

Mysticism, Meditation, and Monologue in *Poemas del ser y del estar* by Ernestina de Champourcin

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Ernestina de Champourcin is remembered primarily as one of two women poets included in Gerardo Diego's landmark anthology of 1934. She was an active and recognized poet at the time, having published four books of poetry during the twenties and thirties and having mingled with many of the young writers of the day. However, she published throughout her long life (1905-99), not only during the vanguard period but also during the years she lived in Mexico as well as after she returned to Spain in 1972. Critics regularly refer to a shift in Champourcin's poetry from her first poetry of human love to one of divine love but generally without detaining themselves long on the second phase in her poetic evolution (Acillona 105, Asuncue xxv, Azimendi 53, Benson 110, Comella 50, Landeira 78, and Villar 2002).¹

In Mexico Champourcin wrote a series of six books centering on her poetic persona's quest for God and expressions of love toward Him. Beginning in 1952 with *Presencias a oscuras* 'Presences in the Dark,' she initiates her spiritual journey from a starting point of anguish, doubt, and pain. She struggles to purge herself of earthly ties and passions and constantly articulates her wish for union with God. Frequent questions, imperative verbs, and the use of the subjunctive mode bear out her posture as prostrate supplicant. From within the dark night of the soul, she can only intuit God's presence and long for transcendence. In her next book, *El nombre que me diste* (1960) 'The Name You Gave Me,' she progresses in her path toward ascetic purification; yet she still pleads for guidance, forgiveness, and rebirth, and God's presence continues to be distant or temporary. *Cárcel de los sentidos* (1964) 'Prison of the Senses' marks the turning of her back on the five senses and the beginning of her glimpses of God and of her feeling the loving embraces of

her divine lover. *Hai-Kais espirituales* (1967) 'Spiritual Haikus,' with its compact panegyrics on the sacred implications in the material and the mundane, represents a brief interlude in her mystic quest. With *Cartas cerradas* (1968) 'Closed Letters,' Champourcin's poetic speaker encloses herself within the realm of the spirit. The intimacy and the personalization of the letter form testifies to her closeness to God, her increased confidence in her faith, and her growing inner calm. *Poemas del ser y del estar* (1972) 'Poems of Being and Existing,' is in many ways the culmination of Champourcin's religious phase not only because it is the last in the series, but also because in it she reaches the serenity acquired when the search for God is over and the soul can dwell in the blissful state of illumination.

This cursory summary of Champourcin's books published between 1954 and 1972 corroborates the implications of mysticism that critics have discerned in her religious poetry. However, in spite of the evidence of a goal of transcendence and the signs of the purgative and illuminative phases essential to the mystic journey, Champourcin cannot be rightly called a mystic, for she does not realize or even aspire to a total dissolution of the self into a perfect union with God. She separates herself from the social and the literary realities around her, but she never entirely blocks out the world of experience nor forfeits her sense of self. She is aware of the presence of God, but her own identity does not vanish. She writes not as a saint, but as a woman poet with an overriding preoccupation with God. Her poetic speaker turns away from the crowd, the material world, and the ego-centered self in order to look inward at the world of the spirit, where the devout self can quietly address the divine other and enjoy the splendor of His presence. For her, a spiritual joy is achieved when "ser" 'to be' and "estar" 'to exist' commingle in time and place, existence facilitates essence, and divine presence illuminates her.

Champourcin's poetry long demonstrated an underlying desire for transcendence. In the poetry of her youth, she found uplifting sensations in poetic creation and in the adventure of living. When she focused on the erotic, her expression carried religious undertones, for she perceived her object of human love as a conduit to spiritual joy and the eternal. She wrote of desire as a lived experience, but always with nuances of mystical transcendence and

neoplatonic idealism (Bellver *Absence*, 172-215, Espejo-Saavedra 133-39). Religion for her was not merely an element of her poetic idiom, it was also a way of life. She told interviewers that she was raised Catholic and had a long-established habit of reading the gospels every day (Bellver "Conversación" 74; Colomer Pellicer 216). Her religious commitment was no doubt intensified after she became a member of Opus Dei, the strict lay order founded in Spain in 1928 whose members adhere to prescribed daily spiritual practices and pledge to spread, throughout society, an awareness of God through their professional and public work. Champourcin's natural tendency to distance herself from worldly concerns through religious devotion was augmented by the marginalization cast on her by her circumstances. At the end of the Spanish civil war, she fled to Mexico with her husband, the poet and politically involved Juan José Domenchina, returning to Spain in 1972, where she remained until her death in 1999. More than thirty years of exile (along with the treatment usually afforded women writers) served to erase Champourcin from the literary annals of her country. *Poemas del ser y del estar*, although written in Mexico, was published in Spain by the prestigious publishing house Alfaguara, but went unnoticed.²

This book of religious poetry was out of tune with the poetic modes of its time of publication.³ When Champourcin began her poetry of "divine love," the poetry in Spain was predominantly poetry of message and communication or what Andrew P. Debicki studied as "poetry of discovery," poetry written as an act of inquiry, of knowledge, and of creation through language. Champourcin was well aware that her poetry did not coincide with that of poets who saw poetry as a means to convey social messages, and she openly and vigorously affirmed her rejection of this type of poetry. In the first poem of *Cartas cerradas*, she declared social poetry to be dull, mundane, and sordid:

No sé hablar de esas cosas que se han puesto de moda:
basura en las esquinas y vómitos de perro,
hedores adheridos al quicio de las puertas;
esa puerta en bostezo de hotelucho o cantina...

La poesía "social" no se me da tampoco...
—Poesía sin misterio es acaso poesía?— (285)⁴

I don't know to talk about the things that have become
fashionable:
trash on the corners and dog vomit,
stench sticking to door frames;
doors agape in flophouses and taverns...

"Social" poetry doesn't agree with me either..
—Is poetry without mystery really poetry?—

By the time she wrote *Poemas del ser y del estar*, she disregards the
opinion and company of others altogether:

Si nadie entiende
 ¿qué importa?
.....
Si me van dejando sola,
 ¿qué importa? (315)

If no one understands,
 What does it matter?
If everyone leaves me alone,
 What does it matter?

Her only companion is God, and her concerns no longer are
of this world and its mandates. Certain religious overtones can be
perceived in the "poetry of discovery," but these are more of an
existential and aesthetic nature than a mystical one. Self-conscious
or auto-reflexive, this poetry grapples with human limitations,
searches for the meaning of time, life, and death, and ponders the
void. José Angel Valente, for one, studied, commented on, and
assimilated myriad versions of mysticism, but his relationship to
spiritual transcendence was philosophical, intellectual, and reasoned.
Champourcin's poetry, in contrast, speaks with the steadfastness, the
devotion, and the unobstructed intimacy of the inveterate believer
engaged in prayer.⁵ Champourcin does not explore or question the
meaning of earthly existence but focuses instead on the soul and
its search for the worthiness of God's grace. Her concentration on
spiritual life has led critics to apply the word mysticism to her poetry

either in general terms as a synonym for religious or more narrowly as actual mysticism. In the words of Arizmendi, Champourcin's poetry is one "que describe un auténtico camino de perfección" (54) 'that describes an authentic path to perfection,' and Acillona writes that Champourcin "se ajusta a la poesía mística tradicional ... de cierto regusto neorrenacentista" (105-06) 'adjusts to traditional mystic poetry ... with a certain neo-Renaissance overtone.'

In its broadest terms, Christian mysticism involves an individual's direct, subjective union with God. Mysticism cannot be acquired voluntarily; it is a gift from God granted through His grace. Basically, it comprises three steps or phases that begin with a purgative phase in which the individual struggles to eliminate worldly desires, passions, and sensations in order to arrive at the illuminative phase in which supreme knowledge of God is revealed as a prelude to the dissolution of the self in the ultimate phase of total union of will and love with God. In this final ascent, the soul has moved from the active position of a search for perfection to a state, beyond reason, of passive prayer and constant contemplation of God. Will and affections have been silenced "so that the soul may become overtly and wholly responsive to the prompting and gifts of God (Reinhardt xii). As Kurt Reinhardt explains, "God is present in the soul by virtue of the indwelling life of grace, and the mystical experience is the conscious awareness on the part of the soul of this presence" (xi).

As alluded to at the outset of this study, Champourcin's poetry of "divine love" begins in the purgative phase and reaches a state of illumination, awareness, and joy in *Poemas del ser y del estar* without, however, truly ascending to the unitive phase. Her knowledge of the ultimate mystery is still deficient; she still asks questions that go unanswered. Also her elegy to her sister with its mention of memory and death shows that she does not forfeit her affective attachments to other human beings, and by using, as sources of inspiration, images of natural settings identified with geographic preciseness, she clings to the world of the senses, even if in its idealized state of *locus amoenus*. She still dwells in a state of longing: "¿Enséñame a quedarme / en este Ser sin ser, / donde quiero anegarme!" (320) 'Teach me to stay in this Being without being, in which I want to sink!' She occasionally still struggles to reach eternal joy: "Lugar

del gozo eterno: / Ir hacia el punto extremo ... ¡Llegar a él" (328) 'The place of eternal joy / to go to the extreme end ... to arrive at Him.' She appeals to God for assistance ("Ayúdame, Señor, / a entender lo que veo" [329] 'Help me Lord to understand what I see'), and still needing the intercession of the saints, she prays to Santa Teresa for guidance: "¿Será muy tarde ya para que des tu mano ... ¿Cuáles son las veredas donde puedes guiarme?" (338) 'Is it too late for you to give me your hand? ... Which are the paths along which you can guide me?' As the word "veredas" reveals, she employs the conventional Christian symbol of the "way" or "path" to represent the course that God or the saints have opened before her. Besides "veredas," she resorts to "camino," 'road,' to "trayecto," 'trajectory,' "circuito," 'circuit,' and "zaguán" 'vestibule.' These signs of extension, progression, or advancement indicate that the feeling of quest—of waiting, yearning, and searching—has not left her.

Total union with God remains an unfulfilled wish and distant goal. What prevails in *Poemas del ser y del estar* is a sense of joy, fulfillment, and inner peace. She may still be figuratively walking toward God, but she is on the right and direct route to Him: "Camino por tu camino. / Las demas sendas, / ¿qué importan?" (315) 'I walk along your road. / The other paths, / What do they matter?' She even declares she has reached a realm beyond reality and language: "Más allá de las palabras, del mundo" 'beyond word and the world.' Her depiction of her state as one beyond verbal explication points to the inexplicable and unfathomable nature of the genuine mystic experience. If not fused with God, she at least dwells in close, private proximity to Him. She inhabits hidden, isolated, and secret places where only she and God exist. She speaks of "lugares del encuentro" 'meeting places' and "lugares secretos" 'secret places,' and of an inner nothingness from which God springs: "De su único pozo / brota un sorbo divino" (329-30) 'From his sole well / a divine sip springs.'

Just as empty spaces give rise to fullness of being, silence and solitude become the requisite prelude to fulfilling encounters with God and thereby cause for joy, not loneliness. Silence allows her to feel the presence of God:

El silencio del agua...

Es un silencio puro,

.....

y nos invade el alma
con un gozo profundo.

.....

Se siente a Dios muy cerca (323)

The silence of water...
is a pure silence

.....

and it invades our soul
with a deep bliss.

.....

God is felt close by

Solitude, like silence, is purity because it signifies withdrawal from the material world, spiritual receptivity, and the promise of the release, through death, from mortal restraint. God himself is understood as loneliness—unique and absolute—and, therefore, she does not fear it (“Eres Tú soledad / y por eso no la temo. ... sola yo me quedo,” [331] ‘You are solitude and so I don’t fear it ... alone I stay.’)

Without anyone, she has everything—God. This oxymoron is extended to her representation of divine revelation as illuminating darkness. Though reminiscent of the poetry of the Spanish mystics and tinged with symbolism, her discourse is fairly transparent. The poetic voice speaks figuratively of walking through darkness with the help of the shining word of God, but the poet employs conventional religious symbols in a straightforward manner. Where she approximates the allegorical diction of the mystic San Juan de la Cruz is in her description of the illuminative phase, particularly in the poem that begins “Tiempo de la noche” ‘Nighttime.’ While in San Juan’s poems the lovers meet, caress, and consummate their love, in Champourcin’s poem the speaker lies in bed, expectant and hopeful. Confident of God’s existence, she praises night for being the time of love, but she experiences this only for a sweet, ephemeral moment: “la dulce pausa / del amor completo” (320) ‘the sweet pause / of complete love.’ In more of a dream than a mystic nuptial, she is left suspended in a state of plenitude and impregnated with hope:

Tiempo de la noche:

dejádmelo entero
Tiempo de esperanza
con la luz por dentro (320)

Nighttime:
leave it whole for me
Time of hope
with light within

Night or darkness symbolizes the concealment, ignorance, and imperfection of the soul that awaits the dawn or light of the divine, but it is also literally the time of day associated with prayer and therefore the physical setting for religious thoughts. However God's arrival into the speaker's room after travelling on a pearl-gray lake turns the descriptive setting into the archetypical depiction of the young maiden awaiting her lover:

Desde mi estancia a oscuras
voy contando los pasos
que me acercan a ti.
A este momento claro
en que estaré contigo
sin prisa ni cansancio (323)

In the dark of my room
I count the footsteps
that bring you to me.
In the bright moment
when I will be with you
without any rush or fatigue

Any erotic ecstasy like that found in San Juan is precluded by the anticipation and forestalling in the last line. The joy expressed in these poems is complete, but pure ("júbilo intacto" [337] 'intact jubilation') and one of balance and rebirth ("inolvidable primavera en otoño" [337] 'unforgettable spring in autumn').

The speaker in Champourcin's poetry knows she is not God's equal ("Eras todo y yo nada" 'You are everything and I am nothing'). Nevertheless, they are intimate companions ("Ibamos navegando /

en la barca del día sin nuevos oleajes” ‘We were sailing along on the boat of time without any surf’), and sublime, perfect love engulfs her: “¡Qué nacimiento augusto del Amor verdadero” (396) ‘What a majestic birth of true Love.’ She may not achieve the ecstasy of a Santa Teresa or San Juan de la Cruz, but she nonetheless is blessed with a glimpse of God’s magnificence. Even if she does not achieve the dissolution and communion of essences that marks the last phase of the mystic experience, she celebrates the transcendence and enlightenment that God does grant her.

Champourcin’s focus on God in her poetry from the fifties to 1972 has been attributed by Francisca Colomer Pellicer and Beatriz Comella to her introduction to Opus Dei.⁶ Colomer goes as far as to say that Champourcin’s poetry cannot be understood without a knowledge of the works of its founder, Josemaría Escrivá. In contrast, María Cristina C. Mabrey, on the basis of the statements of Champourcin’s family and of Luzmaría Jiménez Faro, her friend and publisher, maintains that the poet’s association with Opus Dei was fleeting and superficial (101). If we take the poet at her word, God and religion accompanied her all her life but surfaced in her poetry of the Mexican years. Whatever the stimulus for the religious poetry in her Mexican years, the result was well-wrought poems articulated quietly for God, and, of course, for her reader.

Although private and highly personalized, these poems were written with a diction and imagery reminiscent of those of the mystics.⁷ It should be remembered in passing that Champourcin was familiar with a wide range of authors besides the mystics. She was a cultured, well-read woman acquainted with authors writing in Spanish, English, and French. Her mastery of the latter two allowed her to earn a living in Mexico translating works of authors as diverse as Emily Dickinson, Mircea Eliade, Gaston Bachelard, Anais Nin, and William Golding. With this literary repertoire, the mystic idiom of her poetry should be seen as a result not only of the deep religious sentiments of a pious person, but also of a vast ingrained literary foundation. It is however San Juan de la Cruz who figures most prominently as the intertextual backdrop of her poetry. Echoes of San Juan are detectible in her poetry even before her Mexican period in *La voz en el viento* (1931) ‘The Voice in the Wind,’ but especially in *Cántico inútil* (1936) ‘Useless Canticle.’ The title of the

latter recalls his *Cántico espiritual* 'Spiritual Canticle' but with the significant difference that her adjective points to the inadequacy of her words. She uses lines from San Juan as epigraphs to her poems and projects his influence in other ways. The title of one poem replicates San Juan's "Noche oscura," and she incorporates images characteristic of mystic poetry: desert, night, path, light, flame, bird, eternal spring. At this point she uses erotic imagery not to convey mystic love, but to sublimate erotic love. However in her overtly religious poetry, these symbols will verbalize sentiments more akin to his.

San Juan de la Cruz uses eyes and sight to represent the experience of the presence of God; his "eyesight is absorbed by the blinding light of God, which is, in turn, the source of all light and beauty, the objects of desire" (Daydi-Tolson 31). Not being quite the mystic that San Juan was, Champourcin's persona in *Poemas del ser y estar* is not graced with direct eye-contact. She remains on the sidelines as a witness, seeing God in heaven only reflected in the lake waters: "Ha llegado la hora / en que tan sólo Dios / se contempla en sus ondas" (324) 'The time has arrived / in which God alone / sees Himself reflected in the waves.' Nevertheless comparable sentiments and symbols allow Champourcin's speaker to come close to the style and tone of San Juan's poetry. As we have already seen, both speak of solitude in positive and even exalted terms, and of night symbolically as the blessed state in which God's light shines on the soul. Whereas the mystic feels the tension of the chase of the wounded deer and the excited agitation of the encounter, Champourcin's protagonist feels a consistent emotion of "júbilos nunca sentidos" (317) 'joy never felt.'

The mystic expresses the experience of the soul by means of physical, erotic phraseology, while Champourcin's expression remains modulated and chaste. In him the goal of transcendence is accomplished, while in her it continues as a desire. In his classic study of Spanish mysticism, Hermut Hatsfeld distinguishes the reality of the mystic from that of the poet: "La realidad del místico es Dios; la realidad del poeta es lo humano y lo divino en un sentido general" (16-17) 'The mystic's reality is God, the poet's reality is the human and the divine in a general sense.' The poet has the double objective of understanding God and of creating a work of

art. San Juan's poems are sustained symbolization or more precisely allegories combining images with concepts to create a narrative. San Juan's poems are mimetic, analogous representations in words of his mystical experience, theatrical in their inclusion of dialogue, setting, and protagonists. In contrast, Champourcin's poetry is lyrical and discursive; she states, describes, explains, questions. No matter how devout, her speaker dwells in the human realm of perception and thought.

Champourcin meditates, reflects and comments on the nature of God. Although in everyday discourse "meditate" and "contemplate" are generally used interchangeably, in the terminology of Western religion, contemplation signifies transcendence and meditation refers to deep and deliberate thought. As Biruté Cipliauskaité explains in her essay on the theme of contemplation in contemporary Spanish poets, "contemplación pura se despoja de la imaginación, de la reflexión, del juicio y casi de la palabra. Se llega al olvido de sí mismo" (155-56) 'pure contemplation divests itself of imagination, reflections, judgment and nearly of the word. It achieves the erasure of the self.' The renunciation of the self creates emptiness in the soul and a state that makes it receptive to receiving the deity and to experiencing universal harmony. Christian meditation is a form of prayer structured, like the rosary, for reflection on the revelations, mysteries, and meanings of God. Poetry of meditation lies somewhere between quotidian and religious definitions. It is focused, diligent thinking and "thinking deliberately directed toward the development of specific emotions" (Martz 14).

Champourcin's reflections in these poems center on the question of presence, time, and, as the title indicates, the relationship between essence and existence.⁸ For her, God is, above all, presence, and even more than that, omnipresence:

Lejos y cerca, sí.
A un paso algunas veces;
otras dentro de mí,
.....
Y en el ir y venir
sigues omnipresente
y próximo ... (319)

Far and near, yes.
One step away sometimes;
other times within me.
.....
In this coming and going
You remain omnipresent
And near ...

God passes alongside her: “Mi árbol ya cantó, / vibrando entre Tus dedos” (326) ‘My tree already sang / vibrating through Your fingers.’ He resides within her “en el corazón mismo” (330) ‘in my very heart’; and His light shines on her: “Hay un sol nuevo y limpio / en el polvo sutil / de estos rincones míos” (328) ‘There is a new and spotless sun / in the fine dust of these corners of mine.’ This presence is close and far, perceptible and imperceptible, nowhere and everywhere:

Y me das el desierto
que siempre te he pedido.
Mas no el que no soñaba...
Un desierto distinto (329)

And you give me the desert
that I have always asked for
But not the one I did not dream about...
A different desert

The emptiness of the soul cleansed of the vacuousness of the material is replaced by a spiritual nothingness that is everything. Like many poets and religious thinkers, Champourcin identifies the beauty of nature with the deity. God emerges from the radiance of the dawn with sounds never heard before, and His magnificence is reflected in the “prodigious” blue lake. His beauty is an ancient one that eclipses all others:

Me basta lo que tengo, porque me lo das, Todo.
Esa “hermosura antigua” que Agustín reclamaba.
¡Que otros sueñen, ingenuos, con la belleza nueva
de unos gestos inútiles que nada significan! (322)

What I have is sufficient, because You give me everything.
 This “ancient beauty” that Augustine sought.
 Let others naively dream of the new beauty of
 useless gestures that mean nothing!

This last citation illustrates that Champourcin’s knowledge of religious thinkers went beyond the Spanish mystics. Her concentration on God as presence reflects one of Saint Augustine’s major tenets. Referring to God, he wrote in his *Confessions* that “You are before all the past by the eminence of Your ever-present eternity: and You dominate all the future in as much as it is still to be: and once it has come it will be past; but ‘*Thou are always the self-same*’” (218). God is totally and exclusively presence; He is, independent of an individual’s awareness of this truth or the ability to sense Him. Champourcin’s accepts this basic Christian doctrine, declaring: “Sé que estás ahí / aunque no te siento” (320) ‘I know you are there / even though I do not feel you.’ God exists; He is present not in terms of time but also of space. Champourcin conceives of divine presence as a paradoxical spatial experience, as a state encompassing both the here and the there. This belief accounts for her repeated representation of the feeling of God’s presence as an encounter—secret meetings out in nature, visits to her room, a touch on her hand, or the habitation of her soul.

A meditation on God involves a consideration of the concept of time, because the present points not only to actual existence but to temporal actuality. As St. Augustine explains, because God is eternal and changeless, before Him there is no time: “for time itself You made. And no time is co-eternal with You, for You stand changeless; whereas if time stood changeless, it would not be time” (219). Because God is not subject to the flow and advancement of time, to neither the past nor the future, the tripart dimensions of time must be collapsed into a single present: “there are three times, a present of things past, a present of things present, and a present of things future. For these three exist in the mind, and I find them nowhere else: the present of things past is memory, the present of things present is sight, the present of things future is expectation” (Augustine 223). The mind undermines the passage and transitoriness of time. Therefore Champourcin speaks of spiritual

time as slow and repetitive: “Despacio, muy despacio. / Repetir lo mismo / con palabras eternas” (316) ‘Slow, very slow. / Repeating the same thing with eternal words.’ God’s presence is felt when time pauses, “en la dulce pausa” (320), and ultimately cancels time and its sad, and ruinous force. Champourcin affirms religious doctrine and reiterates St. Augustine in her insistence on the present: “Hoy sin ayer ni mañana” (317) ‘Today without yesterday nor tomorrow.’

In her enthusiasm to stress presence and its importance to the prayerful life, she seems to stray from orthodox doctrine when she orders that existence take precedence over essence:

Y para ser, estar.
Lo que huye no existe.
Lo que pasa fugaz
no será propio nunca
.....
Para ser de verdad
estáte ahí, en tu sitio (317)

And to be, exist.
Whatever flees does not exist.
Whatever passes quickly
will never be one’s own
.....
To truly be
stay there, in your place

She might seem to be espousing the existential philosophy, which considers essence as illusion and conceives of the self as nothing except what it becomes. In traditional philosophy, from Aristotle to the Scholastics, essence is an abstract, permanent, and immutable quality, while existence is a concrete, derivative, and changeable condition, that is, the distinction between the meanings of the Spanish verbs *ser* and *estar* in the title of the collection discussed here. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, “Whereas the essence or quiddity gives an answer to the question *what* the thing is, the existence is the affirmative to the question as to *whether* it. Thus, while created essences are divided into both possible and actual, existence is always actual and opposed by its nature to

simple potentiality” (6). Saint Thomas and his followers believed that existence emanates from essence but that a being is primarily an act of existing, that its world is one of individual acts of existing rather than one of forms or essence.

It is within this idea of existence as an active posture that Champourcin’s poems should be understood. Existence does not mean for her physical movement but situating one’s soul in the right place from which to await spiritual reward:

Jamás
te disperses en rumbos
que no te acogerán.
—Marta salió al camino;
María aguardó en paz—.
Para ser, entregarse.
Para entregarse, estar
en la cena de Pascua (318)

Never
run off in unwelcoming directions.
—Martha walked away;
Maria waited peacefully—.
To be, surrender yourself.
To surrender yourself, be
at the Easter meal.

In the two possible ways of serving Christ, as personified by the New Testament figures of Martha and Mary, Champourcin chooses the latter’s path of meditation, of hopeful waiting, and committed surrender.

In her meditations on her relationship with God, the poetic speaker of *Poemas del ser y del estar* addresses her words and thoughts to God in what often seem to be more like prayers than poems. This posture is not surprising since Champourcin wrote that the life of a poet is a dialogue with God (285). In this intimate dialogue the poet opens her soul, confessing her yearnings and anxieties in a “plegaria entre los actantes poéticos, yo-poeta y Tú Dios” (Ascunce xlv)

‘prayer between the poetic subjects, the I-poet and the you-God.’ A dialogue presupposes the presence of a speaker and an auditor and a sustained interchange of roles between them. However, except for “La canción del sicomaro” ‘The song of the sycamore’ in which Christ’s words to Zaccheas are quoted twice, these poems, like all prayers, are verbalized thoughts that receive no responses or reactions and therefore should rightfully be called monologues. In contrast to diegesis and mimesis, these lyric compositions entail a type of communication in which the addresser and the addressee are the same person. An addressee or auditor may be implied, desired or addressed, but lyric poetry is essentially communication with the self. Lyric poetry is characterized, according to Bakhtin, by being monological, by expressing a single voice or point of view. He considers it implicitly unitary, limited, and self-contained since it “deals only with the subject whose praise he sings, or represents, or expresses, and he does so in his own language that is perceived as the sole and fully adequate tool for realizing the word’s direct, objectivized meaning” (61). Bakhtin privileges the novel which he defines as “multiform in style and variform in speech and voice” and characterizes it by its heteroglossia—its many voices, registers, and dialogic nature (261). However it is precisely the single-mindedness and solo voice that bestows power on the poetic speaker and in the case of Champourcin removes intermediaries and obstructions between God and her.

Lyric poetry constitutes an interior discourse, internal and private. Arturo de Villar maintains that by writing as she prays, Champourcin converts the “acto vulgar” (2002: 91) ‘ordinary act’ of writing into a private liturgy made public. No matter how public, the language of poetry is self-directed, individualistic, and singular. The poetic subject talks to him or herself, seemingly alone and in private, but also openly and without restraint. However in this act of self-communication, the speaking voice projects itself onto an other, a double, who may be an implied, separate being or the self cast into the role of a you. Even though only in an oblique manner, the poetic I creates the impression of presence, of a second person who is present but silent, absent, or imagined. Whether written or spoken, once articulated, words exist in the world of living voices and crowded discourses. To quote Dickinson: “A word is dead /

When it is said, / Some say. / I say it just / Begins to live / That day” (42). Not only does the word take on an existence in the empirical world by virtue of its verbalization, in linguistic terms it exists within the atmosphere of the already spoken or written, and it “is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object,” as Bakhtin says (279). No matter if we refer to the quotation of the poet or the philosopher, we become aware that even private and solitary enunciations are, one way or another, an act of communion. Lyric poetry anticipates no answer; it merely asks, wonders, or meditates. Nevertheless by doing so, it establishes an awareness of something beyond the speaking voice and her consciousness. Furthermore, it is linked to the conceptualization of existence. Therefore, by addressing God over and over as you, Champourcin ratifies His presence, which, even if spiritual, is still felt, and, although absent, is still possible. Far from closing her off from God, Champourcin’s monologues corroborate his existence. By addressing God as Thou, he becomes the addressee and the implied auditor or recipient of her prayer/poems. Occasionally she resorts to the first personal plural in order to draw Him even closer to her in the single unit of we. The disposition of the poetic voice draws Him closer to her and establishes a personal bond between them that opens the possibility for the realization of a union with Him.

The implication of the existence addressed in *Poemas del ser y del estar* belies the initial impression of solitude, withdrawal, and self containment in these poems. The poetic speaker opens herself to a you, who almost always is God—the Father or the Son—but she also speaks to a few human beings. She addresses her sister directly, evoking their past and commanding her in the present: “¡Ven conmigo a mirarlo!” (325) ‘Come with me and look at it.’ She writes a letter to Santa Teresa, whom she addresses in a familiar, friendly, and almost sisterly manner: “¿Qué haces, en qué piensas?” (338) ‘What are you doing, what are you thinking about’; “Podemos ser amigas, si quieres” (339) ‘We can be friends, if you want.’ She seeks the saint’s guidance, confesses her weaknesses to her, and asks for her friendship using a language that is conversational in tone, simple in lexicon and syntax, and full of human emotion. Her informal and candid attitude and her repeated use of direct address in these poems produce a closeness and a sense of companionship with her

subjects. These monologues double back on themselves when the poetic persona addresses herself and creates a double. She can speak to a you that reduplicates the speaking I, or she can metaphorically turn herself into a tree to which she refers in the third person.

All these discursive operations illustrate that monologues and lyric poetry in general are not closed and totally ego-centered compositions. Although the monologue originates in the speaking-self, it creates its own sense of other, of silent auditor or interlocutor, and of presence. In a similar manner meditation implies a consciousness of a realm beyond that same self. Detachment from the outside, social world does not negate engagement. On the contrary, it nurtures reflection, understood as an inward yet deliberative posture, a conceptual interchange with existing ideas, views, or discourses. Meditation and monologue collude in the prayer-like poem to bring the poetic speaker closer to her ultimate goal of union with God. In one of the last poems in the collection published before *Poemas del ser y del estar*, Champourcin alludes to the day of “eternal dialogue,” when no words will be necessary, when there will be a “*Díálogo sin voz*” (306) ‘Dialogue without a voice.’ Words, even in internal, monologic form, will not be necessary. When human utterances are no longer needed, she will draw even closer to mystic fulfillment. Thus monologue and meditation prove to be a significant step in the poet’s quest for transcendence.

The poetry of Champourcin spans a long and fruitful trajectory. Although always cognizant of the social and cultural climate around her, she reacted to that reality in her own way. Whether due to her gender, circumstances, or temperament, her poetry has remained a marginal variation of mainstream poetry. The adventurous, young poet embraced the avant-garde stance promoted by her male counterparts without forfeiting her admiration for Juan Ramón Jiménez; the widow spoke to God in verse form; and the exile recalled her past from a temporal distance of decades. The older woman, having returned to her homeland, confronted the hostility and alienation of contemporary urban life and reflected on loneliness, passing time, and death. Her poetry is personal and personalized, but she does not allow autobiography to become the overt focus of her poems, and she never succumbs to the banality of the outside world. She dwells within herself in her “perpetuo exilio

interior” (Colomer Pellicer 207) ‘perpetual interior exile,’ without becoming self-absorbed. Her poetry is similar to but different from contemporary, canonical poetry of Spain, coinciding in some of her essential themes including in her desire for spiritual transcendence yet standing apart particularly in religiosity. Never displaying doubt or deviation from orthodox dogma, her religious poems engage with sacred and revered texts, approximate mystic illumination, and spring from humble devotion.

Notes

1 Different critics perceive different degrees of shift. For example, Acillona and Comella see Champourcin’s religious poetry as a result of a well-defined rediscovery of God. On the other hand, Villar sees not so much a shift from human to divine love as an amalgamation of the two and a debate between the two. He finds hints of religiosity in her earliest collection.

2 In 1991 José Angel Ascunce initiated a revival of her name with his edition of her complete poetic production. Since then Ascunce and others have attempted to establish a place for her among Spanish poets (Bellver, Jiménez Faro, Miró, Villar, Wilcox). She has been included in the anthology of Spanish twentieth-century poetry edited by Jose Paulino Ayuso as part of the Clásicos Castalia series. A number of anthologies of her poetry were published between 1988 and 2008. Monographs have been written on her, but mostly by small or specialty presses (Comella, Landeira, Mabrey, Vidal). Collections of essays have been published on her, and North American Hispanists have featured her in recent studies. In 1989 she was awarded the Euskadi prize for poetry, in 1992 she was nominated for the Premio Príncipe de Asturias de las Letras, and in 1997 she received the Medalla del Mérito Artístico del Ayuntamiento de Madrid. Despite all these efforts to recognize her, Champourcin has remained a literary outsider in Spain.

3 This is not to say that no religious poetry was written at the time. Gerardo Diego wrote poetry with religious themes, and Debicki affirms that Carlos Bousoño wrote “first-rate religious poetry.”

4 All the quotations from Champourcin are taken from her *Poesía a través del tiempo* and the translations that follow them are mine.

5 José Angel Valente wrote essays on the Spanish mystics San Juan de la Cruz, Miguel de Molino, and Santa Teresa. His poetry reveals intertextual echoes of Christian mysticism, Jewish kabbalah, and Muslim Sufism, as well as Taoism, Buddhism, and the works of María Zambrano. His poetic subject seeks an

“other,” in transcendent harmony, a divinity, a beloved, nature, or even music (See Linda D. Metzler ‘s study). Rather than casting a broad philosophical net, Champourcin moors her sight and heart on one God, that of the New Testament and her Catholic faith.

6 Colomer insists that Champourcin rediscovered God in Mexico for three reasons. She suffered some sort of religious crisis in 1947 or 1948; she discovered the writings of Thomas Merton; and she joined the Opus Dei in 1952 (215-22). This critics gives details on the poet’s involvement in Opus Dei.

7 Champourcin recognized the influence of San Juan on her poetry (Bellver “Conversación,” 76, Landeira 2005, 246). In her eagerness to persuade her readers that Champourcin was a feminist, Mabrey correlates Champourcin with Santa Teresa (325-27) and equates Champourcin’s independent stance before her beloved with that of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (370-72). According to Colomer, crucial to the poet’s “rediscovery” of God was her introduction to the writings of Merton (217). By quoting the German mystic Henry Suso in *Cántico inútil*, Champourcin provides additional proof of the extensiveness of her knowledge of religious writers.

8 Champourcin’s preoccupation with God’s presence is evident from the beginning of her religious period. The very title of her first book of divine love—*Presencia a oscuras*—verifies her consciousness of God’s presence, with the significant difference that at the beginning there is more darkness than light, more obstructions than visibility, and more searches than encounters.

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