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SPIRIT OF SELF IN THE MYSTIC POETRY OF CLARA JANÉS

Anne Pasero

Clara Janés, born in 1940 in Barcelona and still writing prolifically to this day, is one of Spain's most prominent writers of the contemporary period. She published her first book of poetry, *Las estrellas vencidas* ("The Conquered Stars") in 1964 and has continued to this day, having now produced over thirty books of poetry. In addition, she writes novel, short story, essay, and biography. She is also a translator and, as such, has helped to make known the work of Czech, Turkish, Persian, and Hindi poets among others, both in Spain and beyond. She has also translated from the English and French. During her extensive and productive career, she has won several major literary and translation prizes, foremost among them the National Translation Prize from Spain (1997) and the Gold Medal of Merit presented to her by King Juan Carlos in 2005. In all of her work, Janés reflects a passion for writing and the beauty of the word. She ultimately works to achieve a complete affirmation of life, wherein all elements manifest a communion with the cosmos in a kind of mystical transformation.

Throughout her work, Janés has consistently followed a path that presents and develops facets of love in many of its distinct manifestations—creative, erotic, and spiritual. In her book of poetry published in 1996, *Rosas de fuego* (*Roses of Fire*), Janés succeeds in expressing a mystical state reminiscent in many ways of the famous sixteenth-century poet and saint, John of the Cross, while at the same time creating her own unique vision as she describes the sensations of love

overwhelming her. It is indeed fascinating that, from a contemporary point of view, a twentieth-century perspective, Janés reflects a vision not unlike his but also unique to herself as a woman and a woman writer. Like Saint John of the Cross, she relies on images of nature and erotic images to reveal in the end a state of intense spirituality, while all the while preserving her own uniquely feminine voice. In this paper, I will demonstrate that presentation of states of love in mystical terms represents an authentic means of expression for Janés, not only in all of its spiritual dimension but also for her as a female. As will subsequently become evident, mysticism constitutes one of the most fertile feminine forms of expression, as the French critic Luce Irigaray elaborates, because it allows for the female to free herself from restrictions imposed upon her and to surrender herself freely to a union and re-union (encounter / re-encounter) with the "other" ("La Mystérique"). It offers her the opportunity to affirm herself fully at that moment of sheer ecstasy and to surrender herself to the "fire" of love, which in this book symbolizes the moment of greatest illumination, that moment of leaving oneself to become lost in the "other," in a moment of complete negation that for Janés, as a "mystic" poet and female, is transformed into pure affirmation.

In a recent essay titled "Huellas de mujer en la poesía de Clara Janés" ("Traces of Woman in the Poetry of Clara Janés"), Sharon Ugalde makes reference to this relationship, emphasizing the implicit connection between mysticism and the female voice, referring to Irigaray and alluding to the inevitable affinity between the sixteenth-century spiritual manifestation and the contemporary expression of the feminine (204-205). Given the number of female mystics tracing from ancient times to this day, it is indeed odd that there has not been more attention paid to this natural resonance, this form of expression that can be rendered so effective for the release of intense feelings of love. Only in a few recent studies have critics begun to establish the intimate relationship that definitely exists—and at a very subconscious level besides—between mystical expression and the feminine / feminist voice. In a book published by Cambridge UP in 1995, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, the author Grace Jantzen dedicates the entire volume to the historical and philosophical study of the relationship between women and mysticism, but without delving into the detail of its ramifications for the literary analysis. She marvels that until now there has been so little investigation of the rather intimate

relationship between the spiritual power of women mystics and feminist aspirations:

... there has been virtually no attention paid to the way in which the delimiting of mysticism through the centuries was crucial to maintaining male hierarchical control in church and society, let alone to the ways in which issues of power and gender are intertwined in contemporary philosophical discussions of mystics. Clearly feminists have much to gain from pondering the ingredients which have gone into the construction of mysticism ... (3-4).

Catherine Smith devotes detailed essays to the literary study of the English Protestant mystic Jane Lead, from the seventeenth century. She notes that this affinity between mysticism and feminism is not pure coincidence: "... the coincidence is indeed significant and the reasons for it deserve serious attention. To study mysticism and feminism together is to learn about the links between envisioning power and pursuing it" (184).

The main word in this discussion is power, not only having to do with the special relationship that can and may be established with the beloved (God in this case), but also with the form (voice) with which that sense of fusion and unity can be expressed. It is the voice which, as Smith affirms, is born from mysticism and which enables woman to express herself in a particular unique form, revealing an interior world that is essentially feminine, intuitive and hers alone, and that provides her a sense of authority. This voice is described by Irigaray as "la mystérique," a form of discourse that allows woman to "speak and act publicly" (191). It is through this voice that woman is able to affirm her complete transformation from one into the other, to fuse identities, to lose herself in the beloved, to transcend limits uniting subject and object. This moment represents one of maximum self-affirmation that reinforces her sensation of power and creates for her the possibility of converting her interior world into one that is also open to the outside world. Mysticism, according to Irigaray, consists in a form of expression that is more characteristically subjective and feminine, not easily negated by the rational male, and that better lends itself to the more changing and flexible nature that is woman's, that does not resist being subsumed in the other in order to finally and more fully affirm the feminine self.

In all of Janés' poetic work, and especially in this recent book of a mystical bent, this feminine voice is gradually developed and enriched and begins acquiring more and more power through the poet's expression of her ever more intense spiritual / erotic feelings. As Ugalde iterates in her description of Janés' poetic trajectory, this mystical dimension manifested by the author is neither new nor sudden but has been developing from her initial works, with her perpetual desire for light ("The Conquered Stars;" *En busca de Cordelia*, "In Search of Cordelia," 1975) to the discovery and immersion in it. Another important transition that the poet undergoes to arrive at this highly mystical moment is between poetry of an erotic vein (*Creciente fértil*, "Fertile Crescent," 1989), wherein sentiments of enjoyment and corporeal pleasure are expressed and bluntly erotic images utilized, and this new poetry that reflects a spiritual inclination. Janet Pérez points in this direction: "At the same time that Janés' works become progressively more explicit concerning female sexuality, she clearly affirms woman's right to choose as a subject and not as an object" (212). In agreement with Pérez, and following the development from "Fertile Crescent" up to *Roses of Fire*, what stands out in this particular book is the preeminence of the subject, the feminine self that begins to affirm itself progressively more and more, taking control of the voice in order to create a unique world that is solely hers. It is the voice that gives form to this mystical vision at the same time that it emphasizes the female's control over her own spiritual sphere, as we shall see in the following analysis.

From the book's initial moment, the introductory poem, the poet begins affirming her desire to surrender herself to the beloved and to then become lost in him. She expresses her desire in an active way, repeating the verb in the present to emphasize her will and to stress the permanence and intensity of the moment:

I want to drag the moonlight
 along the waters of the night,
 in them to be a silver oar and to plough through
 and to be one with the star
 that awakens the sleeping path of light.

And then to lose myself
 in a far-off enveloping halo,
 to be fixed in love by the unattainable,
 without being noticed,
 and thus to remain in the desoblivion of the day. (Pasero, 9)¹

The poet's desire to become one with the subject and to lose herself within him stands out, but from a perspective of power. With the image "silver oar," the poet announces control over her destiny and an imprint on it as well. In all of the preparatory poems that relate the subject's search for her beloved, active and energetic verbs stand out, lending force to the poet's will, while she remains anguished in her longing:

1 All English translations of Janés' poetry will come from my translation of *Roses of Fire*. Spanish citations will come from the original source, and will be footnoted as below:

Quiero arrastrar el claro de luna
 sobre las aguas de la noche,
 ser en ellas remo de plata y surcarlas,
 y confundirme luego con la estrella
 que despierta el dormido camino de la luz.

Quiero entonces perderme
 en un nimbo lejano
 quedar fija amando en par de lo inasible,
 sin ser notada,
 y permanecer así
 en el desolvido del día. (9)

I return to the well
 in search of hidden water.
 I penetrate its throat
 and in the shadows I discover
 the skein of iris,
 sustained by the drops,
 still united
 by the unbroken light. (17)²

While she is awaiting the illuminative night, she continues pursuing the fire of her living encounter:

and blindly I seek
 the heart in flames
 so that the branches broken
 during the storm
 burn in its breast. (29)³

She anticipates the desired moment of transcending limits both temporal and spatial in order to emphasize the eternity of the moment:

Star of sunset, path
 towards landscapes even more remote,
 with my eyes I can attain you
 and before the shadow overtakes me
 I withdraw into myself
 and go back to the days of Utnapistim

2

Vuelvo al brocal
 en pos del agua oculta.
 Penetro en su garganta
 y en las sombras descubro
 la madeja del iris,
 que las gotas retienen,
 aún en la unidad
 por la luz no dispersa. (13)

3

y busco a ciegas
 el corazón en llamas
 para que arda en su seno
 el ramaje quebrado
 durante la tormenta (19)

and contemplate the lands
bathed by the Euphrates. (27)⁴

And Janés takes advantage of images well-known for their expression of mystical states, such as those stemming from nature. The soul's trajectory towards reunion with the beloved is described in traditional terms but with a mixture of metaphors:

and flows, all love, toward its destiny,
pure offering,
pure submissive way to enter
and will bathe the chasms in splendor
and stripping nothingness forever. (37)⁵

When Janés arrives at the moment of maximum intensity, the point of describing the mystical union, the barriers between one and the other, subject and object, begin to disintegrate. As Irigaray affirms, "... this is the place where the 'she' . . . speaks about the dazzling glare which comes from the source of light that has been logically repressed, about 'subject' and 'other' flowing out into an embrace of fire that mingles on term into another ..." (191). With the "end to their wait" (40), barriers are broken and the terrain prepared:

On the edge of sleep,
the red hues in my field retreat
and the golden light rises up
towards clarity,

4

Estrella del ocaso,
hacia paisajes más remotos, senda,
con los ojos te alcanzo
y antes que la sombra me someta
me remonto en el ser
y llego hasta los días de Utnapistim
y contemplo las tierras
bañadas por el Eufrates. (18)

5

y fluye, toda amor, al desorigen,
pura ofrenda, puro sumiso penetrar
que bañará de resplandor las simas
desalojando la nada para siempre. (23)

and is then transformed
by the loving dawn
that ignites revelation. (41)⁶

And fire, as we know, functions as an element capable of fusing opposites, transforming one into the other and eliminating difference. Cirlot, in his *Dictionary of Symbols*, describes it as "a mediator between forms which vanish and forms in creation ... fire is, like water, a symbol of transformation and regeneration" (105). Fire facilitates that transformation in woman, that fusion of her with the opposite, the creation of that mutual space wherein barriers no longer exist and the only desire is for a union of divergent elements. Integration of the female with her beloved implies a consent on his part as well, once limits between entities have been destroyed and torn down. As Janés clarifies:

With a stubborn rhythm
pure fusion illuminates
its gentle touch.
Violent contours surrender
to the vivid beating
that joins us to the cosmos. (25)⁷

The authority of the female voice imposing itself in that moment of synthesis is anticipated with the projection of interior space onto exterior; one is transformed into a reflection of the other:

: the fields are my body
ignited in scarlet
and the setting sun

6

A ras del sueño
los gules de mi campo se retiran
y se eleva la luz atesorada
hacia la claridad,
y se transmuda en ella
por el aura amorosa
que *destella revelación*. (25)

7

Con ritmo obstinado
alumbra su tacto suave
la pura fusión.
Deshechos contornos se rinden
al vivo latido
que al cosmos nos une. (17)

shades them in gold (23)⁸

This look outward, this reflection in nature that reproduces and parallels what is being generated within the soul, represents a kind of "espejismo" (mirage-like imagery) in which restrictions no longer rule:

Each trunk, the beloved's body,
the immutable waters
traced the ecstasy
and in the reddish line of twilight
branches rubbed against each other
setting fire to the heart. (27)⁹

It is precisely this image of the mirror that enables the transmutation to take place, because in it different identities are fused into one. The water reflects and functions as a mirror, as Janés exalts:

Mirror of water,
glint of glint that eyes
harbor in their lake
for the reach of the senses ... (85)¹⁰

Irigaray also refers to the mirror's unitive properties: "A living mirror, thus am I (to) your resemblance as you are mine. We are both singular and plural, one and ones, provided that nothing tarnishes the mirrors that fuse in the purity of their exchange" (197). As the French critic clarifies, in the mirror differences are dissolved at the same time as beings are multiplied, causing all to be converted into one at the end.

8

: mi cuerpo son los prados
encendidos de bellis
y el sol del ocaso
los matiza en oro (16)

9

Cada tronco, el cuerpo del amado,
las aguas inmutables
dibujaban el éxtasis
y en la línea rojiza del crepúsculo
se cruzaban las ramas
prendiendo fuego al corazón. (18)

10

Espejo de agua,
reflejo del reflejo que los ojos
albergan en su lago
al alcance exterior de los sentidos ... (47)

Once the sacred moment of mystical union with the beloved has approached, it is presented with images that reinforce the creative power of the poetic voice, as in the moment of giving birth:

Oh mountain, what happens
 my solitude is full,
 all is beauty created by my eyes,
 all is light,
 present in the motionless point (49)¹¹

Further on, the positive and life-generating force of the union is accentuated by the images that the poet utilizes, all of them active and strong, symbolic of the new essence about to be born.

Janés affirms in a very clear fashion that power resides within:

A rose rises up
 from within my chest
 : pure fragrance
 that by itself gives way. (53)¹²

On another occasion, she describes a fountain that gushes forth, within and beyond at the same time, and that sustains the earth through which it passes:

And its touch is
 the same lightness of water
 and the freshness
 that releases in my breast
 a refuge of fronds. (51)¹³

11

O monte, qué sucede, mi soledad está llena
 todo es belleza creada por mis ojos
 todo es de luz,
 presente en el inmóvil punto (29)

12

Una rosa se eleva
 en medio de mi pecho:
 pura fragancia
 que sola se desprende (31)

13

Y es su gesto
 la misma ligereza del agua
 y el frescor

This association of the mystical stages with feminine reproduction has been pointed out by the critic Carol Ochs, in her book *Women and Spirituality*, and it is closely related to the vision that Janés presents. Images of nature are born and reborn within the poet's breast ("The leaf turns green again / and its breath on my chest" 61) and they become a "cántico," or hymn to extend the joy of delight. It is important that from now on and in order to affirm the sensation of power, the poet has recourse to images of voice that lend corporeality in the moment preceding the union: "may the lark of the voice / come to drink in my hands" (57). On another occasion, they are "springs of voice" that remain in suspense while interior and exterior landscapes become one (63). But of even more transcendence for this work is the fact that, through this voice, the poet becomes the one able to penetrate the mystical landscape that surrounds, to overcome barriers, integrating herself within this landscape in an active and assertive form. By means of this transformation, the interior landscape becomes exterior, and vice versa, and the sensation of corporeal and spiritual control is accentuated:

I open my mouth and a river is born
that takes in all space.
It offers itself through my lips,
a body of voice, the pulse.
The landscape I flood overwhelms me
: a single breath directs its flow
constellated by spheres. (75)¹⁴

With active verbs ("I open," "I flood"), Janés confirms her desire for mystical immersion, just as in the following poem, where again the voice functions as an active and essential part of the totality:

que en mi pecho desata
un recodo de fronda. (30)

14

Abro la boca y un río nace
que abarca los espacios.
Por los labios se ofrece,
cuerpo de voz, el pulso.
El paisaje que inundo me desborda
: un solo aliento configura su fluir
de esferas constelado. (42)

The wavering of images is stilled
 and my voice penetrates in the fire,
 my breath in the air,
 my sight in the sun,
 my mind in the moon,
 my body in the earth (77)¹⁵

And, lastly, Janés dedicates the final poems of the book to the pure exaltation of the pleasure of the mystical union, and in order to express it utilizes images that validate the poet's identity now transformed into "other" and in harmony with the climax of sexual ecstasy:

My being in shadow
 surrendered to meekness, shines
 and all shadow returns to the Being.
 The eyes of the Beloved rest on me. (87)¹⁶

As in San Juan, no distraction interrupts the love scene:

Not a bird can disturb
 the constant giving and receiving
 in the vacuum of light,
 a tunic that strips
 weight from the senses. (93)¹⁷

The journey of the soul comes to an end upon encountering the "roses of fire," symbol of purity, passion and purification at the same time,

15

Ya se aquieta el fluctuar de las imágenes
 y penetra mi voz en el fuego,
 mi aliento en el aire,
 mi vista en el sol,
 mi mente en la luna,
 mi cuerpo en la tierra. (43)

16

Mi ser en sombra,
 sometido a mansedumbre, brilla
 que toda sombra ya hacia el Ser regresa.
 Los ojos del amado me contemplan (48)

17

Ni un vancejo distrae
 el incesante dar y recibir
 en el vacío de la luz,
 túnica que desnuda
 de lastre los sentidos (51)

and that allows it to rest now in complete peace and serenity (93). The final poem of the book, based on an ingenious word play, indicates up to what point the transformation of two into one has been consummated. Within the figure of the beloved are assimilated the four elements of the universe in the final conversion:

Secret lover
 water of rain,
 breath that brings my earth to life,
 fire and aura
 overflowing in my touch,
 I need nothing more,
 my clarity is now theophany.
 Clara, Clara is my name,
 And each day my love grows. (95)¹⁸

In conclusion, I refer to an article by the well-known critic Paul Julian Smith, titled "Writing Women in Golden Age Spain: Saint Teresa and María de Zayas," in which the author penetrates into this question of why women's writing can be differentiated from men's and especially in the expression of mysticism, so subjective but yet so public. Smith affirms that the writing of Saint Teresa ought not to be judged by the same masculine and sexist norms that apply to other important authors of the period. That is, it ought not to be considered deficient because of a supposed excess of emotion or because of a style that is apparently disordered, unbalanced or at first glance chaotic. On the contrary, the work of Saint Teresa and that of Janés by analogy, should be evaluated from a woman's perspective, which tends toward a dissolution of difference and boundaries. For Teresa, one can only reach that moment of pure union upon first negating all sense of the self, in order then to become joined completely with the "other." Moreover,

18

Oculto amado
 agua de lluvia
 aliento que mi tierra vivifica,
 fuego y aura
 desbordando en mis gestos,
 nada más necesito,
 teofanía es ya mi transparencia,
 Clara, Clara es mi nombre,
 cada día crece mi amor. (52)

this initial fragmentation is necessary in order to arrive subsequently at the integration with the "other." Smith describes: "In the last vision of the *Vida* Teresa sees herself as an infinite mirror in the centre of which is Christ. As she watches the mirror flows amorously into the form of the Lord, sculpting itself into his shape ... The image is typically paradoxical. But in the fluidity of its movement it suggests that love of non-difference common to both mystical rapture and infantile *jouissance*. Christ is reflected in the mirror, but he is also the mirror itself: subject and object are indistinguishable ..." (232-233).

With this evaluation we arrive at the final problematic, the reason for which women mystics have so passionately availed themselves of the rhetorical poetic forms accessible to them, in order to express a more subjective spirituality, one distinct from the masculine. In "Mysticism and Feminism or Why Look at Women Mystics," Ursula King asks the question: "Do they (women mystics) embody a more concrete / emotional / romantic type of mysticism rather than an intellectual / abstract one? Has this anything to do with the fact that they were officially excluded from participating ... and therefore the area of subjective experience was the only avenue open to them?" (15-16). As we know, both Teresa and Janés have recourse to literary expression to unburden themselves and to reveal their most personal, religious and sentimental intimacies. They differ, of course, because Teresa was often officially excluded from public life while Janés has not been. But to this day, Janés continues to be a very private person in spite of her literary stature and prestige. The question that remains is to examine the poetry of Saint John, to see whether indeed there does exist what could be called a "feminine writing" as we have examined here, limited to texts by women. For the moment we will conclude with words by Janés, wherein she continues to affirm not only her mystical inclination but also the strength of her singularly feminine voice:

The roads are all one,
The music one and all.

.....

Like a hidden fountain I sing.
Like a hidden hand
I make true the lines of the poet. (91)¹⁹

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19

Uno son todos los caminos,
una y plural la música.
.....
Como una fuente oculta canto.
Como una mano oculta
cumpló los versos del poeta. (50)