The Influence of Translation on Meaning: 
A Comparative Analysis of English Translations of 
San Juan de la Cruz’ *Llama de amor viva*

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Abstract

Given its reliance on a wide variety of linguistic elements, including sound effects and highly figurative language, poetry lacks a single formula for translation. Thus, this genre presents a significant challenge to translators, who must often choose which of these elements to preserve at the expense of others, and produces considerable variety among translations of the same work. This paper examines this complex process of poetry translation and particularly its impact on meaning by comparing the translations of Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (1964), Willis Barnstone (1972), and Loren G. Smith (2005) of sixteenth-century Spanish mystic San Juan de la Cruz’ *Llama de amor viva*. Using these translators’ approaches to meter and rhyme scheme, original metaphors, Spanish grammatical constructions lacking an equivalent in English, and individual problematic words as criteria of evaluation, this study concludes that although no translation entirely preserves the meaning of San Juan’s original work, each effectively transmits part of this meaning through at least one of the above areas while simultaneously developing individual shades of meaning through others, thus emerging as both translation and independent poem.
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Introduction

There is no single formula for translating poetry. One cannot, as Willis Barnstone asserts in his book *The Poetics of Translation*, duplicate the written word in another language as one might copy a painting, for no two languages are composed of perfectly equivalent words that satisfy the same phonetic, semantic, and syntactic requirements but are rather made up of approximate equivalents that overlap in some areas of sound and meaning but diverge in others (106). Poetry in particular has been called “the ultimate challenge at the complex heart of the art of literary translation” because of its reliance on a wide variety of linguistic elements, including meter, rhyme scheme, other sound effects, and highly figurative language, to convey meaning (Barnstone, *Poetics of Translation* 4). While each of these components communicates part of the meaning intended by the source author, the translator does not have at his or her disposal individual words in the target language that participate in each of these elements in exactly the same way as do the words of the source language. Thus, he or she is constantly presented with a great number of choices as to how to preserve the meaning contained in each aspect of poetry, and is also confronted by the problem that excessive focus on a particular element tends to compromise the others and thus cause a loss of overall meaning. This formidable juggling act results in the considerable variety among translations of the same work. In fact, as Carmen Valero-Garcés claims in her book *Languages in Contact: An Introductory Textbook on Translation*, “Nunca hubo, ni probablemente las habrá dos traducciones iguales de un mismo texto, producidas por dos autores diferentes, y ni siquiera por el mismo traductor en épocas
diferentes.”¹ a suggestion of the significant challenges presented by poetry translation and the consequent lack of specific guidelines for this task (84).

Faced with these difficulties, some have declared the translation of poetry impossible: the differences between languages, when words are arranged in a way in which their denotative and connotative meanings, aesthetic qualities, position in the sentence or in the line, etc. are all crucial to the meaning of the work, seem insurmountable (Baranczak 41; Barnstone, *Poetics of Translation* 25). However, many scholars take a more optimistic viewpoint. Most agree, for example, that translating literature for the sake of such goals as ensuring the survival of literary works and motifs, facilitating the study of global literature, and enriching the literature of the target culture is an important enough endeavor to outweigh the fact that few, if any, of these translations will be perfectly equivalent to their source texts (Lefevere, *Translating Poetry* 119-120; Felstiner 11). Many scholars also affirm the idea that simply transmitting the meaning or the idea behind a poem, rather than aspiring to an ideal but impossible literal rendering, is enough to constitute a valid translation. Some even push this idea of some degree of freedom in translation so far as to suggest that a translation be judged by its own literary value rather than by how well it conveys the message of the source text.

In this study, I advance the middle position expressed above: literary translation is both necessary and possible, and it is best approached with the primary goal of rendering the meaning of the source text in the target text. Of course, however commendable this objective, the difficulty remains of how a translator can or should attempt preservation of meaning, especially when working within the genre of poetry, where, as noted above, meaning is expressed on so

¹ “There have never been, and probably there will never be, two identical translations of the same text produced by two different authors, nor even by the same translator at different times.” [This and all subsequent translations my own, unless otherwise noted.]
many levels that some changes seem inevitable. Nevertheless, as will be demonstrated, much of the original meaning can in various ways be maintained.

This study examines the effects of the translation of poetry on meaning by comparing the translations of Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (1964), Willis Barnstone (1972), and Loren G. Smith (2005) of *Llama de amor viva*, a poem by the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic San Juan de la Cruz. Following an introduction to the author’s context, as well as the thematic elements and the form of this poem, I will critique the ways in which these three translations maintain, enhance, and diverge from the original in a comparative analysis. As criteria of evaluation, I will assess the translators’ approaches to four particular aspects of the source text: meter and rhyme scheme, original metaphors, Spanish grammatical constructions lacking a direct equivalent in English, and individual problematic words. I will also present an original translation of *Llama de amor viva*, which is intended to complement the analytical focus of the rest of the study by serving as a creative approach to and addressing the subjective element of poetry translation. Ultimately, I conclude that, while no single translation entirely preserves the original meaning of the source text, each does demonstrate effective ways to retain at least part of this meaning in one or more of the above areas. Furthermore, each translation, even as it strives to preserve the meaning of the original, simultaneously develops different, unique shades of meaning and emerges ultimately as both a translation of *Llama de amor viva* and an independent work of art.

In order to understand approaches to translation of this particular poem, it will be necessary to have some knowledge of its content, and that in turn will require a familiarity with San Juan’s personal life and spirituality. Thus, before beginning my comparative analysis of the
translations, I turn to a brief discussion of the poet himself, the sixteenth-century Spanish mysticism in which he played a prominent role, and the form and content of *Llama de amor viva*. I conclude this preliminary material with a short introduction to each of the translations to be examined.

The Life and Works of San Juan de la Cruz

San Juan de la Cruz (in English, St. John of the Cross) was born Juan de Yepes in the small town of Fontiveros in Castile, Spain, in 1542 (Barnstone, “Introduction” 10). As his father, Gonzalo de Yepes, had been disinherited by his family for marrying a poor weaver, Catalina Alvarez, Juan and his older brother Francisco grew up in poverty (Kavanaugh, “General Introduction” 9). The family’s financial situation only worsened with the death of Gonzalo when Juan was two years old, and Catalina and her sons eventually moved to Medina del Campo, a growing city with a large marketplace in the center of Castile, in 1551 (Ruiz et al. 29).

There, Juan received an elementary education at the School of Doctrine, during which time he also served as an acolyte at a nearby Augustinian monastery, worked at a hospital caring for the sick and begging alms, and tried his hand at several trades, though he was far more talented at academics (Ruiz et al. 36). With financial support from Don Alonso Alvarez, administrator of the hospital in Medina where Juan worked, he attended a recently founded Jesuit college from 1559-1563, where he studied the humanities and possibly philosophy as well (Ruiz et al. 45). He was reportedly an excellent student (Barnstone, “Introduction” 10). Ordination to the priesthood would have been a sensible next step for a poor yet academically gifted young man, and indeed, upon the completion of Juan’s studies, Don Alonso offered him the position of hospital chaplain if he would become a priest (Kavanaugh, “General Introduction” 10).
However, Juan chose to join the Carmelite friars instead, entering the novitiate in 1563 and taking the name Fray Juan de Santo Matía (Ruiz et al. 51). It is speculated that he was strongly drawn to the contemplative spirit and Marian devotion of this order (Kavanaugh, “General Introduction” 10). At the end of his novitiate year in 1564, Juan moved to Salamanca to study philosophy and theology at the university, an institution on the same level as those of Bologna, Paris, and Oxford (Kavanaugh, “General Introduction” 12). During this time, he seriously questioned his vocation and considered leaving the Carmelites to join the Carthusians, desiring more solitude and contemplation (Ruiz et al. 81).

A fateful encounter in 1567 would persuade him to remain with the Carmelites and indeed shape the remainder of his life as a friar. Juan returned to Medina del Campo to say his first Mass where, at that time, Teresa of Avila (later Santa Teresa de Jesús) was beginning a major reform within the Carmelite order. Her plan included, in part, a return to greater austerity, contemplation and the path to mystical union with God, and members of her reformed convents were known as “discalced” for their wearing of sandals rather than shoes (Barnstone, “Introduction” 11; Kavanaugh, “General Introduction” 13). After Teresa and Juan met in Medina, he agreed to help her establish communities of reformed friars. Juan undertook a “second novitiate,” learning from Teresa, and in 1568 began his first assignment as novice master at a community of discalced friars in the remote town of Duruelo, changing his name at this time to Juan de la Cruz (Ruiz et al. 84, 85).

The reform movement spread, and Juan’s work expanded quickly. In 1573, he became the confessor and spiritual director for the nuns at the monastery of the Incarnation, where Teresa lived as well (Ruiz et al. 125-126). However, the reform was not universally well-received: in 1575, the general chapter of Carmelites convened in Italy and, due to misinformation about the
discalced nuns and friars, certain measures were taken against them by church officials. There was discussion as to whether or not Juan should renounce his office; Teresa left Avila for three years (Ruiz et al. 141, 142). Upon her return in 1577, the provincial, Gutiérrez de la Magdalena, presided over the election of a new prioress and threatened to excommunicate any nun who voted for Teresa (Ruiz et al. 144). Several defied him, however (Barnstone, “Introduction” 12). Shortly afterwards, in the middle of the night, Juan was arrested and taken to a monastery prison in Toledo (Kavanaugh, “General Introduction” 18). It is supposed that he was thought to have been an accomplice in the nuns’ rebellion (Ruiz et al. 145).

For the next nine months, Juan suffered very austere treatment: he was kept in a bare, cramped, cell and fed barely enough to keep him from starvation. Additionally, he was subjected to weekly beatings (Ruiz et al. 164; Kavanaugh, “General Introduction” 18). Despite, or perhaps because of, these sufferings, which plunged him into a literal dark night to mirror the spiritual dark night of his mystical experiences, this period was crucial to his development as a poet (Ruiz et al. 159, 171). In his cell in Toledo, Juan composed the first verses of the Cántico espiritual (Spiritual Canticle), largely based on the biblical Song of Songs, and some additional poetry, including the Romances, the Super flumina Babylonis, and La Fonte (Barnstone, “Introduction” 22; Brennan 103).

Juan managed to escape in August of 1578, taking refuge in a convent of discalced Carmelite nuns (Barnstone, “Introduction” 14). He attended a chapter of the discalced friars in Almodóvar, at which he was appointed vicar of the hermitage of El Calvario in Andalusia: here, he remained safe until the previous accusations against him had been dropped (Kavanaugh, “General Introduction” 19-20). While at El Calvario, he also served as spiritual director for a community of nuns in nearby Beas de Segura (Ruiz et al. 189-190). In 1579, he helped found a
new Carmelite college in Baeza (Brenan 46). During this period, he continued to flourish as a writer, finishing the *Cántico espiritual* and composing the poem *Noche oscura del alma* (The Dark Night of the Soul), which describes the soul’s search for God as a meeting between two lovers, as well as a collection of maxims, the *Cautelas* (Cautions) and *Dichos de luz y amor* (Sayings of Light and Love) (Kavanaugh, “General Introduction” 34).

In 1582, Juan moved to Granada, taking up the position of prior at the monastery of Los Mártires near the Alhambra (Ruiz et al. 223). From 1585 to 1588, he held the office of vicar provincial of Andalusia, a job requiring him to travel extensively to various cities in southern Spain (Kavanaugh, “General Introduction” 21). However, Juan also finished the vast majority of his writings while in Granada, primarily composing commentaries on his major poems (Ruiz et al. 246, 247). The *Subida al Monte Carmelo* (Ascent of Mount Carmel) and *Noche oscura del alma* together make up a commentary on the poem *Noche oscura del alma*, dealing primarily with the purgation of the spirit and senses and the earlier stages of the *vía mística* or mystic way (Brenan 138, 139). Juan also wrote a commentary on the *Cántico espiritual* as well as the last of his major poems, *Llama de amor viva* (Living Flame of Love), and its respective commentary (Brenan 140; Kavanaugh, “General Introduction” 34). In contrast to his earlier poems, *Llama de amor viva* does not describe the path to mystical union but begins and ends at the height of ecstasy, illustrating full possession of the soul by God (Ruiz et al. 281).

In 1588, Juan was made prior of a house of friars in Segovia and thus returned to his birthplace of Castile (Ruiz et al. 317). Here, working on reconstructing the monastery and church, he was able to spend more time in manual labor, solitude, and meditation (Kavanaugh, “General Introduction” 22). In June of 1591, Juan attended a chapter in Madrid and accepted a new assignment to journey to Mexico as a missionary (Ruiz et al. 352). Before departing, he was
sent back to Andalusia, to the monastery of La Peñuela, where he enjoyed relative solitude (Kavanaugh, “General Introduction” 22). However, after only a month there, he caught a slight fever and began to experience severe swelling and pain in his leg (Ruiz et al. 357). He went to a monastery in Ubeda for treatment, but his leg became ulcerated and he was not able to recover. Juan died just after midnight on December 14th, 1591. He was canonized by Pope Benedict XIII in 1726 and declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope Pius XI in 1926 (Kavanaugh, “General Introduction” 23; Ruiz et al. 374).

The Mysticism of San Juan de la Cruz

Critical to an understanding of the poetry of San Juan de la Cruz is some knowledge of sixteenth-century Spanish mysticism. San Juan’s title as Doctor of the Church was Doctor Místico, or Mystical Doctor, and indeed, his writing flowed from personal mystical experiences and cannot be separated from them. As Barnstone asserts in the introduction to his translations of the poetry of San Juan, “San Juan was a mystical poet because… his poems were written… as a result of mystical knowledge, and in his commentaries he endeavors to explain the poems, in great detail, as steps toward the mystical union” (24-25).

This mystical union refers to the union of the soul with God. D. Attwater defines mysticism as “el conocimiento experimental de la presencia divina, en que el alma tiene, como una gran realidad, un sentimiento de contacto con Dios” 2 (qtd. in del Río 255). A mystic, therefore, is someone who achieves this closeness, through prayer and contemplation: as Ángel del Río asserts in his Historia de la literatura española, “es… aquél que por voluntad y amor y gracia, como don divino, llega a la unión con Dios; es decir, que llega al conocimiento directo de

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2 “The experiential knowledge of the divine presence, in which the soul has, as utmost reality, a feeling of contact with God”
Dios por vía sobrenatural y no racional” (255). Such union effects the merging of the human will and the divine will into one, and indeed, San Juan often speaks of the complete transformation of the soul into God (Brenan 126-127). The ecstasy and intimacy of this union is also often emphasized by the portrayal of God and the soul as two lovers (Del Río 255).

The path to mystical union, the *vía mística*, can be described as a three-part process comprising the *vía purgativa*, *vía iluminativa*, and *vía unitiva* (Barnstone, “Introduction” 26). The *vía purgativa* is a stage of purification through discipline, the goal of which is to achieve a *tabula rasa*, or virginal state, from which one will be prepared to see and experience God (Barnstone, “Introduction” 27-28). As San Juan explains in his writings, such self-denial is not a declaration that worldly attachments, affections, and appetites are intrinsically bad, for all creation, having been made by God, is in fact good (Kavanaugh, *Doctor of Light and Love* 68). However, since the Creator is infinitely greater than his creation, Juan asserts, “Compared to the infinite goodness of God, all the goodness of the creatures of the world can be called wickedness” (qtd. in Kavanaugh, *Doctor of Light and Love* 68). God’s greatness demands the soul’s complete, undivided attention, and a failure to recognize this and subsequently free oneself from any attachment to this world is a failure to adequately prepare for spiritual union with God (Kavanaugh, *Doctor of Light and Love* 68; Brenan 133). Put into other words, as Barnstone explains, “to see, understand, and create, one must first erase previous notions, habits, and patterns of thinking… from the nothing or nada… one is prepared freshly to see, understand, and create” (“Introduction” 27-28).

The *vía iluminativa* is a period of intense contemplation, during which one focuses all of one’s thought, will, and feeling on God (Del Río 256). The *vía unitiva* is the final stage of
perfect union with God, sometimes described as the spiritual marriage of the soul, or bride, with Christ, the bridegroom (Barnstone, “Introduction” 27; Del Río 257).

One final component of utmost importance to the vía mística is that of the noche oscura del alma, or dark night of the soul. This refers to the tormented state of the soul just before the ecstasy of union with God, a potentially agonizing experience and the culmination of “purgative contemplation” in the final moments just before God reveals himself (Kavanaugh, Doctor of Light and Love 179). Though the soul has already endured much self-denial and other forms of purification in preparation for mystical union, it has not yet been filled with God: as Kavanaugh explains in his book on the spirituality of San Juan, John of the Cross: Doctor of Light and Love, at this point, “Once the soul is emptied of everything, it feels a vast void, for any little thing can so hold our attention and absorb us that we do not perceive what we lack” (181). The absence of God is most acutely felt when the soul is free from every other attachment: this is part of the pain of the noche oscura. Agony may also derive from the soul’s increasing awareness of its own lack of holiness and the fact that its love of and longing for God is increasing intensely while God himself is still perceived as absent; in effect, it suffers from unsatisfied love and the fear of being abandoned (Kavanaugh, Doctor of Light and Love 181; Brenan 134). In essence, the noche oscura is the struggle to push through this pain and torment for the sake of God: as Kavanaugh asserts, it is “the desire to push forward in pursuit of the Beloved alone—though one’s face may be metaphorically prostrate in the dust—in complete trust that God will not abandon anyone who seeks him” (180). In this way, it embodies the virtue of faith, relying on and remaining devoted to a God who is still unseen and in many ways incomprehensible (Brenan 134).
Indeed, the overwhelming bliss of mystical union rewards the efforts of those who persevere through the *noche oscura*. As Juan himself explains, “The soul is purged and prepared for union with the divine light just as the wood is prepared for transformation into the fire [....] By drying out the wood, the fire brings to light and expels all those ugly and dark accidents that are contrary to fire. Finally, by heating and enkindling it from without, the fire transforms the wood into itself and makes it as beautiful as it is itself” (qtd. in Kavanaugh, *Doctor of Light and Love* 188). Such beauty, however, is not attained without a trial of purgation, and this idea is crucial to San Juan’s mystical experiences.

In his own quest for mystical union, San Juan was part of a larger movement throughout Spain that included mystics such as Fray Luis de Leon and his own mentor, Santa Teresa de Jesús (Del Río 258). Barnstone has called the tradition from which sixteenth-century Spanish mysticism developed “complex and... poorly illuminated by scholarship,” and Del Río echoes this assertion of the complexity of its origins: however, it is possible to identify at least a few influences on this movement (“Introduction” 25, 253). The first is the earlier German mysticism of the late Middle Ages, such as practiced by à Kempis and Eckhart (Barnstone, “Introduction” 25; Del Río 252). The Spanish mystics, however, distinguished themselves from those who preceded them by standing out not only as religious but also as literary figures (Barnstone, “Introduction” 25). Jewish mysticism also had significant influence on San Juan and others; San Juan was particularly influenced by the writings of León Hebreo, in which the allegory of human love often employed to describe mystical union was more readily available to him than in any other source besides the Bible (Barnstone, “Introduction” 26).

The religious climate of Spain during the sixteenth century also had a significant effect on the development of mysticism. The Counter-Reformation was at its height, and, as Del Río
points out, Spain was at the vanguard of this movement in a struggle against Protestants, Turks, and even unorthodox members of her own Catholic Church (Del Río 253). The intensity of this crusade caused an increase in the fidelity of Spanish Catholics to church teachings: as Del Río claims, many felt “la necesidad de… aceptar intelectualmente como única explicación valedera de la vida la de la doctrina católica,” and, speaking of a typical devout Spaniard, he concludes, “Todo su dinamismo aún vivo, todo lo que le queda aún de voluntad combativa, lo va a aplicar a la defensa de esa doctrina con la espada y con la letra” (254). Mysticism, therefore, may have provided Spanish Catholics with a weapon for use in their spiritual battle (Del Río 254).

Barnstone takes a slightly more skeptical viewpoint, affirming the importance of the Counter-Reformation to the flourishing of Spanish mysticism but emphasizing the increased strictness of Catholic doctrine during this period and suggesting, “[M]ysticism was an outlet for the spiritual energy of such heretics as San Juan, Santa Teresa, and Fray Luis,” giving them an opportunity for creativity and expression while allowing them to remain orthodox members of the Church (“Introduction” 26).

Yet whatever the exact combination of factors influencing the mysticism of San Juan de la Cruz, it is evident that his writings flowed from his personal, mystical experiences and cannot be considered apart from them. As Federico Ruiz et al. assert of San Juan’s poems in particular in their book God Speaks in the Night: The Life, Times, and Teaching of St. John of the Cross, “Tied to the deepest religious experience, they are a supreme expression of mystical experience. The poetry and the mysticism fuse into a vitally unique piece” (248). San Juan himself admitted of the words he employed, “Sometimes God gave them to me, and at other times I myself searched for them” (qtd. in Ruiz et al. viii). Without knowledge of mysticism, of San Juan’s

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4 “The need to… intellectually accept Catholic doctrine as the only valid explanation of life”
5 “All of his energy that is still alive, all that is left to him, even an aggressive will, he will direct towards the defense of this doctrine by the sword and by the written word”
burning desire for union with God, the spiritual suffering he was willing to endure to achieve such bliss, and the subsequently deep and personal intimate relationship with God he enjoyed, one can only read his poems at a surface level, interpreting them as portrayals of an intimate love between a woman and a man (Barnstone, “Introduction” 29). With such an understanding, however, one can arrive at the deeper layers of meaning, comprehending the depth of this saint’s personal love story: a quest for spiritual union with his creator.

Introduction to *Llama de amor viva*

The poem which is to be the focus of this study, *Llama de amor viva* (Living Flame of Love) or, by its full title, *Canciones del alma en la íntima comunicación de unión de amor de Dios* (Songs of the Soul in the Intimate Communication of Union of the Love of God), is among the later works of San Juan de la Cruz. It is the last of the three poems on which his reputation as a great lyric poet is founded, the other two being *Cántico espiritual* and *En una noche oscura* (Brenan 105). San Juan composed it in 1585 in Granada at the request of a widowed laywoman, Doña Ana de Peñalosa, whom he had served as spiritual director. Some claim that it was partially written in a state of contemplative prayer; others deny this and affirm that, while it recounts the experience of such prayer, it was composed apart from this state (Ruiz et al. 324; Kavanaugh, “Introduction to *The Living Flame of Love*” 633; Brenan 104).

The theme of *Llama de amor viva* is the union with and transformation of the soul in God, the final stage of the *vía mística*. Here, the *noche oscura* has already passed; the poem begins with “full possession” of the soul by God and treats only of the ecstasy of that experience (Ruiz et al. 281). In his commentary, San Juan explains the source of the soul’s joy, saying, “[P]arécele [al alma] que, pues con tanta fuerza está transformada en Dios y tan altamente de él
Indeed, during the mystical experience described in this poem, the soul is as close to eternal life as it is possible to be while still living; San Juan continues, “Mas es tan subido el deleite que aquel llamear del Espíritu Santo hace en ella, que la hace saber a qué sabe la vida eterna, que por eso la llama a la llama viva; no porque no sea siempre viva, sino porque le hace tal efecto, que la hace vivir en Dios espiritualmente, y sentir vida de Dios” (John of the Cross, *Obras Completas* 376-377).

Perhaps because the soul has reached this final stage of the *vía mística* and thus the greatest joy possible for it to feel without dying, there is no movement towards a climax in this poem but rather a perpetual focus on the present (Kavanaugh, “Introduction to *The Living Flame of Love*” 633). Each of the four verses expounds a particular profundity through what Bruce Wardropper in his book *Spanish Poetry of the Golden Age* calls “a mass of complex, interplaying imagery” (313). The soul does not narrate at all but only exclaims in joy, and the tone is that of “prolonged admiration and holy ardor” (Wardropper 313; Kavanaugh, “Introduction to *The Living Flame of Love*” 633). San Juan himself also comments on this frequent use of exclamations, saying, “Para encarecer el alma el sentimiento y aprecio con que habla en estas cuatro canciones, pone en todas ellas estos términos: oh y cuán, que significan encarecimiento afectuoso; los cuales cada vez que se dicen, dan a entender del interior más de lo que se dicen.

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6 “It seems [to the soul], because it is so forcefully transformed in God, so sublimely possessed by him, and arrayed with such rich gifts and virtues, that it is singularly close to beatitude – so close that only a thin veil separates it” (Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross* 641).

7 “But the delight that the flaring of the Holy Spirit generates in the soul is so sublime that it makes it know that which savors of eternal life. Thus it refers to the flame as living, not because the flame is not always living but because of this effect; it makes the soul live in God spiritually and experience the life of God” (Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross* 643).
The ultimate joy the soul has received in its union with God makes any greater climax for it impossible, eliminating the need for narrative structure and sentences and rather calling only for imagery and exclamations focused on the present.

San Juan composed a commentary as well for *Llama de amor viva*, just as he did for his other major poems. It was written in Granada between 1585 and 1586, with a second redaction made in Peñalosa in 1591, though the differences between these two versions are minimal (Kavanaugh, “Introduction to *The Living Flame of Love*” 636). San Juan wrote this commentary only with reluctance, however, stating in the prologue, “Alguna repugnancia he tenido… en declarar estas cuatro canciones… por ser cosas tan interiores y espirituales, para las cuales comúnmente falta lenguaje; porque lo espiritual excede al sentido, y con dificultad se dice algo de la sustancia del espíritu si no es con entrañable espíritu” (John of the Cross, *Obras Completas* 373). The poem’s theme, discussed above, is too sublime for words, or at least for prose. Thus, San Juan ends the commentary abruptly as well, providing almost no analysis of the last three lines, which treat of the breathing of the Holy Spirit within the soul. Referring to the challenge of explaining this subject, he writes, “I am aware of being incapable of so doing and were I to try, it might seem less than it is” (qtd. in Kavanaugh, “General Introduction” 22).

*Llama de amor viva* is written in four metrically identical verses of six lines each. Each verse begins with two heptasyllabic lines followed by one hendecasyllabic line, then repeats this pattern. The rhyme scheme employs pure rhyme in all cases, with each verse following an

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8 “To lay stress on the sentiment and esteem with which it speaks in these four stanzas, the soul uses in all of them the exclamations, “O” and “how,” which indicate an affectionate emphasis. Each time they are uttered they reveal more about the interior than the tongue expresses” (Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross* 641).

9 “I have had some aversion… to explicating these four stanzas… because they treat of very inner and spiritual matters, for which language is generally insufficient. Because spiritual matters surpass consciousness, it is difficult to speak of the essence of the spirit, if not with the intimate part of the spirit”
abCabC pattern. These verses can be considered *liras*, although of a somewhat unique form (Alonso 287). As noted above, most of the sentences are exclamations, starting with the interjection “Oh” or the adverb “Cuán” and beginning and ending (following Spanish convention) in exclamation points. The form of the poem lends itself very much to the elation of its theme: the extended length of every third line, providing a sudden and unexpected burst of extra words, gives the impression that seven syllables are not enough to contain the ecstasy and love for God of the soul. Additionally, the pure rhyme scheme creates a pleasing, lyrical effect when the verses are read aloud and makes the poem seem like the love song which, on some level, it is.

Introduction to the Translations

In choosing three translations to analyze for the purpose of this study, I have taken into account the extent to which each holds a place in the canon of literary translation as well as the extent to which each differs in style from the other two in order to provide an illuminative comparative analysis. Limiting my analysis to these three translations has, however, unavoidably compelled me to omit others of excellent quality, most notably that of E. Allison Peers, among the earliest translators of San Juan into English and perhaps the most credited with making his works accessible to speakers of this language. Nevertheless, for this particular study, I have chosen to exclude Peers’ work based on its similarities to Kavanaugh and Rodriguez’ translation, for inclusion of both would lead to significant redundancy in a comparative analysis. I consider the three translations discussed here to be representative of both the highest quality translations of *Llama de amor viva* currently published and also the wide spectrum of stylistic paths a translator of this work may take.
Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez first published their translation of *Llama de amor viva* in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, a complete collection of both the prose and poetry of San Juan in translation, in 1964, with a second edition released in 1991. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez’ translations are among the earliest English renderings of San Juan’s writings, following those by David Lewis and E. Allison Peers, and have been cited in the *Encyclopedia of Literary Translation* as likely to remain the “standard English version of the foreseeable future” (375). Both Kavanaugh and Rodriguez are members of the Order of Discalced Carmelites. Kavanaugh has also published other Sanjuanist scholarship, including *John of the Cross: Doctor of Light and Love*, a book about San Juan’s spirituality, and has translated Federico Ruiz et al.’s comprehensive biography *God Speaks in the Night: The Life, Times, and Teaching of St. John of the Cross* into English.

Willis Barnstone’s translation appears in *The Poems of Saint John of the Cross*, a collection of San Juan’s poetry in Spanish and English, published in 1972. In his introduction, he speaks of a strong connection with San Juan, asserting, “there is no poet, in regard to art and spirit, with whom I have felt such a constant affinity” (35). Furthermore, he claims that his three priorities in composing the translations of these poems have been “clarity, simplicity, and resonance” (35). Barnstone is also a well-known author of poetry, memoir, and literary criticism as well as the translator of numerous other works in several different languages.

Loren G. Smith’s translation of *Llama de amor viva* appears in *Flame of Love: Poems of the Spanish Mystics*, a collection of poetry by San Juan de la Cruz and Sta. Teresa de Jesús published in 2005. In Smith’s introduction to the translations, he comments on the importance of each poem as an individual work, separate from its commentary. In regard to his methods, he claims, “The objective in preparing these English versions has been to provide the most accurate
possible translation while retaining the original rhyming scheme and utilizing meters as close to
the original as possible. Preserving the meaning of the original poems has been given priority
over aesthetic considerations” (xvi).
Llama de amor viva

San Juan de la Cruz

1 ¡Oh llama de amor viva
2 que tiernamente hieres
3 de mi alma en el más profundo centro!
4 Pues ya no eres esquiva,
5 acaba ya si quieres,
6 ¡rompe la tela de este dulce encuentro!

7 ¡Oh cauterio suave!
8 ¡Oh regalada llaga!
9 ¡Oh mano blanda! ¡Oh toque delicado
10 que a vida eterna sabe
11 y toda deuda paga!
12 Matando, muerte en vida has trocado.

13 ¡Oh lámparas de fuego
14 en cuyos resplandores
15 las profundas cavernas del sentido,
16 que estaba oscuro y ciego,
17 con estraños primores
18 calor y luz dan junto a su querido!

19 ¡Cuán manso y amoroso
20 recuerdas en mi seno
21 donde secretamente solo moras,
22 y en tu aspirar sabroso
23 de bien y gloria lleno,
24 cuán delicadamente me enamoras!
Living Flame of Love

San Juan de la Cruz

Translation: Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez

1 O living flame of love
2 that tenderly wounds my soul
3 in its deepest center! Since
4 now you are not oppressive,
5 now consummate! if it be your will:
6 tear through the veil of this sweet encounter!

7 O sweet cautery,
8 O delightful wound!
9 O gentle hand! O delicate touch
10 that tastes of eternal life
11 and pays every debt!
12 In killing you changed death to life.

13 O lamps of fire!
14 in whose splendors
15 the deep caverns of feeling,
16 once obscure and blind,
17 now give forth, so rarely, so exquisitely,
18 both warmth and light to their Beloved.

19 How gently and lovingly
20 you wake in my heart,
21 where in secret you dwell alone;
22 and in your sweet breathing,
23 filled with good and glory,
24 how tenderly you swell my heart with love.
Living Flame of Love

San Juan de la Cruz

Translation: Willis Barnstone

1 O living flame of love,
2 How tenderly you wound
3 My soul in her profoundest core!
4 You are no longer shy.
5 Do it now, I ask you:
6 Break the membrane of our sweet union.

7 O soothing cautery!
8 O wound that is a joy!
9 O gentle hand! O delicate touch
10 Tasting of eternity,
11 Repaying every debt!
12 Killing, you turn my death to life.

13 O lamps of human fire,
14 In deep transparency
15 The lowest caverns of the senses,
16 Once shadowy and blind,
17 Flare in light and warmth
18 And wake the lover with amazing joy!

19 How lovingly and soft
20 You make my breasts recall
21 Where you alone lie secretly:
22 And with your honeyed breath
23 Replete with grace and glory,
24 How tenderly you make me love!
Living Flame of Love

San Juan de la Cruz

Translation: Loren G. Smith

1 O living flame of love
2 whose tender burning fire
3 wounds sore my soul within its deepest center!
4 No more depriving of
5 completing your desire,
6 now burst the veil, perfect this sweet encounter!

7 O cautery's mellow glow!
8 O healing wound's delight!
9 O gentle hand! Oh delicate touch, you taste
10 of heavenly life, and lo!
11 each debt is set aright!
12 You killed, yet with new life my death you graced.

13 O lamps of fiery light,
14 within whose radiant splendor
15 the very deepest caverns of my sense,
16 once dark, bereft of sight,
17 now with rare beauty render
18 to Lover light and ardor full intense!

19 How soft your love's sensations,
20 that waken in my heart,
21 where only you alone in secret live;
22 and your sweet inspirations
23 all good and glory impart,
24 as tenderly the grace of love you give!
Comparative Analysis of the Translations

I now turn to a critical analysis of the ways in which these three selected translations of *Llama de amor viva* preserve, enhance, or diverge from the original text. To this end, I will evaluate each translator’s approach to four different areas: meter and rhyme scheme, original metaphors, Spanish grammatical constructions lacking a direct equivalent in English, and individual problematic words. The importance of each of these areas to the meaning of this particular poem is detailed below as well. However, in essence, an “accurate” translation (i.e., a faithful transfer of San Juan’s intended meaning) will transmit the significance contained in the aesthetic qualities of the poem, clearly preserve all original metaphors, compensate for any use of Spanish grammatical constructions that do not exist in English, and handle individual problematic words by choosing an equivalent that fits smoothly into the context of the poem.

In a study of this nature, there has not been room to explore each translator’s approach to every aspect of the poem: even in a work as short as *Llama de amor viva*, the reliance of poetry on so many different, overlapping uses of language to convey meaning produces a formidable number of variations between translations. However, by presenting a close examination of the above four areas, I believe that I include the choices confronting the translator that have the strongest influence on the meaning of the resultant work and am thus able to draw informed conclusions from this analysis alone.

Ultimately, no single translation of the three here examined preserves the entire original meaning of San Juan’s poem. However, each effectively retains part of this meaning in at least one of the above areas, while simultaneously developing different shades of meaning in others, allowing it to emerge both as a translation and as an independent work of art.
Sound Effects

The sound effects of a poem, particularly its meter and rhyme scheme, form one of the major elements of its composition and are crucial to establishing its identity as distinct from prose. Furthermore, in many ways, the arrangement of the words of a poem can have almost as much influence on the meaning they convey as their dictionary definitions. André Lefevere, in his book *Translating Literature: Practice and Theory in a Comparative Literature Context*, observes that rhyme can provide a certain rhythm, regularity, and rounding of the line and can also be a “‘marker’ of development” in the poem as a whole (71). In another of his works, *Translating Poetry: Seven Strategies and a Blueprint*, he argues that other losses resulting from converting poetry into prose can include the effect achieved by making a word stand out by placing it in a “strategic position” within a line (43). Barnstone further explains this importance of form in poetry, asserting that in this genre, a word can act not only as a signifier but also partially as the signified: the language of a poem conveys not only the denotative meaning of the words but also the aesthetic qualities of the words themselves (*Poetics of Translation* 229).

Thus, in an article for *Latin American Literary Review*, “On Translation,” Jean Paris notes that with poetry, “The task of the translator is no longer to render the message in a new medium, but to realize… that the medium *is* indeed the message” (73). An accurate translation of a poem requires transference of both the denotative and aesthetic functions of language. As Barnstone asserts, “To transpose [the content of a poem] with some degree of honesty one must also transpose its aesthetic/connotative coloring as well” (*Poetics of Translation* 230). In other, more candid words, he concludes, “In translating a song, if the new version does not sing, it fails” (*Poetics of Translation* 230).
Of course, the precise extent to which rhyme scheme and meter are crucial to the meaning of a particular poem depends entirely on the poem itself. In the case of *Llama de amor viva*, as San Juan takes such care to adhere to a precise meter and pure rhyme scheme, it should be considered that perhaps he would not have gone to these lengths if he could have expressed his theme equally as well in unrhymed verse or in prose. As noted above, his rhyme and metrical schemes give the poem a lyrical quality which makes it seem like a love poem, thus portraying the allegory of human love representing mystical union. Furthermore, the extended length of every third line, demonstrating the soul’s inability to contain its love for God, works towards expressing the bliss of union almost as much as do the words themselves.

The placement of individual words within the metrical and rhyme scheme chosen by each of the translators also impacts the overall meaning conveyed. However, these individual words will be discussed in the context of metaphors, particularly problematic words, etc., with this specific section focusing solely on the effects of the meter and rhyme scheme of each translation.

These are preserved to varying degrees in each English poem. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez’ translation does not follow any observable rhyme scheme, nor does it appear to follow a set meter: a metrical analysis of the first verse reveals one line of six syllables, three of seven, one of nine, and one of ten, and the other verses are similarly irregular in the length of their lines. Furthermore, these lines do not appear to have a regular pattern of emphasis or to be composed of a specific type of metrical foot. The form of this translation, therefore, might be said to be closest to free verse: although it is still clearly poetry as opposed to prose, it distinctly lacks the fluid, musical quality of the original. While form is thus separated from content, with the arrangement of Kavanaugh and Rodriguez’ words failing to re-affirm the delicate beauty of
their subject matter, some of the completeness of San Juan’s expression of the love between God and the soul is lost.

Barnstone’s translation does not preserve a visible rhyme scheme, either. It does follow a more structured meter than Kavanaugh and Rodriguez,’ however. The first, second, fourth, and fifth lines of each stanza have approximately six syllables each, while the third and sixth lines have between eight and ten. This imitates to some extent the meter of the original. Moreover (though with some notable exceptions), most lines are made up of a string of iambics, which provides a fairly consistent rhythm and adds a musical quality to the work. While thus slightly more successful than Kavanaugh and Rodriguez’ translation at conveying the meaning embedded in San Juan’s original form, Barnstone’s translation nonetheless still loses much of the grace, tenderness, and melody of the original form that accentuate its meaning as a love song.

Undoubtedly, Smith’s translation follows the strictest metrical pattern. He maintains a pure rhyme scheme throughout, with each stanza conforming to the ABCABC pattern of the original work. The majority of the first, second, fourth, and fifth lines of each stanza have six syllables, with some having seven; most of the third and sixth lines of each stanza have ten syllables, with two having eleven. With only a few exceptions (notably, in those places where the lines have seven or eleven syllables instead of six or ten), each line is composed of a string of iambic feet. These rhyme and metrical schemes come very close to preserving the effects of San Juan’s original form. Although Smith’s lines are one syllable shorter than San Juan’s, as he uses the masculine rhyme more conducive to English rather than the feminine rhyme more common in Spanish and may thus produce more of a pause at the end of each line, the form closely approximates San Juan’s *liras* and, indeed, gives the poem the smooth, fluid quality that is so
crucial to its meaning as tender love poetry. Form does not contradict content in this translation, allowing for a more complete expression of the theme of intimate divine love.

Original Metaphors

After sound effects, one of the most challenging aspects of literary translation may be the translation of metaphor. In his book *A Textbook of Translation*, Peter Newmark goes so far as to identify metaphor as the “epitome of all translation” and assert that it is the “most important particular problem” of this art form (113, 104). Much of this importance is due to the fact that original metaphors, as he claims, “contain the core of an important writer’s message, his personality, his comment on life” (112). Hence, continues Newmark, they must be translated as literally as possible, and this opinion is echoed by Lefevere (Newmark 112, 164; Lefevere, *Translating Literature* 37).

For a poem like *Llama de amor viva*, attention to metaphor may be of even greater importance than for other works. Not only do the metaphors San Juan employs contain the core of his message, as each of them describes in a different fashion the loving union of God and the soul, but they offer possibly the only means of conveying his theme in words, for mystical union with God is something that can hardly be described in prose or plain speech. San Juan himself desists from writing his own commentary when he arrives at the analysis of the last three lines of his poem, concerning the intimate breathing of God within the soul. As he protests, “En la cual aspiración, llena de bien y gloria y delicado amor de Dios para el alma, yo no querría hablar, ni aun quiero, porque veo claro que no lo tengo de saber decir, y parecería que ello es menos si lo
dijese,”¹⁰ and he specifically calls the love of himself that God inspires in the soul “sobre toda lengua y sentido”¹¹ (Obras completas 427). Metaphor is a possible means of solving this problem of the inefficacy of words, for it is indeed a way to express the inexpressible. As Newmark puts it, “its… purpose is to describe a mental process or state, a concept, a person, an object, a quality or an action more comprehensively and concisely than is possible in literary or physical language” (104).

Thus bearing in mind how San Juan’s original metaphors contain the heart of and possibly the only means of presenting his theme, the following section examines how faithfully each of the translations renders a selection of the metaphors from the poem.

¡rompe la tela de este dulce encuentro!

Kavanaugh and Rodriguez: “tear through the veil of this sweet encounter!”

Barnstone: “Break the membrane of our sweet union.”

Smith: “now burst the veil, perfect this sweet encounter!”

One of the main challenges this metaphor presents lies within tela, for the sense of this word can be rendered in a number of different ways, many of which could serve in this context to signify something thin that can easily be broken, the last barrier between the soul and God. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez’ version, “tear through the veil,” understands tela in the sense of cloth or material and uses the more specific English word “veil” to convey the thinness and fragility of this particular cloth. Their word choice also slips into the text an allusion to the biblical veil of the temple torn down the middle at the moment of Jesus’ death. This allusion is not necessarily

¹⁰“I do not desire to speak of this spiration, filled for the soul with good and glory and delicate love of God, for I am aware of being incapable of doing so; and were I to try, it might seem less than it is” (Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross 715).

¹¹“Above all language and understanding”
present in the original, for in many Spanish translations of the Bible, the veil of the temple is translated not as *tela* but as *cortina* or *velo*. However, this allusion is perhaps fitting in this context, as the veil of the Jewish temple traditionally divided the people from the Holy of Holies, the presence of God. The *tela* in San Juan’s poem is the final barrier separating the soul from the absolute union with God that may only be obtained after physical death, and Kavanaugh and Rodriguez are thus able to deepen its meaning as such in their English translation.

Barnstone’s version of this metaphor takes a different approach, choosing the other possible meaning of *tela* as the film or skin of a membrane. This word choice conveys the incredible delicacy and thinness of the barrier separating the soul and God and thus their ultimate closeness that can only just barely be increased. Furthermore, “membrane” carries a rather scientific connotation and may thus allude to the physical, biological nature of the human love San Juan often uses as an allegory for the union of God and the soul. However, because it does carry this scientific connotation, “membrane” is also subtly different in tone from the rest of the poem. Consequently, while Barnstone enhances the reader’s understanding of the closeness of God and the soul, he may take away from the coherency of this metaphor by the description of such a personal, metaphysical experience with what may be read as a scientific term.

Smith’s version, “burst the veil,” is similar to Kavanaugh and Rodriguez’ in its choice of the meaning of *tela* as “cloth.” It loses some of their allusion to the biblical veil by the replacement of “tear” with “burst” but increases the sense of the soul’s urgency, indicated in the source text by *ya* in the next line, through this word. Additionally, instead of leaving *de este dulce encuentro* as a prepositional phrase modifying *tela*, as do the other two translations, Smith moves it into a new clause, saying, “perfect this sweet encounter.” While it moves further away from the syntax of the original, this addition clarifies for the reader the reason why the soul is

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12 See, for example, Mateo 27:51 in *La Biblia Latinoamericana* and *La Biblia: Traducción en lenguaje actual*. 
asking the flame to remove the final barrier between them: in death, the soul would indeed be
elevated to perfection in God. Thus, Smith’s translation of this metaphor maintains the basic
imagery of the original while highlighting the emphasis on urgency and the ultimate goal of the
bursting of the veil, providing a more explicit and direct phrasing of San Juan’s meaning.

¡Oh cautério suave!
¡Oh regalada llaga!
Kavanaugh and Rodriguez: “O sweet cautery,/ O delightful wound!”
Barnstone: “O soothing cautery!/ O wound that is a joy!”
Smith: “O cautery’s mellow glow!/ O healing wound’s delight!”

Kavanaugh and Rodriguez maintain perhaps one of the most literal translations possible
of these two lines. They clearly convey San Juan’s original metaphor in a way that is both close
to the source text and very intelligible, almost exactly preserving the meaning of these words.

Barnstone’s translation takes some liberties with the meaning of suave in the first line and
the word order in the second, but this does not necessarily cause a loss of meaning. “Soothing”
instead of “soft” or “sweet” for suave in fact enhances the paradoxical quality of the cautery, for
a burn is generally the opposite of soothing, and neither does this word choice stray too far from
the original meaning, as something that is soft or sweet may consequently be soothing as well.
He changes the word order in the second line, which maintains his chosen metrical scheme better
than a version more similar to Kavanaugh and Rodriguez’ might, but still conveys the idea of a
pleasurable wound. Thus, Barnstone’s translation also clearly preserves the meaning of the
original even while drawing out deeper layers of meaning from the paradox of the first line.
Smith’s translation of these two lines, on the other hand, strays far from the source text. Turning the subjects of each of the exclamations into possessive adjectives, he shifts the focus of each phrase from the *cauterio* and the *llaga* to an attribute of each. This shift in emphasis is made doubly strong by the unemphasized positions of the “cauterity” and the “wound” at the beginning of each line, with their attributes taking the positions of greater accent at the end. However, these attributes have little or no basis in the source text. No “mellow glow” belonging to the *cauterio* is mentioned by San Juan; indeed, a “mellow glow” seems too dim to fit with the rest of the poem’s more vibrant metaphorical descriptions of God. The next line also presents a semantic ambiguity that is not found in the source text. In the phrase “O healing wound’s delight,” does the wound heal, or is the wound being healed? If the first option is understood, then the idea of the *cauterio*, indeed a wound that produces healing, from the first line has effectively been transferred to the second line with some consequent preservation of meaning. However, if the second option is understood, and the wound is in the process of being healed, then some of the paradox of the poem, namely, that the soul is indeed wounded but with a very pleasurable wound, is lost. Finally, the emphasis on the delight of the healing wound rather than a delightful wound implies that the wound itself, not the wounded one, is filled with joy, which again distorts the meaning of the source text. Overall, Smith renders a fairly imprecise image of this original metaphor, making it difficult for the reader to understand what San Juan means by using these images to describe God: at the very least, he or she is left with a very dulled sense of the simultaneous piercing pain and infinite tenderness of God’s touch.

¡Oh lámparas de fuego

*en cuyos resplandores*
Braun 32

las profundas cavernas del sentido,
que estaba oscuro y ciego,
con extraños primores
calor y luz dan junto a su querido!

Kavanaugh and Rodriguez:
“O lamps of fire!
in whose splendors
the deep caverns of feeling,
once obscure and blind,
now give forth, so rarely, so exquisitely,
both warmth and light to their Beloved.”

Barnstone:
“O lamps of human fire,
In deep transparency
The lowest caverns of the senses,
Once shadowy and blind,
Flare in light and warmth
And wake the lover with amazing joy!”

Smith:
“O lamps of fiery light,
within whose radiant splendor
the very deepest caverns of my sense,
one dark, bereft of sight,
now with rare beauty render
to Lover light and ardor full intense!"

Overall, Kavanaugh and Rodriguez’ translation of this metaphor offers a fairly clear picture of the original. In fact, it might be difficult to compose a more exactly literal but still readable translation of lines 13, 14, and 16. However, in line 15, their choice of “feelings” to translate *sentido* does cause a small shift in meaning. “Feeling” in English can have a subjective quality, and while *sentido* is related to *sentir* (“to feel”), which can imply a similar level of subjectivity, *sentido* more often connotes the idea of “sense” as both intuition and a more objective method of acquiring knowledge, such as when it refers to one of the five senses. It can also have the more comprehensive definition of “consciousness.” Thus, the word “feelings” to describe the deepest level of the soul’s consciousness eliminates some of the possible ways in which the soul might have an understanding of the lámparas del fuego, narrowing the scope of the original meaning of this line.

In line 17, Kavanaugh and Rodriguez again provide a very clear transference of the original image of the source text. They do make a slight change to the syntax, moving the idea expressed by the prepositional phrase *con extraños primores* to the adverbial phrase “so rarely, so exquisitely,” but both grammatical constructions achieve the description of how the “giving forth” is carried out. The choice of “rarely” as a translation for *extraños*, with its power to connote in English something that is uncommon but highly desirable, highlights the unusualness of this act without making it seem unappealingly strange to the reader. Furthermore, the use of “exquisitely” for *primores* fits well with the tone of the rest of the poem, as it brings to mind an action that is not just beautiful but delicate, a characteristic the poetic voice ascribes in other places to the love it feels. Furthermore, in line 18, Kavanaugh and Rodriguez clarify the image
of the source text even further: the capitalization of “Beloved” indicates that querido refers to God and not the soul, leaving no doubt in the reader’s mind. These specific word choices help not only to clearly convey San Juan’s original metaphor but also to make it even more precise and vivid to the reader of English. Indeed, overall, even with the potential loss of meaning through the translation of sentido with “feelings,” the imagery of this metaphor is very clearly transferred into the English of Kavanaugh and Rodriguez’ translation and thus preserves the majority of San Juan’s original meaning.

Barnstone takes far more liberties with this particular metaphor, going so far as to create a separate image entirely with only some basis in the source text. From the very beginning of his translation of this verse, by inserting the word “human” in line 13 as a modifier of “fire,” he changes the metaphor by implying that it represents something human. It is possible that Barnstone’s inclusion of the word “human” is simply intended to preserve his metrical scheme, which it indeed accomplishes: as Lefevere notes, “padding” a line with extraneous words is indeed one of the most common strategies employed by translators dedicated to maintaining a particular metrical scheme (Translating Poetry 39). However, as another two-syllable adjective, even a general descriptor of fire, might have served the same purpose as “human” of maintaining the meter without creating as radical a shift in meaning, Barnstone likely purposely intends to effect a certain change on the meaning of the source text, whether to provide an interpretation of the line or aid in the reader’s understanding of this metaphor.

Two more significant divergences from the imagery of the source text appear in line 14, rendered by Barnstone as “in deep transparency.” First, he supplies no equivalent for cuyos. This impacts the meaning of the stanza as a whole: without this word, it is ambiguous whether it is the lámparas de fuego or the profundas cavernas del sentido that act within the resplandores.
Again, the elimination of an equivalent for *cuyos* is difficult to explain outside of a deliberate change in meaning: its absence does not help maintain the meter, as “deep,” not present in this line of the original text, might have easily been replaced with “whose” for a more faithful translation. Rather, Barnstone has probably deliberately changed this word to advance a particular interpretation of this metaphor. His second divergence from the source text in this line is the elimination of a close equivalent for *resplandores* and the introduction of an original phrase, “deep transparency.” Though the words “transparency” and *resplandores* (“splendors”) can both connote light, the former conveys the idea of something thin enough for light to pass through, while the latter implies something that shines with its own light. Depth is not usually associated with transparency, thus creating a new paradox in the target text.

In the next two lines, Barnstone draws closer to the wording of the source text, with only one lexical choice offering a potentially different shade of meaning from that probably intended by San Juan: the use of “lowest” to translate *profundas*. This Spanish word generally means physically deep or profound; “lowest” overlaps with this first sense but not the second, and it can also connote that something is basic or lowly. Thus, Barnstone’s use of this word risks the reader interpreting the *lámparas de fuego* as working within the soul at the most basic or rudimentary level of its consciousness, rather than at the most intimate or innermost level.

In the final two lines of the metaphor, Barnstone returns to a freer translation. However, while losing much of the original structure of the source text, he does retain some parts of the intended imagery by compensating for the loss of certain words in other parts of the sentence. For example, the idea of *estraños primores* is removed entirely from its original location as a prepositional phrase in line 17, but part of the astonishing rarity suggested by *estraños* is expressed through Barnstone’s penultimate word “amazing.” Additionally, some of the words he
adds seem at first glance to have no basis in the source text but, in reality, simply stem from other lines or stanzas. “Flare,” while lacking an exact corresponding word in lines 17-18, does return to the image of the lámparas del fuego from the first line of this stanza and thus enhances that part of the metaphor. Similarly, “joy” has no specific equivalent in the source text but can be derived from the main theme of the poem itself, the ecstasy of union.

Yet although many of the changes Barnstone makes can be thus traced back to the source text in some way, the clarity of San Juan’s metaphor is still lost in much of these last two lines of Barnstone’s translation. Instead of the “caverns of the senses” giving light and warmth to their querido, they “flare in light and warmth;” the direct object therefore becomes a prepositional phrase, and the final emphasis of this verse is transferred from the giving of light and warmth to the waking of the lover in the next line. These words, “wake the lover,” express one of the least textually-based ideas of these final lines: again, instead of the caverns of the senses giving warmth and light to the beloved, they simply “flare” with these qualities and wake the lover with “amazing joy.” This idea of waking is perhaps borrowed from the next stanza (specifically, recuerdas), and it may be conceptually related to the transition from darkness and blindness to light and warmth and thus partially derived from elements of the source text. However, it somewhat overshadows the idea of the caverns of the senses giving anything to the querido, which, by its position in the last line of the stanza, is the most emphasized aspect of this metaphor in the original text.

The combined effect of all of these choices Barnstone makes in his translation of this metaphor is the presentation of a new image to the reader, one that has some identifiable basis in but is ultimately substantially different from that of the source text. Perhaps this new metaphor may be interpreted as a deliberate effort on Barnstone’s part to focus mainly on the soul,
describing its reaction to the way that the flame has been working within it: deeply touched by the divine flame, the soul flares with its own, “human,” fire with such “light and warmth” that it awakens God’s presence within it. The image of “deep transparency” is perhaps meant to help convey the closeness of this relationship, returning to the idea of God and the soul separated only by a membrane thin enough to see through. This possible interpretation of Barnstone’s image lays more emphasis on the organic reaction of the soul rather than highlighting, as in the source text, the point that all the soul has to give to God are the very gifts it has received from him. Or, alternately, perhaps Barnstone’s inclusion of “human” fire is simply a metaphorical way of continuing the allegory of human love to represent mystical union, and should not necessarily be taken as a reference to the soul. Yet whatever Barnstone’s intended interpretation, some deliberate divergence from the original meaning is clear. He gives the metaphor of this stanza a new direction and emphasis, drawing the reader away from San Juan’s original meaning and towards his own.

Smith’s translation, while not quite as literal as Kavanaugh and Rodriguez’, presents the original imagery with more clarity than Barnstone’s. Rendering *fuego* as “fiery light” inspires nearly the same image in the reader’s mind as the original Spanish wording. Indeed, the idea of “light” is contained in the word *lámparas*, and therefore is not as much an addition to the text as the extension of the meaning of this Spanish word to a second English word (“light” as well as “lamps”). The most significant divergence from the original meaning is found in the shift in emphasis from the idea of fire to that of light, as this becomes the new last word of the line.

In line 14, Smith again remains very close to the original text. While he does choose the singular of “splendor” instead of the plural, which would technically be closer to *resplandores*, and adds the word “radiant,” which has no direct equivalent in the source text, these decisions do
not effect a great shift in meaning. Indeed, a certain radiance is even implied in the idea of resplandores. Thus, despite these minimal changes, the original imagery is clearly conveyed to the reader, and this pattern of close translation continues through lines 15 and 16.

Smith’s translation of the final two lines affects the meaning of this metaphor perhaps more than his rendering of any other part of the stanza. Like Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, he capitalizes his translation of querido to clarify that this word refers to God. He goes even a step further than these translators in his efforts to assist the reader with interpretation, however, by deliberately altering this word from the more literal “Beloved” to “Lover:” in some ways, it may be easier for a reader to imagine God as lover rather than beloved in a relationship, especially in the context of this poem, which in many ways has thus far described the powerful love of God for the soul, rather than vice versa. Smith’s translation of calor also produces a deepening in meaning. Through the word “ardor,” he is able to convey the literal sense of heat and also help the reader understand this warmth as alluding to the burning passion of the soul for God.

Finally, Smith places at the end of this stanza the words “full intense” rather than an equivalent for querido. This phrase, while lacking a direct equivalent in the source text, draws attention to the fervent and passionate nature of the gift of the soul to God, and its emphasized position at the end of the stanza thus serves to further highlight these qualities to which it alludes.

Spanish Grammatical Constructions Lacking a Direct Equivalent in English

It has already been noted in the introduction that not every word has a perfect equivalent in every other language. Likewise, not every grammatical structure of a given language can be exactly replicated in another tongue. One basic example is the fact that English lacks the grammatical gender found in Spanish and other Romance languages, but many, more subtle differences exist as well (Valero-Garcés 33, Newmark 86-87). This adds another layer to the
difficulties of translation: because grammar acts as the “skeleton of a text” and a major
transmitter of meaning, transposition, or the process of replacing one part of speech for another
when required by differences in the languages’ grammatical systems, can often result in certain
changes of meaning (Newmark 125, Valero-Garcés 73). Newmark suggests that, in particular,
transposition frequently produces a shift of emphasis from one word to another (88).

When translating poetry, the necessity of transposition may increase: as the translator is
simultaneously focused on preserving both form and content, some cases may arise in which,
even when a certain grammatical structure of the source language does have a close equivalent in
the target language, this corresponding structure distorts the form of the poem in some way and
thus forces the translator to use different syntax. Given grammar’s integral role in structuring
meaning, an increase in transpositions may also lead to an increase in shifts in meaning between
the source and the target texts. This section, therefore, analyzes the effects on meaning of the
translators’ approaches to certain places in *Llama de amor viva* where San Juan has employed a
Spanish grammatical construction that does not have a direct equivalent in English.

*que tiernamente hieres de mi alma*

Kavanaugh and Rodriguez: “that tenderly wounds my soul”

Barnstone: “How tenderly you wound/ My soul”

Smith: “whose tender burning fire/ wounds sore my soul”

In this line, the inflected nature of Spanish verbs gives San Juan the luxury of indicating
without including a pronoun, even within the relative clause beginning *que*, that he is speaking to
and not merely about the *llama*. English grammar does not permit this subtlety, and thus this
line forces the translator away from a literal rendering and offers several alternative choices.
Kavanaugh and Rodriguez remain extremely close to the original word order and are thus forced to change their verb to the third person, losing the idea of direct address of the flame. Consequently, although the reader is still able to clearly understand the action the flame is performing, an element of the intimacy, crucial to the poem’s theme of mystical union, with which is it being carried out is lost, for the third person description rather than the second person address forces the poetic voice to step back and slightly remove itself from closeness with the flame. Although the direct address is regained in subsequent lines of Kavanaugh and Rodriguez’ translation, because of their approach to this particular phrase, its impact is nevertheless delayed for the reader.

Barnstone takes an opposite approach, playing with the syntax of this phrase in order to be able to render the verb in the second person. In this case, while he does abandon the sentence structure of the original, he comes closer than Kavanaugh and Rodriguez to the overall meaning by maintaining the soul’s direct address of the flame and thus the intimacy of that relationship. Even the new sentence structure he chooses, the exclamation beginning with “How,” fits in very well with the poem as a whole, which is constructed mainly of such exclamations.

Smith retains neither the original word order nor the second person. This, while possibly done for reasons of preserving the rhyme scheme or meter, creates an effect similar to that of Kavanaugh and Rodriguez’ translation, in which a shade, however delicate, of the initial burst of intimacy between the soul and God is lost.

¡en el más profundo centro!

Kavanaugh and Rodriguez: “in its deepest center!”

Barnstone: “in her profoundest core!”
Smith: “within its deepest center!”

Another syntactical difficulty of translation into English is posed by the phrase *en el más profundo centro*. Where Spanish allows a definite article, conventional, or, at the very least, fluid English demands a possessive. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez and Smith adopt the neutral “its,” while Barnstone chooses “her.” While little meaning is lost in any of these versions, Barnstone’s arguably gains a shade of meaning not present in the other two translations and only to some extent apparent in the original: the notion of the gender of the soul.

All nouns in Spanish possess grammatical gender, so the soul, *el alma*, is always understood to be feminine. This adds a layer of meaning to the allegorical expression of mystical union as human love, since this imagery may be more readily understood by a reader if God is presented as masculine and the soul as feminine. However, this shade of meaning is extremely subtle in the Spanish version, as the feminine nature of *el alma* is a grammatical necessity and thus not immediately recognizable as a potentially conscious choice on the part of San Juan. Barnstone’s express use of the pronoun “her,” therefore, is able both to convey the idea of the gender of the soul, which can be difficult to do in English, and to accomplish this in a way that is readily apparent to the reader, thus further deepening the allegory of human love as a representation of mystical union within the poem.

Individual Problematic Words

At times, an individual word can create more problems for a translator than an entire passage. In fact, Newmark observes that occasionally, a translator may be forced to spend more time on one elusive word than on the entire remainder of the work (223). The source of this problem may vary. Occasionally, certain words may be old or obscure enough not to be found in
a standard dictionary, which of course presents a formidable challenge to the translator. However, even when the translator is familiar with the meaning of a particular word in the source language, representing it in the target language can nonetheless be extremely difficult, as not all words have direct equivalents in all other languages (Lefevere, Translating Poetry 28, 96). In such cases, bilingual dictionaries may be of only limited assistance: as Jorge Luis Borges aptly remarks, “The dictionary is based on the hypothesis – obviously an unproven one – that languages are made up of equivalent synonyms” (qtd. in Barnstone, Poetics of Translation 113). Even with all aesthetic considerations of rhyme scheme, meter, and other sound effects aside, certain words in the source language will defy rendering with one perfect, semantic match in the target language.

However, in literature, particularly in poetry, and perhaps especially in such a brief poem as Llama de amor viva, every word counts. As Newmark asserts, as important as conveying the central theme or idea of a work might be, ultimately, “The SL [source language] text consists of words, that is all that is there, on the page. Finally all you have is words to translate, and you have to account for each of them somewhere in your TL [target language] text” (193). A poor translation of one word can alter the meaning of an entire line, or perhaps an entire verse, and thus, the way in which translators handle individual difficult or “untranslatable” words is critical to their overall product. Again, accurate translations of individual words may be of particular importance when working with Llama de amor viva, as it is an older text and includes a few words that may be unfamiliar to the modern reader, and because it deals with a subject matter outside the realm of common knowledge. The following section examines how the three translations treat words with ambiguous or obscure meanings, as well as those without an
aesthetically satisfactory equivalent in English, and these choices’ influence on the meaning of each translation.

**esquiva**

Kavanaugh and Rodriguez: “oppressive”

Barnstone: “shy”

Smith: “depriving of/ completing your desire”

The adjective *esquiva* is one of the single most difficult words of this poem to translate, not because an English equivalent cannot be found, but because the standard definition is difficult to apply within the context of the poem as defined by San Juan. The meaning of this word is fairly crucial to the first stanza, however, as it occupies a place of emphasis in and carries the meaning of line 4. Thus, the different approaches of each of the three translations to *esquiva* color each of their first stanzas with a different meaning.

In *Spanish Poetry of the Golden Age*, Wardropper includes a list of many of the more difficult terms found within the poems reproduced in this book: he here defines *esquiva* as “elusive, coy, disdainful,” and this is in keeping with the standard definition found in most other dictionaries (343). However, in his own commentary on *Llama de amor viva*, to explain the meaning of the line *pues ya no eres esquiva*, San Juan writes, “Es a saber, pues ya no afliges, ni aprietas, ni fatigas como antes hacías; porque conviene saber que esta llama de Dios, cuando el alma estaba en estado de purgación espiritual, que es cuando va entrando en contemplación, no le era tan amigable y suave como ahora lo es en este estado de unión”\(^\text{13}\) (*Obras Completas* 380).

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\(^{13}\) “This means: since you no longer afflict or distress or weary me as you did before. It should be recalled that when the soul was in the state of spiritual purgation, which was at the time of the beginning of contemplation, this flame of God was not so friendly and gentle toward it as now in this state of union” (Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross* 648).
He is referring here to the *noche oscura del alma*, which the soul has recently undergone to achieve its present state of union with God: the flame is no longer painfully afflicting the soul to purify it, as during that stage of the *vía mística*, but rather wounding it far more gently and tenderly. San Juan further explains this line by saying,

> Y esto es lo que quiere dar a entender cuando le dice el alma el presente verso: Pues ya no eres esquiva, que en suma es como si dijera: pues ya no solamente no me eres oscura como antes, pero eres la divina luz de mi entendimiento, con que te puedo ya mirar; y no solamente no haces desfallecer mi flaqueza, mas antes eres la fortaleza de mi voluntad con que te puedo amar y gozar, estando toda convertida en divino amor; y ya no eres pesadumbre y aprieto para la sustancia de mi alma, mas antes eres la gloria y delite y anchura de ella14 (*Obras Completas* 383).

Again, he emphasizes the idea that although the soul has previously felt the flame to be a grief and an affliction, it now sees it as a pure delight: *esquiva* clearly describes the former state. Both of these passages in the commentary to *Llama de amor viva*, therefore, suggest a meaning of *esquiva* closer to “afflictive,” “harsh,” or distressing” than “elusive,” “coy,” or “disdainful.” Thus the translator’s dilemma.

In their translation, Kavanaugh and Rodriguez stay closest to the meaning suggested by the commentary, using the word “oppressive.” This single choice then colors the meaning of the next three lines as well, as it implies that the reason the soul so strongly desires perfect union with the flame is that it no longer feels any pain, only joy, from it. This translation also thus alludes to the process of the *vía mística* and the fact that the present poem is describing its final stages, which may be helpful to a reader less familiar with San Juan’s mysticism.

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14 “Such is the meaning of the present verse, “Now you are not [esquiva].” It is in sum like saying: Not only are you no longer dark as you were before, but you are the divine light of my intellect by which I can look at you; and you not only have ceased making me faint in my weakness, but are rather the strength of my will by which I can love and enjoy you, being wholly converted into divine love; and you are no longer heavy and constraining to the substance of my soul but rather its glory and delight and amplitude” (Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross* 651). [Note: I leave *esquiva* intentionally untranslated here in order to enable the reader to understand how an idea of its intended meaning can be discerned from the context of the commentary alone, and in order to prevent a particular English rendering of this word in this context from influencing the reader’s opinion of the most appropriate way to translate it in the poem.]
Barnstone takes a different approach and renders *esquiva* as “shy,” staying closer to the idea of a coy lover. Interestingly, this almost entirely reverses the meaning of the next three lines. In both versions, the soul begs the flame for perfect union, yet with the first meaning of *esquiva*, it is the soul who has not previously desired this, because of the pain of contact with the flame; with the second meaning, it is rather the flame that has been avoiding union up to this point. Both Barnstone and Kavanaugh and Rodriguez thus create individual, distinct meanings for their first stanzas, yet, unless one were to uphold San Juan’s commentary as authoritative, neither can be said to deliberately diverge from the meaning of the source text but rather only to necessarily specify one interpretation over another, limiting the reader of English to understanding only one of the two possible options that may be available to a reader of Spanish.

Smith takes yet another path. Rejecting both of the above definitions, he does not supply one word for *esquiva* but instead paraphrases lines 4 and 5 with “No more depriving of/ completing your desire.” Certainly the most free of the three translations, this version again changes the meaning, not suggesting that either the flame or the soul did not previously long for perfect union but that the flame was purposely depriving itself of fulfilling this desire. It represents possibly the greatest shift in meaning from the original, because it develops a new idea of *esquiva* as “restraining” or “withholding” rather than simply narrowing the existing meanings of this word.

*Acaba*

Kavanaugh and Rodriguez: “consummate”

Barnstone: “Do it now”

Smith: “perfect”
The difficulty of \textit{acaba} lies in its generality. It means “finish,” thus leaving open a wide variety of options for the translators within this broad range of meaning. Each translator’s decision to maintain this general sense or select a more specific word has a significant influence on the reader’s understanding of the last two lines of the first stanza.

Kavanaugh and Rodriguez’ choice of “consummate” does not necessarily change the meaning of \textit{acaba} in the context of this poem, but rather explains what type of “finishing” San Juan alludes to through this word. Working within the context of human love as an allegory for mystical union with God, this word choice helps the reader understand that when the soul exclaims \textit{acaba ya}, it desires God to complete their own union as a married couple might do on their wedding night. This may help a reader less familiar with Spanish mysticism understand some of the meaning behind the text as well.

Barnstone’s translation preserves the generality of \textit{acaba} with the phrase “do it now.” Like San Juan, he does not specify in this line what the soul wishes the flame to do or finish, only that it wishes it accomplished, and thus stays very close to the meaning of the source text.

Smith does not express the meaning of \textit{acaba} in one word or phrase but rather devotes two entire lines to conveying the meaning of \textit{pues ya no eres esquiva/...si quieres} and alludes to \textit{acaba ya} in the following line, by saying “\textit{perfect this sweet encounter [emphasis mine]}.” Like Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, therefore, he selects a very specific word for the general \textit{acaba}. Smith’s choice emphasizes the fact that, if the flame finishes its work of transforming the soul, the \textit{vía mística} will be completed and the soul will have been brought to absolute perfection. This helps underscore the identity of the union as no ordinary joining of two beings but the transformation of a flawed soul into a perfect deity and thus, once again, helps a reader less familiar with mysticism understand what is taking place in the poem.
recuerdas

Kavanaugh and Rodriguez: “wake”

Barnstone: “make… recall”

Smith: “waken”

In rendering recuerdas, the translators seem to be divided between the modern definition of “remember” or “recall” and the older possible meaning of “awaken.” Kavanaugh and Rodriguez select this older meaning, thus indicating that God is awakening within the soul. Smith’s translation, while his verb takes as its subject the sensations of God’s love rather than specifically God himself, nevertheless also implies that an attribute of God is awakening within the soul. The meaning drawn from a cursory reading of these two versions based on their translation of recuerdas, therefore, is that God has been asleep within the soul and is now waking up because of the present union with it.

This meaning seems to be the most literal rendering of the source text for two reasons. First, the explanation in San Juan’s commentary of this line supports it as the most valid meaning in the context of the poem. When discussing this line, he asserts,

con verdad se dice que nuestro recuerdo es recuerdo de Dios, y nuestro levantamiento es levantamiento de Dios; y así es como si dijera David: Levántanos dos veces, y recuérdanos, porque estamos dormidos y caídos de dos maneras. De donde porque el alma estaba dormida en sueño de que ella jamás por sí misma no pudiera recordar, y solo Dios es el que la pudo abrir los ojos y hacer este recuerdo, muy propiamente le llama recuerdo de Dios a éste, diciendo: Recuerdas en mi seno15 (Obras Completas 425).

15 “It is rightly asserted that our [recuerdo] is a [recuerdo] of God and our rising is God’s rising. It is as though David were to say: Let us arise and [recuérdanos] twice, because we are doubly asleep and fallen. Since the soul was in a sleep from which it could never [recordar] itself, and only God could open its eyes and cause this [recuerdo], it very appropriately calls this a [recuerdo] of God, saying: ‘[Recuerdas] in my heart’” (Trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross 711). [See footnote 14 for an explanation of why I leave recuerdas untranslated here in all its forms.]
By here discussing the *recuerdo* of the soul in the context of coming out of sleep, he implies that this event is a type of awakening. Furthermore, rendering *recuerdas* as “remember” or “recall” causes a grammatical difficulty. No indirect object exists for *recuerdas*, and the phrase that can be taken as its direct object, *donde secretamente solo moras*, could also be understood as an adverbial phrase. Thus, a choice of “recall” or “remind” is difficult to defend, since neither makes sense in this context without information about who is made to recall: this option would require the translator to change the part of speech of another word in the source text or insert a new word.

This, however, is Barnstone’s choice in his own rendering of this particular line. He translates *recuerdas* as “you make… recall,” and, in order to do so, is forced to take the phrase *en mi seno* and convert it into an indirect object of *recuerdas*, using *donde secretamente solo moras* as the direct object. The subsequent implication is that God causes the soul to remember where he resides, in its most intimate center. On the surface, this seems to be a meaning completely opposite to that of San Juan’s poem and the other two translations. If the poet states that God awakens in the soul, it may seem as though he were asleep and is waking up because of the present union; if, on the other hand, this union results in God reminding the soul of where he resides, deep within it, the implication is that God has always dwelt there, and the union causes the soul to remember, or wake up to, this fact. The difference, therefore, seems to be between a figurative awakening of God or of the soul, and Barnstone appears to choose the idea furthest away from San Juan’s original meaning.

However, there is another level of significance behind the choice of translating this word, for in the context of Catholic theology, the two meanings may actually be the same. Strictly speaking, God does not sleep, so he cannot awake; if he seems to a human to have awakened, it
is because that person himself has awakened, even though this sensation might be figuratively explained by the idea of God awakening (John of the Cross, *Obras Completas* 424-425). In this case, Kavanaugh and Rodriguez’s and Smith’s translations, by remaining close to the literal meaning of the source text and translating San Juan’s wording of this idea fairly faithfully, leave the English-speaking reader, like the Spanish-speaking reader, to understand on his or her own that if God seems to have awakened, it is actually the soul that has done so. Barnstone’s version moves away from a literal translation of the words in order to convey San Juan’s meaning in a more literal sense, taking this step to help the reader with less experience in Catholic theology or Spanish mysticism understand this idea. His approach, therefore, may be intended not to stray from San Juan’s interpretation or from preservation of the syntax of the source text but rather to render the main idea of this part of the poem more clearly to the average reader.

*me enamoras*

Kavanaugh and Rodriguez: “you swell my heart with love”

Barnstone: “you make me love”

Smith: “the grace of love you give”

While the meaning of these two words may be fairly clear (“you make me fall in love”), they are perhaps difficult to render into an English phrase that sounds as fluid as the original Spanish. Their position as the very last words of the poem makes them crucial, however, to both the tone and the aesthetic impact of this work as a whole, and each of the translators uses a different strategy to take these considerations into account.

Kavanaugh and Rodriguez’ image of God swelling the soul’s heart with love involves an addition of words lacking direct equivalents in the source text, but the idea these words convey is
not implausible based on other parts of the poem. For example, this stanza discusses the actions of the flame within the most secret, intimate corner of the soul, and San Juan’s use of the word *seno* can imply the heart, while *enamoras* does indeed imply an action of increasing, not just steady, love. This translation has the added benefit of being fairly poetic as well, providing a strong ending for the work and concluding with a metaphor a poem that is almost entirely based on such figures of speech.

For his part, Barnstone offers a very literal translation of these words. He thus leaves the reader in little doubt as to San Juan’s intended meaning and preserves the emphasis on “love” as the last word of the poem. However, some aesthetic meaning is lost, as his last four words are somewhat halting in form and contradict the tender, delicate nature of the action they describe.

Smith’s approach to these words takes a different direction. His word choices of “grace,” “love,” and “give” create a softer line than does Barnstone’s more literal version, and the alliteration also helps to make the line more fluid, more poetic, and thus ultimately more appropriate to the denotative meaning of the words. While Smith does not specifically convey the original idea that God is moving the soul to love, this idea can be understood to result from God’s gift of his own love to the soul and, indeed, is further alluded to in lines 19-20, where he states, “How soft your love’s sensations,/ that waken in my heart.” Though this idea is different from that of these lines in the source text, in which God himself, not only his love, awakens in the interior of the soul, it helps convey the meaning of *enamoras* by implying that the love of God (i.e., the love God is capable of, rather than love for God) is now present within the soul itself. Also, Smith turns his last line into a neat summary of his poem. The Catholic understanding of the word “grace” implies a gift from God, and much of the poem has indeed been spent describing the multitude of blessings the soul has received from God. By explicitly
referring to these gifts and even making “give” the last and therefore a significantly accentuated word in the poem, Smith emphasizes this aspect of the poem’s theme in a more distinct way than does the original text.
Original Translation

In *A Textbook of Translation*, Newmark asserts, “[A]ll translation is partly science, partly craft, partly art, partly a matter of taste […] The fourth area of translation, that of taste, has to be accepted as a subjective factor” (189-191). Thus far, I have concentrated principally on the first three areas Newmark mentions, establishing certain criteria for a satisfactory translation of *Llama de amor viva* and critiquing the work of Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, Barnstone, and Smith accordingly. This approach has been intentional, as the primary focus of this study has been analytical rather than creative. However, to ignore entirely the subjective element of translation assessment, that of personal taste, would be to leave this study incomplete. Thus, it has seemed fitting to me to include at this point an original translation of *Llama de amor viva*.

I do not present this poem without reservations, however. Although I did compose it with the criteria I have outlined as necessary for an accurate translation of *Llama de amor viva* in mind, I do not pretend that it perfectly fulfills each or even any of these standards: while I am pleased with many of the choices I have made, there are others I find less than satisfactory and would improve if I could at this point in time. Therefore, I present this final translation of San Juan’s poem not as a model but merely as a further example of the ways in which elements of the meaning of this particular poem may be rendered in English, an example which I favor but by no means claim to be superior or authoritative. Ultimately, it is my hope that this original translation will provide insight into the way in which I read and interpret this work and thus be helpful in understanding both the philosophy of translation I have set forth and this study as a whole.

In addition to thus completing my analysis of English translations of *Llama de amor viva*, the creation of an original translation has been extremely helpful to me throughout my work on
this study. I composed a preliminary version at the beginning of my research, in order to better understand the general process of translation and the specific challenges presented by this particular poem; after having completed the comparative analysis and having gained a deeper understanding of the poem’s nuances and the subtle effects of translation on meaning, especially within the four main areas of translation discussed above, I refined the draft. It is this final version which I present below.
Living Flame of Love

San Juan de la Cruz

Translation: Kathryn Braun

1 Oh living flame of love,
2 how tenderly you wound
3 my soul in her profoundest, deepest core!
4 You seem severe no longer,
5 so end this, if you wish,
6 and tear the veil of this encounter sweet!

7 Oh soothing cautery!
8 Oh welcome wound! How soft
9 the hand, how delicate the touch that tastes
10 of everlasting life
11 and pays back every debt!
12 By killing, out of death you bring new life.

13 Oh blazing lamps of fire,
14 in whose resplendent glow
15 the deepest caverns of my consciousness,
16 before so dark and blind,
17 now with rare beauty give
18 both warmth and light to their beloved one!

19 How loving and how meek
20 you wake within my heart,
21 where only you, alone, dwell secretly;
22 in your sweet breathing, full
23 of glory and of grace,
24 how gently you inspire me to love!
Conclusion

Perhaps at first glance, if only one aspect of poetry translation seems to have been sufficiently demonstrated through this comparative analysis, it may be the sheer complexity of this art. In any case, the translations examined in this study have certainly illustrated the variety of ways to approach the translation of a given poem as well as the difficulties of this task. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, with their brilliantly clear metaphors, lose the fluidity and grace of San Juan’s liras; Barnstone, with his skilled transposition of grammatical structures to minimize loss of meaning from Spanish to English, sometimes fails to convey the clear imagery and consistent tone of the original; Smith, with his beautifully rendered meter and rhyme scheme, sacrifices the emphasis San Juan imparts to certain words by their position within the line and the lucidity of some of his metaphors. Personally, even after having conducted this in-depth study of Llama de amor viva and having had the benefit of numerous pre-existing English versions to reference, I, too, find myself unable to compose an original translation that satisfactorily conveys every element of meaning in San Juan’s poem. Thus, from a certain perspective, it may be tempting to dismiss these and all translations of poetry as “proof” of the impossibility of this art.

However, it has been the purpose of this study to conduct a deeper analysis than such a cursory dismissal allows, and I have indeed sought to demonstrate the numerous ways in which meaning may be preserved from source to target text. Furthermore, moving beyond the mere transference of much of this original meaning, these translators have used the English language to enhance and even add to the poem’s meaning at times, thus developing a new, individual depth in each of their own poems. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez offer the reader a more concrete image of the tela separating the soul and God by translating this word with an English approximation that alludes to the biblical veil of the temple; they enhance the allegory of human
love already present in the poem with their word choice of “consummate” in the first stanza; they add an additional poetic touch to the work by concluding it with an original metaphor that nonetheless preserves the main idea of the source text. For his part, Barnstone deepens a paradox already present in the original text with his word choice of “soothing” for suave in line 7; he directs the reader towards a new interpretation of the poem’s third stanza, whether as an image of human love or a stronger emphasis on the soul’s reaction to its union with God; he clarifies to the reader through his translation of recuerdas that the soul, not God, is truly the one who awakens to the other’s presence. Finally, Smith enhances the sense of urgency already present in the poem by his wording of the end of the first stanza; he subtly increases the conveyed passion of the soul for God in stanza 3 by drawing on the flexibility of English “ardor” to mean both literal and figurative burning and by ending this stanza with an original phrase, “full intense;” and he shades the entire poem with an emphasis on the gifts the soul receives from the flame by highlighting this aspect of their union in his translation of the last line. Moreover, these conclusions represent only a selection of the ways demonstrated in this study in which these three translations have enhanced and developed further shades of meaning within their respective poems. My original translation offers still another example of the variety of ways in which an English translation of Llama de amor viva might enhance or add to the meaning of the Spanish original.

Thus, while much may be lost in translation, perhaps something may be gained as well. Paradoxically, it may be the very challenges of poetry translation that allow those who undertake it the opportunity to rise to this considerable achievement. By forcing the translator to depart from the literal and the obvious and to embrace the “obligatory freedom of imaginative leaps,” poetry offers this chance for the translator to add to or enrich the meaning of the original work in
such a way that he or she may, even while conveying the ideas of the source text, create an independent work of art (Barnstone, Poetics of Translation 50). Certainly, speakers of English whose only means of reading Llama de amor viva is through one of these translations will not discover every element of the original meaning, but they will find many of San Juan’s ideas clearly conveyed through the new texts and may even come away understanding a layer of meaning not as readily apparent to those who have read the original Spanish. Thus, if these translations are proof of anything, they are testimony not of any impossibility but of the significant potential of translation. They have added to the corpus of English literature, certainly, contributing to the survival and spread of Llama de amor viva by transferring much of its meaning to a new language; yet more importantly, they have given this poem life in English not by attempted mechanical duplication but by a deepening of meaning and the creation of three independent works of art.
Bibliography


