

# Towards a Poetics of Stutter: Semantic and Syntactic Deconstruction in Saint John of the Cross and Stéphane Mallarmé\*

## *Hacia una poética del balbuceo: la deconstrucción semántica y sintáctica en san Juan de la Cruz y Stéphane Mallarmé*

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**Abstract:** The present paper analyzes semantic and syntactic deconstruction in Saint John of the Cross and Stéphane Mallarmé, which is closely connected to the motif of stutter in both their works. It will be shown that, in each case, this motif describes language's outlying district, an intermediate space between speech and silence, and an ongoing and simultaneous process of dissolution and manifestation that involves the poetic word on the one hand, and the transcendent signified (God in the case of Saint John, mainly the "Spirit" for Mallarmé) on the other.

**Keywords:** Saint John of the Cross. Stéphane Mallarmé. Deconstruction. Mysticism and Modern Poetry. Religion and Literature Studies.

**Resumen:** El presente trabajo analiza la deconstrucción semántica y sintáctica en la obra de san Juan de la Cruz y Stéphane Mallarmé, procedimiento lingüístico que en ambos autores está relacionado con el motivo del balbucir. Se mostrará que, en ambos casos, este motivo describe una zona periférica del lenguaje, un espacio intermedio e intermediario entre lenguaje y silencio, y un proceso continuo y simultáneo de disolución y manifestación que incluye, por un lado, la palabra poética y, por otro, el significado trascendente (Dios, en el caso de san Juan de la Cruz, principalmente el "Espíritu" en el caso de Mallarmé).

**Palabras clave:** San Juan de la Cruz. Stéphane Mallarmé. Deconstrucción. Mística y poesía contemporánea. Estudios de religión y literatura.

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Christian mysticism has repeatedly been related to modern lyrical poetry,<sup>1</sup> with an increasing number of studies recognizing similarities between both traditions. Among the most recent works, Cirlot and Vega define mysticism as a “founding phenomenon of Europe’s spiritual identity” (9) whose traces can be clearly detected in 20<sup>th</sup> century art and thought.<sup>2</sup> I have proposed elsewhere a common (Neo-)Platonic substratum as a possible explanation of the, sometimes striking, parallels. In this context, the mystical (including the negative) theology of Pseudo-Denys, basically an application of Plotinus’ ideas concerning the ineffability of the One to a Christian framework, can be understood as a theory of language with regard to a transcendent signified that contains elements akin to modern poetics. In addition, the Platonic conception of poetry as a form of *enthousiasmos* (*Ion*, 534c-e),<sup>3</sup> with the poet transmitting a message that does not originate in himself, is relevant for both traditions.<sup>4</sup>

In general terms, what unifies Christian mysticism and modern poetry is a skeptical position towards the expressive possibilities of human language in view of an absolute being.<sup>5</sup> In both traditions, this can lead to the paradoxical conclusion that silence is the most adequate way of expression, and, in relation to that idea, a language that tends to formulate, recursively, its own speechlessness. The linguistic procedure appropriate for this communication of speechlessness is a deconstruction (conscious or not) of sense and structu-

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1. In accordance to Friedrich, I use the term “modern” with regard to 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century lyrical poetry, focusing on the post-Baudelarian tradition in particular.

2. Henri Bremond (*Prière et poésie*) is among the first to reveal parallels between both traditions, and several studies have since been published. He describes both the mystical and the poetical experience as an irrational, non-conceptual form of cognition, resulting from a subject-object unification (220-21). To name a few other examples, Walter Benjamin sees in Mallarmé the inventor of a “negative theology of art” (156; the author does not explain this idea in detail), Wagner-Egelhaaf regards a mystical paradigm of *disimilar similarity* (“unähnliche Ähnlichkeit”) as characteristic of Rilke and several other 20<sup>th</sup> century writers (5-6), and Haas considers Fritz Mauthner and Paul Valéry to represent a particularly modern mysticism absent of God (450-62).

3. According to *Ion* (534c-e), the poet is a *messenger of the Gods* (*hermeneus tôn theôn*) whose mind is possessed by a divine force (*theia dynamis*), deprived of his own reason and filled with a message that does not originate in himself.

4. This platonic idea is very popular in Romanticism, but continues to resound during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and at least until the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, if we think of Rimbaud’s concept of poetry as a transmission of the *unknown* (“l’Inconnu” 151) or *universal soul* (“l’Âme universelle” 154), or the surrealists idea of expressing the depths of the unconscious mind, for example. With regard to the relevance of this idea for Christian mysticism, and Saint John of the Cross in particular, see Schmelzer.

5. Whether conceived in Christian terms as God, romantically as nature or the Spirit, psychologically as the depths of the unconscious mind, or more neutrally, as reality in itself.

re, a common element of both mystical texts<sup>6</sup> and modern poems. In a way, these writings execute within themselves a procedure that lies at the core of late 20<sup>th</sup> century literary and cultural theory. Literature, in this sense, is not an object of deconstruction theory, but its model.<sup>7</sup>

Through a concrete comparison, such a deconstruction can be detected as an element relating the work of Saint John of the Cross and Stéphane Mallarmé (Schmelzer 510-15). Using a formulation of Teuber (41), one could say that the work of both exemplifies a “poetic staging of deconstruction”. I will try to further define this idea in relation to these two authors by analyzing the motif of stutter, which is closely connected to the idea of deconstruction in their work. As we shall see, this motif describes, in each case in different contexts, language’s outlying district, an intermediate space between speech and silence, and an ongoing and simultaneous process of dissolution and manifestation that involves the poetic word on the one hand, and the transcendent signified (God in the case of Saint John, mainly the “Spirit” for Mallarmé) on the other.

#### “UN NO SÉ QUÉ QUE QUEDAN BALBUCIENDO”

The motif of stutter appears in various places in the work of the Carmelite poet, the most prominent of which is probably a famous verse of the *Cántico espiritual*, “un no sé qué que quedan balbuciendo”, imitating a stuttering voice in an onomatopoeic manner. The Spanish term “balbucir” on its part could also be translated as *stumble*, but as the verse suggests, both significations are closely related with regard to the ineffability of God. One might say that God’s inexpressibility on the semantic level traduces into a stumble, which results in a stutter at the syntactical level.<sup>8</sup> Of course, context is important: following the

6. That is, mystical texts in general, both theoretical and literary, in prose and verse. The treatises of Pseudo-Denys (especially his *Mystical Theology*) are teeming with negations and paradoxes; the same goes for the writings of Meister Eckhart. Saint Teresa of Ávila’s prose writings such as *El libro de la vida* contain highly enigmatic and contradictory passages (which the author openly admits), as do the poems of Saint John of the Cross.

7. In this context, Derrida’s interpretation of Kafka’s *Vor dem Gesetz* is highly interesting. According to the French critique, this writing is a text without a nucleus, and thus a form of “différance” (1999, 73).

8. Moreover, it seems that at the time of Saint John of the Cross, both words could be used as synonyms: “BALBUCIENTE. adj. El que es tartamúdo, torpe de léngua, que no articula ni pronuncia las palabras con perfección, yá sea por defecto de la naturaleza” (*Diccionario de Autoridades*). The use of “balbucir” instead of “tartamudear” can also be explained by metrical necessity. Ynduráin (62) indicates that the term implies the “disappearance of conceptual communication” in the poem.

tradition of nuptial mysticism,<sup>9</sup> the poem describes the bride's (the human soul's) search for the bridegroom (God) in a bucolic setting. The famous verse belongs to the first part, in which she expresses her separation from, and longing for, the beloved. After having perceived traces of His grace in the physical world,<sup>10</sup> she carries a *wound* that can only be healed by a direct encounter with Him, that is, an encounter without a mediating entity (stanza 6):<sup>11</sup>

¡Ay, quién podrá sanarme!  
Acaba de entregarte ya de vero;  
no quieras enviarme  
de hoy más mensajero,  
que no saben decirme lo que quiero.

This direct encounter, the *unio mystica*, is introduced in the following strophe by the idea of the *death* of the soul, and this is the context in which the already quoted verse appears (stanza 7):

Y todos cuantos vagan  
de ti me van mil gracias refiriendo,  
y todos más me llagan,  
y déjame muriendo  
un no sé qué que quedan balbuciendo.

As Saint John of the Cross himself specifies in his commentary (*Cántico espiritual* 7.1), the last verse can be read as an expression of the immensity of God the human soul perceives through Creation; in other words, the totality of creatures, rational ones in this case,<sup>12</sup> communicates God in a manner that cannot be understood any longer. At the same time, it is God who communicates *Himself* through the creatures – a semantic ambiguity that explains why

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9. This kind of Christian mysticism is reminiscent of the biblical *Song of Songs* and its interpretation by Bernard of Clairvaux, that is, expressing the unification of the human soul and God by using the allegory of marriage and several erotic metaphors related to that allegory.

10. In the context of a perception of God in and through Creation, the poem (stanzas 4-7) expresses poetically the patriarchal doctrine of the *Book of Creation*, whose study has the one and only purpose of getting to know the author.

11. If not indicated otherwise, the quotations of Saint John of the Cross are taken from *Obra completa*, ed. López-Baralt/Pacho.

12. According to the poet's comment, strophes 5 and 6 refer to the soul's being wounded by the perception of the divine grace and beauty through the physical world and irrational creatures, whereas stanza 7 has to be understood as its being killed by the overwhelming communication of God through the rational creatures, that is, humans and angels (*Cántico espiritual* 7).

some manuscripts use the singular (“déjame”) and others the plural-form (“déjanme”).<sup>13</sup> In any case, this communication is perceived as stumble or stutter whose message, according to the commentary (7.9), is the impossibility of understanding God. Paradoxically, this awareness is, at the same time, a very high understanding and one of the greatest gifts the soul can receive. In the end, this divine communication literally *kills* (*Cántico espiritual* 7.9) the soul so that it can unify, at least momentarily, with God.

In addition to the idea of the human perception of the *divine language* in and through Creation, the motif of stutter in the work of Saint John also describes *human language* itself. This can be seen in the poem beginning “Entre-me donde no supe...”,<sup>14</sup> which encircles the apparent dichotomy knowing/not knowing meaning, as already indicated, that true knowledge of God corresponds to a no-knowledge from the human perspective. The following verses describe the way to this *docta ignorantia*: “Cuanto más alto se sube, / tanto menos se entendía, / que es la tenebrosa nube, / que a la noche esclarecía” (vv. 32-35). Our knowledge and understanding gradually dissipate as we get closer to God, who finally reveals Himself, in midst of the unknowing, in paradoxical manner as an illuminating *cloud*.<sup>15</sup> Transferred to the linguistic dimension, this means that our discursive speech literally dissolves into stutter to the degree we get nearer to Him, as the second stanza indicates:

De paz y piedad  
era la ciencia perfecta,  
en profunda soledad  
entendida vía recta,  
era cosa tan secreta,  
que me quedé balbuciendo,  
toda ciencia trascendiendo.

In comparison to the *Cántico* and its famous verse, it is not God’s communication through the creatures that is *perceived as a stuttering*, but the lyrical self

13. See note \*\* in Juan de la Cruz, *Poesía* 250.

14. “Coplas del mismo autor hechas sobre un éxtasis de harta contemplación”.

15. Saint John uses a similar metaphor (“rayo de tiniebla”) in his comment on the poem *Noche oscura* (II, 5.3), in a paragraph that relates directly to the work of Pseudo-Denys, who applies this formulation in his *Mystical Theology* (I.1.): “πρὸς τὸν ὑπερούσιον τοῦ θεοῦ σκότους ἀκτῖνα” (the passage refers to the moment the mind enters “into the superessential radiance of the divine darkness”). An excellent study of the darkness/light opposition in the work of the Carmelite from a semantic perspective is offered by Mancho Duque (in particular 49-60).

that *is* stuttering. Both readings do not exclude themselves: not knowing (“no entender”) implies not knowing how to say (“no saber decir”). In fact, the apparent difference is only one of perspective, as one could say that, in the latter case also, God expresses Himself, now through the resigned self of the poet; in how far the self, at the moment of the *unio*, is still a self is one of the central mysteries of Christian mysticism.

Apart from its direct mentions, the motif of stutter is also related to the poetics inherent to the Carmelite’s work. In this context, it is highly meaningful that he describes his own verses in the prologue of the *Cántico* as *nonsenses* (“dislates”). What is meant here is that they are incomprehensible from a logical point of view.<sup>16</sup> This idea is curious insofar as it makes somehow obsolete the commentary, which is an attempt to explain these *nonsenses* within a theological –mainly Thomistic– framework. The superiority of poetry over theology, philosophy, and any science that tries to grasp the ultimate reality with terminologically precise concepts shines through, and it is probably this degree of incomprehensibility or ambiguity that makes his poems so akin to the modern lyrical tradition.

If we apply the idea of stutter to the structure of the *Cántico* itself, it becomes obvious that its incomprehensibility in decisive places is related to a semantic and syntactical deconstruction of the poetic language. This can be seen in particular in the stanzas 13-15:<sup>17</sup>

LA ESPOSA	¡Apártalos, Amado, que voy de vuelo!
EL ESPOSO	–Vuélvete, paloma, que el ciervo vulnerado por el otero asoma al aire de tu vuelo, y fresco toma.
LA ESPOSA	Mi amado, las montañas, los valles solitarios nemorosos, las ínsulas extrañas, los ríos sonorosos, el silbo de los aires amorosos,

16. In the context of a surmounting of rational knowledge in the poetry of Saint John of the Cross, see also López-Baralt (particularly 41-42).

17. The count of the strophes corresponds to the second version of the poem.

la noche sosegada  
 en par de los levantes de la aurora,  
 la música callada,  
 la soledad sonora,  
 la cena que recrea y enamora.

At this highpoint of the poem, the bride has just conjured up the apparition of the bridegroom looking at a crystalline fountain (stanza 12) and has entered a state of ecstasy (the dove's *flight*) caused by His appearance. This appearance is too much to bear, so she tells him to *look away* ("Apártalos" refers to the bridegroom's eyes). That is precisely when the *unio* seems to take place (stanza 13),<sup>18</sup> a unification that reveals itself also at the metrical level, as the corresponding verse (the second in the quote) is spoken by both bride and bridegroom. Notable, likewise, is the accumulation of bilabials ("voy", "vuelo", "vuélvete", "paloma", "ciervo vulnerado") that can be read as another onomatopoeic reference to the idea of stutter.

The bridegroom then takes over the speech for a few verses and refers to Himself in the third person, describing his own appearance as that of a *wounded deer* ("ciervo vulnerado").<sup>19</sup> She, at the same time, seems to pass into a state of calmed ecstasy (stanzas 14-15), perhaps resulting from the momentary union, or possibly still experiencing that union itself as being completely (ful)filled by the other. Just here, the syntax is incomplete, and the message becomes somehow incomprehensible. Instead of a whole phrase, there is an *accumulatio* of strange metaphors and paradoxical figures that recall a mystical vision, incohesive fragments not structured by any verb. This omission of predication and simultaneous use of accumulation, a procedure related to negative theology, can be interpreted as an intention to delimit language with regard to the divine (if we suppose that every predication is a limitation). After this enigmatic passage, the poem once again returns to a more comprehensible speech.

#### "UN BALBUTIEMENT"

In the work of Stéphane Mallarmé, the idea of stutter appears at the end of one of his important poetological writings, "Le Mystère dans les lettres".

18. This is of course debatable. As Teuber (226) points out convincingly, the *unio mystica*, the true signified of the poem, is never really present.

19. A reference to psalm 42 and, in the medieval tradition, also a Christological metaphor.

Conceived as a sort of hidden pamphlet against his critics,<sup>20</sup> this difficult and hermetic text consists of a series of aphoristic reflections that encircle the idea of obscurity, or incomprehensibility, as a necessary ground of existence that true poetry must reveal. This darker, or higher, dimension of reality, which, according to the Frenchman, worries the positivists among us, is circumscribed metaphorically as a barely noticeable *profound mirroring*, and also as a “beautiful cloud floating above the abyss of each thought”. Moreover, it is related to the notion of a *hidden signifier*: “Il doit y avoir quelque chose d’occulte au fond de tous, je crois décidément à quelque chose d’abscons, signifiant fermé et caché, qui habite le commun” (282). This notion is one of the key elements of Mallarmé’s thought, even though it is not developed in a systematic manner.

In the second part of “Le Mystère”, Mallarmé focuses on the question of how true poetry, following the ideal of music, can reveal, at least partially, the obscure. Important in this context is the concept of *interruptions*: “Dites, comme si une clarté, à jet continu; ou qu’elle ne tire d’interruptions le caractère, momentané, de délivrance” (284). The Absolute, now in terms of *light* (the paradoxical ensemble of light and darkness can be viewed as a characteristic that relates both Saint John’s and Mallarmé’s work to the neo-Platonic tradition) is described here with regard to our necessarily limited, that is, *discontinuous* perception of it. A constant illumination would not be an illumination at all, for, in order to be perceived as such, it must be interrupted. Mallarmé sees this principle fulfilled in (true) music: “Les déchirures suprêmes instrumentales, conséquence d’enroulements transitoires, éclatent plus véridiques, à même, en argumentation de lumière, qu’aucun raisonnement tenu jamais” (285). The interruptions, or as here, *ruptures* (“déchirures”), correspond to momentary and fragmentary flashes of the obscure that, to manifest itself, requires the destruction of a clearly perceptible structure or, more precisely, an *opening* of structure. Interestingly, these *ruptures* are explained here as being consequences of *transitory windings*,

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20. Marchal explains in his commentary of the text: “La cause prochaine de cet article inhabituellement polémique de Mallarmé était très vraisemblablement la publication, dans le numéro du 15 juillet de la même revue [*La Revue blanche*], d’un article de Marcel Proust, intitulé «Contre l’obscurité». Cet article ne s’en prenait pas directement à Mallarmé –il attaquait les jeunes symbolistes–, mais il relançait la polémique sur l’obscurité poétique à une époque où Mallarmé était la cible mensuelle des articles d’Adolphe Retté dans *La Plume*. Mallarmé choisit donc de répondre une fois pour toutes à ses nombreux accusateurs” (2003, 499).



a term which, in the poet's work, suggests a sort of momentary contact with the Spirit.<sup>21</sup>

Transferred to the realms of language, the concept of *interruption* or *rupture* finds its equivalent in the idea of stutter. It is thus no complete surprise that at the end of the text, ideal poetry is described as such:

Les abrupts, hauts jeux d'aile, se mireront, aussi: qui les mène, perçoit une extraordinaire appropriation de la structure, limpide, aux primitives foudres de la logique. Un balbutiement, que semble la phrase, ici refoulé dans l'emploi d'incidentes multiple, se compose et s'enlève en quelque équilibre supérieure, à balancement prévu d'inversions. ("Le Mystère dans les lettres" 287)

The quotation must be read in the context of Mallarmé's poetics. Released from both semantic unambiguity and syntactic structure, the words mirror each other, and a total relation of everything to everything is created in the poem. This is achieved by the proclaimed technique of poetic suggestion<sup>22</sup> and, where the passage focusses on them, the use of *inversions* that destroy the syntactical order of the phrase. The result is a primordial murmur or stutter that *composes itself* within this dynamic linguistic interplay and, at the same time, *elevates itself* towards a *higher equilibrium*, (probably) a unity of contradictions we can no longer perceive and that only the *hidden signifier* would be able to express.

As the subsequent passage of "Le Mystère" indicates, the supreme stutter, i.e., the free vibration of words within the poem, makes it possible to recognize momentarily a facet of what could be viewed as a Platonic idea (the following words are reminiscent of the Allegory of the Cave): "Les mots, d'eux-mêmes, s'exaltent à mainte facette reconnue la plus rare ou valant pour l'esprit, centre de suspens vibratoire; qui les perçoit indépendamment de la suite ordinaire, projetés, en parois de grotte, tant que dure leur mobilité ou principe" (286-87). The reader comes into play here: the suspension of semantic and syntactic order also takes place in his mind, which is only capable

21. The description of the faun's encounter of the two *tangled* nymphs in the famous poem (*L'Après-midi d'un faune*) can be interpreted in this sense. Even though the poem is highly erotic, according to Bonnefoy (xxiii), it has a clearly spiritual background, in which the nymphs function as ciphers of the Absolute the poet (faun) tries to conquer.

22. Expressed in his famous phrase against the realist poetics of the Parnassiens: "Nommer un objet, c'est supprimer les trois quarts de la jouissance du poème qui est faite de deviner peu à peu: le suggérer, voilà le rêve" ("Sur l'évolution littéraire" 700).

of obtaining momentary freedom –for Mallarmé an absolute movement of the words– and has to return to structure with necessity. But this moment seems sufficient to create a space of revelation for the purely spiritual idea. Another famous text, “Crise de vers”, explains the aim of this poetic self-deconstruction, which results in a near complete disappearance of concrete objects in the poetic language, in a similar manner: “À quoi bon la merveille de transposer un fait de nature en sa presque disparation vibratoire selon le jeu de la parole, cependant; si ce n’est pour qu’en émane,<sup>23</sup> sans la gêne d’un proche ou concret rappel, la notion pure” (259).

Obviously, also in the case of Mallarmé, and even more so than in the case of Saint John of the Cross, the idea of stutter can be applied to the poems themselves. A good example<sup>24</sup> of how the Frenchman fulfills the principle of semantic and syntactic deconstruction in his own poetry is the sonnet *Éventail* (de Mme. Mallarmé):<sup>25</sup>

Avec comme pour langage  
 Rien qu’un battement aux cieux  
 Le futur vers se dégage  
 Du logis très précieux  
  
 Aile tout bas la courrière  
 Cet éventail si c’est lui  
 Le même par qui derrière  
 Toi quelque miroir a lui  
  
 Limpide (où va redescendre  
 Pourchassée en chaque grain  
 Un peu d’invisible cendre  
 Seule à me rendre chagrin)  
  
 Toujours tel il apparaisse  
 Entre tes mains sans paresse (*Poésies* 46)

23. The idea of emanation (in Plotinus, it would be an emanation of the One; see Wallis 61-72), of course, is another element that relates the French to the Neo-Platonic tradition.

24. There are numerous examples, the most extreme being *Un coup de dès*. I have chosen the following sonnet because the process of deconstruction is more subtle here, and, in this sense, more interesting.

25. More detailed interpretations can be found in Friedrich (100-03), Bénichou (303-07), and Marchal (1992, 227-28).

The poetological dimension, decisive in Mallarmé's poems in general, is obvious. The *future verse* is related to the fan ("éventail"), the main motif of the text, and its soft and barely notable vibrational movement. The rest, despite the poem's regular sonnet form,<sup>26</sup> is somewhat incomprehensible, and this has essentially to do with a lack of structure. There is no punctuation, the only typographical element being the brackets of the third strophe, which do not contribute to the understanding of the text either. Moreover, from the second stanza on, the syntactic relations are not at all clear, even though it seems that "cet éventail" and "toujours tel il apparaisse" belong together. The main difficulty of the text probably lies in the way the objects are described. The fan is named and, in the same verse, the question is raised whether or not it is *this* fan (which?), which is then related to the apparition of *some mirror*. That mirror, on its part, *has shone behind* (that is, in the past and probably unnoticed) the *you* to whom these words seem to be directed (who?). In the brackets of the third stanza, the secret mirror of uncertain existence is further described as a future place for a descent of *invisible ash*... In this manner, the poem generates increasing grades of indeterminacy. A(n) (im)possible interpretation: the fan, that is, poetry, if it is *true* poetry, creates a room of manifestation for the invisible spirit.

Be its message as it may, what is obvious in the poem is the procedure: released from their syntactic, grammatical, and semantic determination, the individual words and parts of the poem tend to be all related (or relatable) to each other. The poem thus reflects a process of linguistic self-deconstruction, causing the dissolution of any concrete message and sense.

### SOME CONCLUSIONS

From a poetological (not a theological) perspective, the difference in the way both authors apply the motif in question is not one of essence but focus. In the case of Saint John of the Cross, the focus lies in the idea of ineffability, that is, the human incapability of understanding and expressing God; with Mallarmé, the –fragmentary– revelation of the Spirit lies at the core. These meanings do not exclude each other. Even the apparent opposition between stillness (strophes 14-15 of the *Cántico*) and movement (of the words) in the work of the two

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26. Even though the use of the English sonnet is somewhat unusual in 19<sup>th</sup> century French poetry.

is not essential when we keep in mind that, for Mallarmé, absolute stillness and movement are one and the same.<sup>27</sup>

In both cases, the motif of stutter describes language's outlying district, a connecting link<sup>28</sup> between human speech de-manifesting itself into the Divine, and the Divine –as already said, Mallarmé frequently uses the word *Spirit*– manifesting itself in human language. In how far the latter is even possible is, in the end, a question of belief. With regard to Saint John of the Cross, Thompson opts for what could be called a 'presence in rupture' or 'presence in absence': "El lenguaje y los conceptos humanos no pueden contener a Dios; sin embargo, *en el quebramiento de las normas de aquéllos hay un testimonio de la presencia de él*" (369). This idea is opposed to Teuber's theory of an absolute absence of the true signified –God, and the *unio mystica*, respectively– in the work of the Carmelite (226). Maybe these ideas can be reconciled if we conceive this opposing movement of de-manifestation and manifestation as an *on-going process* which, if one tried to sum up the poetics of Saint John and Mallarmé with a common denominator, would be the true nature of *poiesis*.

In the case of Mallarmé, moreover, the question arises of how far the *Spirit* even exists independently outside the boundaries of language, but the response may be less relevant from a literary perspective. Moreover, it is difficult to answer and likely that Mallarmé himself was unsure. If we examine the early phase of his career, in which he regards himself as a mediator of the *Spiritual Universe*,<sup>29</sup> there is much to be said for the assumption of an independent existence. The later Mallarmé, on the other hand, seems more metaphysically cautious, but, if we believe Bonnefoy (ix), never really gave up on his religious assumptions.

A key difference, even though it is difficult to mark a frontier, is that Saint John of the Cross seems to conceive poetry as a posterior-written ac-

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27. Another famous passage of "*Crise de vers*" illustrates this: "Tout deviens suspens, disposition fragmentaire avec alternance et vis-à-vis, concourant au rythme total, lequel serait le poème tu, aux blancs" (257).

28. An idea somehow corresponding to T.S. Eliot's *Dry Salvages*: "But to apprehend / The point of intersection of the timeless / With time, is an occupation for the saint" (136).

29. "C'est t'apprendre que je suis maintenant impersonnel, et non plus Stéphane que tu as connu, –mais une aptitude qu'a l'Univers Spirituel à se voir et à se développer, à travers ce qui fut moi" (*Correspondance* 343). In this famous letter to Cazalis (dated May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1867), Mallarmé mentions a *purity* of thought he has reached through an enormously increased sensibility. Revealing mystical elements and ideas, he refers in this context to a descent into *Darkness* ("Ténèbres", in capital letters), and *Nothingness* ("Néant"), even to his own *death*. All these tortures, it seems, were necessary for him to become a kind of *obstetrician* of the Spirit.

count of a mystical experience,<sup>30</sup> whereas Mallarmé, in this context influenced by the Romantic equating of the poetic (aesthetic) and the religious sentiment,<sup>31</sup> seems to regard poetry as a means of gaining such an experience; it might be more appropriate to speak of a *poietic experience* in the latter case. On the other hand, if we take into consideration that such an experience is supposed to happen outside the boundaries of space and time, the distinction becomes somehow less precise.

In any case, what both authors show like *very* few others is what poetry is capable of: it can lead human language to its outermost limits and suggest an all-embracing silence. And it may be that sometimes a fragment of that silence becomes somehow present throughout the stuttering poetic word which seems to generate a space or blank for a linguistic epiphany, that is, a manifestation of the transcendent signified's ineffable nucleus inside the boundaries of language. The biblical *YHWE* –“I am who I am”– comes to mind. A reflection of Beierwaltes sheds light on this. What is described here as a main characteristic of (Neo-)Platonic philosophy and negative theology can also be applied to the poetry of Saint John and Mallarmé, with an important modification:

Philosophies of the absolute and theologies that are convinced of the incommensurability of their object are motivated by the question of the expressibility of their highest object, which is nuclear for them. If it is evident within a common metaphysical horizon that the first principle or God cannot be grasped by categories or forms of thought coming from a logic adequate to the limited, finite, created, their whole terminological effort must be directed to express at least with reasons the inexpressibility of their object. Such philosophies and theologies are aligned, in accordance to their basic intention, with a clarification of the efficiency and functioning of language.<sup>32</sup>

30. Thinking of his most famous poems *Cántico espiritual*, *Noche oscura*, and *Llama de amor viva*.

31. An idea which is very obvious in Novalis' *Die Christenheit oder Europa*, and gains its theoretical background in Schleiermacher's famous definition of religion as “sense and taste for the infinite” (*Über die Religion*, qtd. in Safranski 141).

32. Beierwaltes (52): “Philosophien des Absoluten und Theologien, die von der Inkommensurabilität ihres Gegenstandes überzeugt sind, werden durch die für sie zentrale Frage nach der Sagbarkeit ihres höchsten Gegenstandes bewegt. Wenn innerhalb eines gemeinsamen metaphysischen Horizontes als evident gelten kann, dass das erste Prinzip oder Gott nicht in Kategorien und Denkformen einer für Begrenztes, Endliches, Geschaffenes adäquaten Logik fassbar ist, dann muss ihre ganze begriffliche Anstrengung darauf gerichtet sein, zumindest die Un-Sagbarkeit ihres Gegenstandes mit Gründen sagbar zu machen. Derartige Philosophien und Theologien sind von ihrer Grundintention her auf eine Klärung von Leistung und Funktion der Sprache ausgerichtet”.

The aforementioned modification is that poetry goes beyond philosophy and theology because it does not express (or try to express) the *reasons* of the highest principle's ineffability but this ineffability *in itself*.

Transferred to the realm of literary theory, the aforementioned idea implies that a poetical is superior to a theoretical text because of its ability to *deconstruct itself*.<sup>33</sup> In order to execute this *consciously*, an awareness of the inevitability of *aporia* is necessary, and this awareness is what seems to unify the mystic with the modern poet. In this context, it is no wonder that Derrida's thought received decisive impulses from the work of Mallarmé.<sup>34</sup> Literature, once again, is not an object of deconstruction theory, but its model.

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33. According to Simons (102), a similar superiority of the literary over the theoretical text is one of the most important consequences of Paul de Man's deconstruction theory.

34. For example, "Force et signification", the opening essay of *L'Écriture et la différence*, receives decisive impulses of Richard's *L'Univers imaginaire de Mallarmé*. See also, in this context, Greer Cohn. With regard to the influence of Mallarmé on (Post-)Structuralism, Barthes gets to the heart: "All we do is copy Mallarmé" (51).

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