



## SELF ACTUALIZATION IN THE POEMS OF JOHN OF CROSS

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### Abstract

This paper deals with the psychological understanding of self actualization in the poems of John of the Cross who lived in Spain during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. John of the Cross is considered as one of the great mystic poet, reformer and monk who stood for the spiritual awakening of his community in the fast running of materialism and imperial network of the European countries. John of the cross was a revolutionist in the Catholic Church who shown the right path and taught the people how to lead a pure Christian life by the love and illumination in Jesus Christ. The ecstatic union with God is the central theme in the most of his poems. The paper is an attempt to read John of the Cross's poems in the views of Abraham Maslow and 1908-1970) and Carl Rogers (1902-1987), with different aspects of actualization. It develops this idea that John of the Cross, as a spiritualist and a self-actualized poet, not by selecting the term actualization but reflect his life and experiences through his poems.

### Self-Actualization in the poems of John of Cross

Albeit several theories of human psychology explains the goal of self-actualization as a feeling of fulfilment in an individual, Abraham Maslow explains the fact of using one's ability to achieve the meaning of life, as much as he can "What a man *can* be, he *must* be. This need we may call self-actualization...It refers to the desire for self-fulfilment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming."<sup>1</sup> Similarly Carl Rojer referred 'the creative force in psychotherapy, man's tendency to actualize himself, to become his potentialities to express and active all the capacities of the organism<sup>2</sup>. Though attainment biological and psychological needs satisfy many people, there are people who nurture the desire that their lives should be the realization and utilization of their potentialities to maximum.

Self-Actualization apart from a modern psychological developmental theory, it has a philosophical basement too. A foundation for the theory of self-actualization is expressed in the concept of *entelechy*, a term coined by Aristotle (384 – 322 BCE). According to William Sahakian, Aristotle is the founder of self-actualization psychology, providing the conception of the soul as the *entelechy* (self-contained purpose) of the body... The person who actualizes himself fully, i.e., realizes his every major potential capacity or ability, is adjusted in the sense that he finds himself in a state of *eudemonia*<sup>3</sup> (beautiful state of mind)

John of Cross (1542-1591) a mystic, poet and major figure of Counter Reformation composed more than 2500 verses in Spanish language. Among them, Spiritual Canticle, Dark Night of the Soul, Living Flame of love and Ascent of Mount Carmel are widely considered masterpiece of his Spanish poetry. John of Cross, a man of pious purity of mind and modesty of life stood apart from materialistic way of his community. Due to this, he was kept under a brutal regime included public lashing before the community at least weekly, and punished with severe isolation in tiny stifling cell barely large enough for his body. In the midst of his intricacy, he composed a great part of his poem, Spiritual Canticle.

In Spiritual Canticle, John of cross makes it clear that the souls self-definition is rooted in its attachment.

"How do you endure  
O life, not living where you live,  
And being brought near death  
By the arrows you receive  
From that which you conceived your beloved."

The soul lives where she lives more than in the body she animates: for she does not live in the body, but rather gives life to the body, and lives through live in the object of her love. Hence, the movement of life and the experience of meaning flow directly from relationships that engage the deepest desire in the soul for the 'other' The soul, perceiving itself to be dying of

<sup>1</sup> Abraham Maslow, *A theory of motivation, psychological review* 370-396

<sup>2</sup> Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person* (1961) p. 350-59

<sup>3</sup>Sahakian, 1975, p.9



love, complain of the continuance of its bodily life, by which the spiritual life it is living upon earth, magnifying the sorrows of it.

The poem beautifully reverberates the experience of spiritual quest and union with other, that is beloved His loving God in the sense of self-actualization and tells no attachment of the worldly affairs. In Marlow's view of God as 'being itself' or the 'integrating principle of the universe' or the 'whole of everything' and he says 'peak experience' is very private, hardly able to share to someone to understand this self-actualization. Maslow says that a human being "...has within him a pressure toward unity of personality, toward spontaneous expressiveness, toward full individuality and identity, toward seeing the truth rather than being blind, toward being creative, toward being good, and a lot else. That is, the human being is so constructed that he presses toward what most people would call good values, toward serenity, kindness, courage, honesty, love, unselfishness, and goodness,"<sup>4</sup> When looking into the John of Cross's philosophy of life, he is well aware of what the scripture teaches.

As a human being, he is made in the image of God but is a fallen being needing salvation "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" Roman 2:23. To be self-actualized therefore, one needs something or someone bigger than the self to get them to the place of rest. The writer of the book of Ecclesiastes indicates that God "has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end" Ecclesiastes 3:11. This indicates that he can never be completely satisfied with earthly pleasures and pursuits because he is so mindful about that he dwells in the created in the image of God and celebrates the harmony with the other' that is the beloved he refers.

"Ascent of Mount Carmel" and "Dark Night", are two poems. Though both composed separately, these two can be considered a single treatise written by John of Cross. He describes the mystical process of the transformation of the soul from what he terms its old to its new self through an erotic, spiritual and participatory union in God, a union requiring the soul's passage through a night of detachment, purgation and purification.

O guiding night!  
O night more lovely than the dawn!  
O night that has united  
The lover with his beloved,  
transforming the beloved to lover

Maslow's view of self-actualized individual is the enlightenment one who has attained perfect inner freedom and whole tranquillity and detachment are perfect. John of Cross wonderfully depicts the reflection of his inner self as

I abandoned and forgot myself,  
Laying my face on my beloved;  
All things ceased; I went out from myself,  
Leaving my cares  
Forgotten among lilies.

Maslow defines peak experience as think of most wonderful experiences of your life: the happiest moments, ecstatic moment, moment of rapture, perhaps from being in love ,or being in love or from listening to music or suddenly being hit by a book or painting, or from creative movement<sup>5</sup>In his poem, living Flame of Love, John of Cross experiences the touch of deification is an unspeakable experience of spiritual awakening, became his lord Jesus, the word of god is intimately united with the soul and so there is a marvellousscene of oneness with Him. The soul is no longer alone, they are no longer two but one. Like a rose opening to the sun, the lord treats the soul like a friend, a brother, a sister and a spouse which makes in him the celestial happiness, without any fear, the soul is rejoicing in the spiritual marriage.

The prominent characteristics of a self-actualizing individual include realism and acceptance, autonomy, spontaneity, creativity, simplicity, freshness of appreciation, enjoyment of both solitude and deeper personal relations, problem-centred rather than self-catered, dichotomy-transcendence, strong ethical sense, humility and respect towards others, and peak experiences.<sup>6</sup> These qualities indicate a conception of self-actualization .In the "The Spiritual Canticles", John of Cross searches the journeys toward Beloved who, it seems, has left her wailing in nature. Finally, she gazes into a fountain,

<sup>4</sup>Maslow, *Towards the Psychology of Being* 1968, p. 155.

<sup>5</sup>*Towards a psychology of being* 1962

<sup>6</sup>Maslow, 1970, pp278-312.



commands his appearance, and the Beloved appears as a stag, thus provoking the poetic subject's soul to soar like a bird. From this encounter, the poem goes on to eulogize the mutual devotion between lover and Beloved leading up to the Beloved's promise to marry her.

The marriage ceremony summons a new poetic world of abstract and natural forms while evoking imagery from the Old Testament's Song of Songs. The poem ends with the return of the poetic subject to the world, indifferent to worldly events, love-struck with God's touch and grace. The journey towards that end which John describes in the Prologue to *The Ascent* as 'that divine light of perfect union with God, which is achieved in so far as possible in this life through love.' The powerful insistence in *The Ascent* on the need for renunciation and detachment that then moves the soul into the purifying night of sense and spirit in *The Dark Night* is, according to John, a preparation, for the prayer of contemplation described towards the end of Book Two of *The Dark Night* as 'a science of love, which as we said is an infused loving knowledge, that both illumines and enamours the soul, elevating it step by step unto God, its Creator. It is precisely this state of union that is then expanded and placed within the intimate dynamics of a loving relationship between the Bridegroom and the beloved in *The Canticle* that then prepares the soul for the Trinitarian experience of love when the Holy Spirit's movement of the soul brings this spiritual journey to completion.

This is expressed with great clarity right at the end of *The Living Flame*, 'But in this awakening of the Bridegroom in the perfect soul, everything that occurs and is caused is perfect, for He is the cause of it all. And in that awakening, which is as though one were to awaken and breathe, the soul feels strange delight in the breathing of the Holy Spirit in God, in which it is sovereignty glorified and taken with love.'

Though, John of Crosses poems are filled with the mystical union and love with God, these reflect his defined creativity as a lifestyle, a way of living and perceiving, the greater the overlap. Creativity is clearly more than producing new ideas in art, science, or even business; it can refer to the process of composing a poem as well. The time when John of Cross created this poem was the years of flood of his creativity, when he was coming to his full power as a poet and composed lots of poems even in the midst of his tragical life. In all his poems shows his satisfaction of his actualization of self. He believes in himself and his relation with God so much that to encourage the other people to actualize themselves as well through his poems.

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