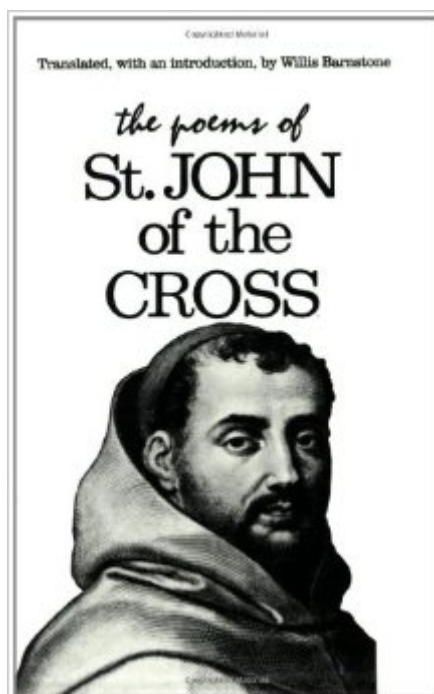


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The Poems Of St. John Of The Cross



Synopsis

Saint John's poetry of love and joy describes the soul's passage through dark night to final illumination in mystical union with Absolute Being. The allegory the poet uses is that of earthly love, and the poems are strikingly effective on the immediate level of personal experience, quite apart from their theological meanings. Many critics regard the work of Saint John of the Cross (1542-91), the 16th-century mystic, to be among the finest poetry Spain has produced. This bilingual edition, the first in modern English, was originally published in hard cover in 1968 by the Indiana University Press. Most of these poems were written during a period of nine months, in 1577-78, when Saint John (San Juan de la Cruz) was imprisoned and tortured in the dungeon of a small Carmelite monastery in Toledo, and their recurrent motifs are both metaphysical and deeply personal.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Barnstone has done a magnificent job of presenting the poems of St John of the Cross in English with side-by-side Spanish original text. I read Spanish, and have read more than one English translation of St. John of the Cross over the years. Barnstone's is the only one which to my mind maintains the 'alive' quality of the original. His English version of 'Noche Oscura' is particularly inspired. Barnstone also provides informative background information in his introduction to the poems. He has done a wonderful piece of work to make the life and the meaning behind these poems accessible to English speakers.

St. John of the Cross (San Juan de la Cruz) did not write many poems, or, if he did, he took little care to preserve them. Barnstone, in his introduction, thus likens St. John of the Cross to Emily Dickinson, who likewise did not seek widespread distribution of her poetry in her lifetime. There are eleven primary poems, with some small fragments beyond -- in this way, he is more like ancient Greek and Roman obscure poets than his contemporary Iberians, who tended toward overproduction. Barnstone describes St. John's poetry as being of three primary influences -- Italian, Iberian (both Spanish and Portuguese) and Hebrew scriptural poetry. St. John of the Cross was a controversial figure -- imprisoned, tortured, crippled and outcast at various times, at any given point in his life he was more likely to have been excommunicated than canonised. His bitter hardships made his black night, his dark night of the soul, one of incalculable ecstasy in poetic and spiritual disciplines. While he writes in the first person, it is sometimes shocking to realise that a monk vowed to poverty and celibacy would write of such rich and sexual/sensual imagery. In the same sense of poetry that the biblical 'Song of Songs' can be taken in physical and spiritual ways, so too can many of St. John's poetry. His 'Spiritual Canticle' (Cantico Espiritual) is a conversation between bride and bridegroom including the creation around them, in startling terms. It is included here twice, in different redactions. His piece on Psalm 136 -- By the waters of Babylon/Super Flumina Babylonis -- also shows strong biblical influences overlaid by contemporary poetic sensibilities. Barnstone's introduction is a good overview of both of the basic biography and a literary analysis of St. John of the Cross. The dual-language format of this text is of great help to students and scholars who wish to see the original and an interesting translation side by side.

The Poems of Saint John of the Cross is one of my all-time favorite books of poetry. If you want to understand the source of the writings of San Juan de la Cruz, you should read a bit of his history and the circumstances under which much of his poetry was written. It will amaze you.

Everyone is aware of John of the Cross's Dark Night of the Soul, but his poetry is so uplifting and beautiful. The ballads of the Trinity are something of a prayer, like a ballet of words. I read it at least five times to get the whole effect.

If you love St. John of the Cross you love his poetry. He is considered Spain's greatest poet and his poems are deep spiritual encounters with God. You will contemplate for hours...

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