiritual Life: A Process of Purification of the Bride

John of the Cross, presents the Spiritual Life as a process of purification of the Soul through various levels and stages with the ultimate goal being unification of the Beloved with the Bride (Soul). Through intricate connections, ordinary and perhaps mundane words acquire new meaning in the poetry of John. From the wounding of love, the Bride is led through, “mountains and lonely wooded valleys” into “sweet garden of her desire,” where the Bride dwells “in the serene night with a flame that is consuming and painless”.<sup>2</sup> Through a bold and well calculated rejection of common and conventional usage of themes upon poetry, John generates a rich synthesis of meaning in the Spiritual Life discourse which in *The Spiritual Canticle* is presented through poetic communication between the Beloved and the Bride.<sup>3</sup> By great wit, John transforms complicated and complex concepts of the Spiritual Life into beautiful, comprehensible and applicable themes through poetry rich in symbolism.

### Symbolism in the Poetry of John of the Cross

Through various dictions relating to the ordinary and mundane activities of the human condition, John manages to communicate the intricacies of the Spiritual Life in a poetically captivating manner. In the *Spiritual Canticle*, symbol becomes for me, the most interesting part of

the poetry of John. In this current project I understand symbols as a sign that has further layers of meaning in it. By being broader and more ambiguous in meaning, symbols are differentiated from signs.

In the *Spiritual Canticle*, John of the Cross explores the Spiritual Life in a language that is rich in symbolism. Using simple object choices such as ‘wine cellar’, ‘valley’ and ‘herd’ John creates an environment where the Spiritual Life is understood in a completely new way where the Beloved becomes a part of the Bride on account of the Bride having drunk of her Beloved.<sup>4</sup> Through use of the ocular imagery of drinking, John presents the reality of Spiritual Union between the Beloved and the Bride. It is ingestion of the Beloved by the Bride in ‘the inner wine cellar’ that the union between the Beloved and the Lover is actualized. Through implicit association, the Beloved is recognized as being represented by wine. Wine, therefore, in this instance becomes a symbol of Christ who is the Beloved of the *Spiritual Canticle*.<sup>5</sup> Wine identically relates to the ingestion process and through such ingestion of the Beloved, the Bride is brought into intimate union with the Beloved, whom she has sought in different places only to be found, “in the inner wine cellar”. The word choice of John, in this instance shows his understanding of the realities of Spiritual Life as having its final goal in the union of the Beloved and the Bride.

### **John of the Cross in the Context of Carmelite Doctors of the Church**

John of the Cross does not stand alone in understanding the Spiritual Life as a Journey in search of the Beloved. Apparently, this view of the Spiritual Life as a Journey is drawn from the life of the Prophet Elijah who is recognized as a Figure of Inspiration by the Carmelites.<sup>6</sup> Distinctive stages of the Spiritual Life as a journey are discernible in the Elijah Cycle of the 1st Book of Kings in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is therefore plausible to consider that the understanding of the Spiritual Life as a journey through various levels and stages is adopted by the Carmelites from the foundational stories of their Spiritual Father.

Teresa of Jesus and Therese of the Child Jesus and Holy Face are the other two Doctors of the Church from the School of Carmel. It is of

special interest to note that in these two female Doctors of the Church, the Spiritual Life is presented in the context of a Journey. Teresa of Jesus with her *Interior Castle* and *The Way of Perfection* characterizes the Spiritual Life as a journey evidenced by the various levels within the walls of the Castle and the Spiritual Union being only achievable after one has journeyed, “*The Way of Perfection*”. Therese of the Child Jesus and Holy Face, in her, ‘little way’ where there is use of elevators, in *The Story of a Soul*, clearly advances the same thesis of the Spiritual Life as a Journey. Thus, the three Carmelite Doctors of the Church are seen as having a common understanding of the Spiritual Life as a Journey. Furthermore, it is recognized from the foregoing that the Carmelite Doctors of the Church seem to impart their understanding of the Spiritual Life primarily through the use of symbolism.

### **Symbolism in The Spiritual Canticle**

In its endeavour to explore the concept of Symbolism in the poetry of John of the Cross, the project will concentrate its attention on the *Spiritual Canticle*. Recourse to other poems of John of the Cross will be made where such a detour assists in clarification of symbolism in the *Spiritual Canticle*. Instances abound where some people are of the opinion that John of the Cross is too difficult to understand, furthermore, that his use of symbolism is difficult to interpret. Nevertheless, I am of the humble opinion that with the right interpretive key (that is, within Carmelite Spirituality), John of the Cross is one of the most interesting Doctors of the Church.

This project explores ‘wound’ which is one of the symbols that John uses in the *Spiritual Canticle*. Furthermore, the project attempts at identifying the key elements of wound as a symbol appearing in *The Spiritual Canticle*, describing the manner in which John constructs this symbol. It is expected that this project will provide an analysis of some of the symbolic nature of wound in *The Spiritual Canticle*.

The term symbol enters into the English language as a derivative from the Greek *symbolon* and Latin *symbolum* which etymologically means a token, a sign. In its usage in the literary sense symbol denotes a communicative element representing or standing for a complex of person, object,

group, or idea, it is more than just mere representation. Furthermore, a symbol denotes through representation a complex set of abstract values. Symbol is something which is more than what it is, it goes beyond its literal meaning, it is characterized with further layers of meaning and at times it goes beyond what the writer consciously intended.

Poetry has the capacity of communicating both positive and negative elements. In the poetry of John of the Cross, this characteristic of poetry being capable of communicating contrasting elements is clearly exemplified. *The Spiritual Canticle* contains in its stanzas the reality of death and life, of wounding and healing thus making *The Spiritual Canticle* polyphonic. This current project considers only four themes of wound as a symbol contained in *The Spiritual Canticle*. The project attends to the following themes; firstly, wound as genesis of encounter between the Bride and Beloved, secondly, wound as process of tearing the sweet veil, thirdly, wound as expression of love and lastly the intention of the Beloved in wounding the Bride.

### **Wound: Genesis of Encounter between Bride and the Beloved**

Quantitatively, the symbol wound is the predominant symbol in *The Spiritual Canticle*. The symbol occurs both explicitly and implicitly. Five times the symbol is explicit and in four instances it is implicit. To articulate the dynamics characterizing the relationship between the Bride and the Beloved, John employs the symbol of wound. As a sign, wound denotes that which is unpleasant and as John puts it a form of suffering.<sup>7</sup> It thus becomes curious for John to use wound as the principal expression of the relationship between the Beloved and the Bride since this relationship is characterized by other realities apart from suffering. Only when considered as a symbol, does wound expose the multiplicity of the intricacies of the relationship between the Bride and the Beloved and its complexity.

John presents the relationship between the Bride and the Beloved as having its genesis through the process of the wounding of the Bride by the Beloved. It is understood here that John is of the opinion that the relationship between the Bride and the Beloved begins with an invitation extended by the Beloved towards the Bride. An invitation made through

the love of the Beloved which wounds the Bride.<sup>8</sup> This invitation is in the form of the wounding of the Bride, whose wounding prompts her constant search for Beloved. The wounding of the Bride in itself necessitates the constant search for the Beloved by the Bride. Mourning the absence of the Beloved, the Bride states, “You fled like the stag, after wounding me”.<sup>9</sup> This notion of the Beloved being the source of the wound that characterizes the Bride is reiterated in *The Dark Night* where the Bride says, “as I parted his hair, it wounded my neck”.<sup>10</sup> Through the use of personification John exposes his understanding of the Spiritual Journey as being characterized by difficulties as the Bride strives for communion with the Beloved.

The Bride is presented as being fully aware of the reality that, absence of the Beloved creates a thirsting for the Beloved that can only be quenched by union with the Beloved.<sup>11</sup> Leonardo Doohan believes that the wound that characterizes the Bride is attributed to the action of the Holy Spirit.<sup>12</sup> The Bride experiences this action of the Holy Spirit as a wound through the process of purification that she undergoes as preparation for her union with the Beloved. Through an increase in the desire for the Beloved that the Bride experiences her capacity for full communion with the Beloved is attained. This wounding is experienced as a “flame of love that tenderly wounds,” the soul of the Bride, the wounding occurs at the very centre of the Bride.<sup>13</sup> The Bride is thus freed from all other desires and now thirsts for the Beloved and only finds solace in the wounding action of the Holy Spirit experienced as a flame of love. It is at the deepest centre of the Bride that she experiences this wounding action of the Beloved.<sup>14</sup>

### **Wound: The Process of Tearing of the Veil**

The process of the encounter between the Bride and the Beloved presents another stratum upon which John constructs the symbol of wound to explicate the processes that characterize the Spiritual Journey of the Bride towards union with the Beloved. John introduces the symbol of wounding functioning as a process of emancipation of the Bride by the Beloved.<sup>15</sup> Through an appeal to those already in freedom the Bride requests that she be wounded even more.<sup>16</sup> Freedom is placed in direct

opposition with attachment in this instance, on the one side is freedom experienced as union with the Beloved pitted against attachment experienced as separation from the Beloved. Through paradox, John here constructs one of his most impressive points regarding the Spiritual Journey. Freedom is often associated with independence of entities yet John presents union between Bride and Beloved as an expression of the full freedom of the Bride. In *The Spiritual Canticle* 7, the Bride states;

All who are free  
tell me a thousand graceful things  
of you;  
all wound me more  
and leave me dying  
of, ah, I-don't-know-what behind  
their stammering<sup>17</sup>

Communion between the Bride and the Beloved is presented in the form of union and thus distinguished from attachment. Where union achieves freedom for the Bride, attachment yields dependence and confusion.

Further analysis of wound as symbol in this part of *The Spiritual Canticle*, points to the process of the wounding of the Bride by the Beloved as being, the “tear through the veil of this sweet encounter”.<sup>18</sup> The symbol of wound is here understood as pointing to the reality that while the Bride experiences her encounter with the Beloved as characterized by pain, it is a sweet pain as the Bride is torn from attachments and experiences freedom in the tearing of the veil of sweet encounter.<sup>19</sup> In the process of self-abandonment, the Bride experiences the encounters with the Beloved that constitute the delightful. In the wonderful pain of encounter with Beloved, the wonderful pain of love heals the Bride.<sup>20</sup>

Informed by the foregoing, the wound is understood to symbolize the painful moment of a severing of the attachments that ordinarily prevent the Bride from coming into union with the Beloved.<sup>21</sup> Attachments by their very nature impede the union of the Bride with Beloved. No matter how minute attachments may be, they block that initial contact between the Bride and the Beloved. The initial encounter of the Bride with the Beloved, brings to the Bride a consciousness of the fact that attachments

are a stumbling block preventing her attainment of a sweet encounter with the Beloved. The Bride is cognisant of the fact that only the Beloved has the capacity and power for her healing.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, the Bride recognizes that the messengers, sent by the Beloved only point to the direction of union with the Beloved. They only mitigate the pain of her wounding but her real cure is in union with the Beloved. The wounding therefore, of the Bride by the Beloved is seen as a tearing of the veil of separation and ultimately leads to union with the Beloved.

### **Wound: An Expression of Love**

In *The Spiritual Canticle* 34, John explains the symbolism of wound as being an expression of Love. This reality of the Bride's experience of wounding as an expression of love is fully captured by the Beloved when he states; "and in solitude he guides her, he alone who also bears in solitude the wound of love".<sup>23</sup> John presents a reciprocity of the Beloved towards the Bride in this stanza; the Bride is able to love the Beloved on account of the Beloved having loved her first.<sup>24</sup> The qualification of the wound that characterizes both the Bride and the Beloved as the wound of love presents the third element in the symbol of wound as articulated by John in *The Spiritual Canticle*.

This stanza of *The Spiritual Canticle* presents the full reality of the environment in which the growth of the relationship between the Bride and the Beloved is attained. The Bride having previously left all that is beautiful to the eye, which the Bride enumerated as:

O woods and thickets  
planted by the hand of my Beloved!  
O green meadow,  
coated, bright, with flowers,  
tell me, has he passed by you?<sup>25</sup>

Having gone through a difficult journey of letting go that which is beautiful, the Bride is released from entanglement by attachments. It is love in itself that releases the Bride from attachments which separates her from the Beloved and it empowers her to love and seek the Beloved more sincerely.<sup>26</sup> This process of attainment of freedom by the Bride is characterized by a form of suffering that is borne by both the Bride and

the Beloved. For as the Beloved states, “She lived in solitude, [...] he alone, who also bears in solitude the wound of love”.<sup>27</sup> While the Bride experiences her separation from the Beloved as suffering in the form of a wound, the Beloved on his part experiences suffering in his being separated from his Bride. With love being the emotion that purifies the intention of the Bride towards union with the Beloved, the Beloved continues to draw the Bride towards himself.<sup>28</sup> Knowledge of the Beloved acquired through creatures becomes the constant reminder, the very pain of love to the Bride, that she is a state of separation from the object of her desires, the Beloved.<sup>29</sup> Wound thus becomes the symbol of the love which purifies and unites the Bride to the Beloved.

Informed by the foregoing, it thus becomes plausible to subscribe to the notion that the wounding of the Bride occurs in the context of love. The Bride is wounded by and for love. While suffering the pain of being wounded by encounter with the Beloved, the Bride invites the Beloved, “all wound me more” as she has realized it is only in union with the Beloved that true love is attained.<sup>30</sup> This process of wounding of the Beloved is the result of “the constant self-giving of God. God gives Himself to man unselfishly.” It is an invitation to the Bride that instead of choosing the gifts of the Beloved, she should rather opt for a choosing of the Giver of the gifts.<sup>31</sup> The messengers have failed her and only the love of the Beloved can bring true union with source and summit of her true desire, union with the Beloved.

### **The Beloved’s Intention in Wounding of the Bride**

Through symbolism of wound, John proceeds to explicate the intention of the Beloved in wounding the Bride. At her wits end, the Bride rhetorically questions the Beloved regarding his intention in wounding her. The Bride asks, “Why, since you wounded this heart, don’t you heal it?”<sup>32</sup> Here, it becomes apparent, that the dynamics in the relationship between the Bride and the Beloved seems incomprehensible to the Bride. The intention of the Beloved seems to elude the Bride at this state. For as much as she understands that she carries in herself the wound of love, she fails to see the rationale of the Beloved in wounding her.<sup>33</sup> The actions of the Beloved confuse the Bride, as she understands that it is love that has

wounded her and yet her search for this love only yields further pain as she becomes even more conscious of her separation from the object of her love.

Noting that love is never idle, John recognizes that the intention of the Beloved in wounding the Bride is that she becomes correctly disposed towards the source of her existence. The Bride was created for communion with the Beloved and attachments that characterizes the Bride have corrupted her. She fails to find satisfaction in creation for she was purely created for union with the Beloved.<sup>34</sup> In spite of creation revealing something of the reality of God, it is only in the Bride being taken fully into the possession of the Beloved that she can find true healing which she has earnestly sought in her questioning of the Beloved;

Why, since you have wounded  
this heart, don't you heal it?  
And why, since you stole it from me,  
do you leave it so,  
and fail to carry off what you have  
stolen?

It is of keen interest that John here uses 'heart' as a self-reference of the Bride. The heart is the seat of emotions and in the Brides being stolen by the Beloved and yet the Beloved not taking that he has stolen brings confusion to the Bride.<sup>35</sup> John has the Bride in total confusion as she seeks the intention of the Beloved. It is to enkindle love and delight in the Beloved that leads the Beloved wounding the Bride. The bride is wounded such that she seeks and comes to full union with the Beloved.

Moreover, the wounding by the Beloved is intended at extinguishing the miseries that characterizes the Bride. The wound of the Bride thus becomes a constant reminder to the Bride that there is something lacking in her that is only achievable through union with the Beloved.<sup>36</sup> Most of the images that John employs in this part of *The Spiritual Canticle* puts to the fore the confusion and helplessness of the Bride. She is presented as constantly seeking that which she seems to be in possession of. Her stolen heart is there and yet the miseries she experiences remind her that her heart is stolen. She receives arrows that pierce her to the core from what she conceives of the Beloved.<sup>37</sup>

In remaining hidden to the Bride, the Beloved intends that the Bride is stripped of all that prevents union between Beloved and Bride. In addition, the Bride is healed from disfigurement by sin through her union with the Beloved.<sup>38</sup> John is here recognized as using a paradox in presenting the intention of the Beloved in his wounding of the Bride. The Bride is wounded in order that she is healed from the effects of sin. It is thus apparent here that John rejects the conventional usage of wound and through this rejection points to the reality of healing coming from wounding. Progression in the Spiritual Journey is thus portrayed by John of the Cross as being characterized by moments where the Bride fails to understand the action of the Beloved. The Bride seems to have negative knowledge in the sense that she knows that she does not know the intentions that the Beloved has for her.

### **Fundamental Convictions and Conclusion**

Drawing from the foregoing, it is noted that John of the Cross uses wound not as a sign but as a symbol. As presented above, wound in *The Spiritual Canticle* exposes a multiplicity of meanings thus denoting it is not a sign but a symbol since it contains more than one meaning. The project explored the various meanings of wound in *The Spiritual Canticle*, noting that John uses a number of images as symbols to communicate the realities of the Spiritual Journey. Wound as a symbol in *The Spiritual Canticle* has a plurality of meanings and this project only concentrated on four of these meanings. In the first instance, wound was considered as the genesis of the encounter between the Bride and the Beloved. Upon this encounter through wounding the process of tearing the veil of separation between the Bride and Beloved is advanced, through the expression of love. It is the intention of Beloved in wounding the Bride, that she is brought into union with Him and thus the Bride purged of her disordered affections becomes one with Christ, the Beloved. In consideration of the foregoing, one comes to the conclusion that through symbolism John of the Cross explores the relationship between the Bride and the Beloved.

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<sup>1</sup> Graviss, Dennis. *Portrait of the Spiritual Director in the Writings of Saint John of the Cross*. (Roma: Edizione Carmelitane, 2014), 66.

- <sup>2</sup> John of the Cross. *The Collected Works of John of the Cross: Spiritual Canticle*. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez. Trans. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 14, 22,32,39.
- <sup>3</sup> Muto, Susan. *John of the Cross: The Dark Night*. (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1994),25.
- <sup>4</sup> *The Spiritual Canticle* 26.
- <sup>5</sup> John of the Cross. *The Collected Works of John of the Cross: The Spiritual Canticle*. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez. Trans. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 575.
- <sup>6</sup> Chalmers, Joseph. *The Sound of Silence: Listening to the Word of God with Elijah the Prophet*. (Faversham, Kent: St. Albert Press, 2007), 11.
- <sup>7</sup> John of the Cross. *The Collected Works of John of the Cross: The Spiritual Canticle*. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez. Trans. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 478.
- <sup>8</sup> John of the Cross. *The Collected Works of John of the Cross: The Spiritual Canticle*. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez. Trans. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 478.
- <sup>9</sup> *The Spiritual Canticle* 1.
- <sup>10</sup> John of the Cross. *The Collected Works of John of the Cross: The Dark Night*. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez. Trans. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), *The Dark Night* 7.
- <sup>11</sup> Mina, Macario Ofilada. *Flame in the Night Canticle of the Mountain*. (Roma: Edizione Carmelitane, 2015), 104.
- <sup>12</sup> Doohan, Leonardo. *The Contemporary Challenge of John of the Cross*. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1995),100.
- <sup>13</sup> John of the Cross. *The Collected Works of John of the Cross: The Living Flame of Love*. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez. Trans. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), *The Living Flame of Love* 1.
- <sup>14</sup> Thompson, Colin P. *St John of the Cross: Songs in the Night*. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 245.
- <sup>15</sup> John of the Cross. *The Collected Works of John of the Cross: The Spiritual Canticle*. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez. Trans. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 500.
- <sup>16</sup> *The Spiritual Canticle* 7.
- <sup>17</sup> *The Spiritual Canticle* 7.
- <sup>18</sup> *The Living Flame of Love* 1.
- <sup>19</sup> John of the Cross. *The Collected Works of John of the Cross: The Spiritual Canticle*. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez. Trans. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 507.
- <sup>20</sup> Dombrowski, Daniel. *St. John of the Cross: An Appreciation*. (Albany: State University of New York, 1992), 97.
- <sup>21</sup> John of the Cross. *The Collected Works of John of the Cross: The Spiritual Canticle*. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez. Trans. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 508.
- <sup>22</sup> *The Spiritual Canticle* 6.
- <sup>23</sup> *The Spiritual Canticle* 34
- <sup>24</sup> Graviss, Dennis. *Portrait of the Spiritual Director in the Writings of Saint John of the Cross*. (Roma: Edizione Carmelitane, 2014), 104.
- <sup>25</sup> *The Spiritual Canticle* 4.

- <sup>26</sup> Graviss, Dennis. *Portrait of the Spiritual Director in the Writings of Saint John of the Cross*. (Roma: Edizione Carmelitane, 2014), 114.
- <sup>27</sup> *The Spiritual Cantic* 34.
- <sup>28</sup> Mina, Macario Ofilada. *Flame in the Night Cantic of the Night*. (Roma: Edizione Carmelitane, 2015), 104.
- <sup>29</sup> Herrera, R. A. *Silent Music: The Life, Work and Thought of John of the Cross*. (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 94.
- <sup>30</sup> *The Spiritual Cantic* 7.
- <sup>31</sup> Mina, Macario Ofilada. *Flame in the Night Cantic of the Night*. (Roma: Edizione Carmelitane, 2015), 144.
- <sup>32</sup> *The Spiritual Cantic* 9.
- <sup>33</sup> John of the Cross. *The Collected Works of John of the Cross: The Spiritual Cantic*. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez. Trans. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 505.
- <sup>34</sup> Mina, Macario Ofilada. *Flame in the Night Cantic of the Night*. (Roma: Edizione Carmelitane, 2015), 115.
- <sup>35</sup> John of the Cross. *The Collected Works of John of the Cross: The Spiritual Cantic*. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez. Trans. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 506.
- <sup>36</sup> John of the Cross. *The Collected Works of John of the Cross: The Spiritual Cantic*. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez. Trans. (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 509.
- <sup>37</sup> *The Spiritual Cantic* 8.
- <sup>38</sup> Mangiaracina, George. *A Lenten Journey with St. John of the Cross*. (Wellesley: Christos Publishing, 2009), 167.