



1997

Intertextual Oneiric Space in "El Cantico Espiritual" by San Juan de la Cruz and Disney's Alice in Wonderland

Bobbie L. Arndt
Illinois Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev>

Recommended Citation

Arndt, Bobbie L. (1997) "Intertextual Oneiric Space in "El Cantico Espiritual" by San Juan de la Cruz and Disney's Alice in Wonderland," *Undergraduate Review*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev/vol10/iss1/4>

This Article is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/ or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.

Intertextual Oneiric Space in "El Cántico Espiritual" by San Juan de la Cruz and Disney's *Alice in Wonderland*

Bobbie L. Arndt

In *Las Moradas* (1577), Santa Teresa de Jesús explains that one's spirituality can be imagined as a crystal castle with many rooms (5). With this comparison, which came to her in a vision, de Jesús defines the concept of the spiritual journey; it is a journey through the antechambers of the mind. This interior world of the mind, one that lends itself to expression in a surrealistic style, is also apparent in the mystic poem of a contemporary of de Jesús, San Juan de la Cruz. Disregarding consideration of time or genre, de la Cruz's mystic poem, "El Cántico Espiritual" (1586), is comparable to the style of many other surrealist works, such as Disney's *Alice in Wonderland*, originally a Lewis Carroll tale. The famous twentieth-century animated classic serves as a good frame of reference in terms of the oneiric space (dream-like, surreal content) of the mystic sixteenth-century "Cántico Espiritual." Through his use of rhetoric and language in his "Cántico Espiritual" (1586), de la Cruz creates, or presents, a surrealistic representation of a dream-like spiritual quest or vision.

In *Alice in Wonderland* Alice falls asleep seated beneath a tree while listening to a story about a white rabbit. Suddenly, Alice imagines that she sees a white rabbit scurrying about and passing through an opening in the trunk of the tree. Alice decides to follow the intriguing

white rabbit into Wonderland, asking curious creatures along the way if they haven't seen a white rabbit pass by. Alice's entrance into Wonderland presents the viewer with a surreal setting where everything is not quite as it should be, as well as the meta-fiction of Alice's journey through Wonderland within the fictional framework of Alice's "reality"; she is asleep and dreaming.

"El Cántico Espiritual" by de la Cruz has a similar beginning, with the exception that there appears to be no meta-fiction in the poem. De la Cruz's protagonist/narrator, "la esposa" [the wife], also is searching for something—"el Amado" [the Beloved]: a personification of a union with the divine. She looks for "him" through fields, mountains, and rivers while asking the creatures of nature, "plantadas por la mano del Amado," if he hadn't passed by:

¡Oh, bosques y espesuras,
Plantadas por la mano del Amado!
¡Oh prado de verduras,
De flores esmaltado,
Decid si por vosotros ha pasado! (de la Cruz 577)
[¡Oh, forests and thickets,
Planted by the hands of the Beloved!
¡Oh meadow of green,
Of enameled flowers,
Tell if he has passed by you!]

Keeping in mind Santa Teresa de Jesús's allegory, this natural landscape may be, in poem form, the landscape of the antechambers of the mind in de la Cruz's surreal mystic journey. Yet de la Cruz makes no reference to the possibility of a dreaming or meditating protagonist (like Alice) that could be a pretext for his choice of images; such a character could express the mystic experience that belongs in the realm of such mental phenomena. Perhaps de la Cruz implies a meta-fiction in "Cántico Espiritual," as evidenced by its surreal content and rhetoric. More than a mystic love poem, it is a surreal representation of the spiritual capacities of the mind which Walt Disney, following Lewis Carroll's vision, so quaintly animated, bestowing a remarkable, surreal

visual impact

The objective of "Cántico Espiritual" is to express the ineffable union with the divine. The fact that the act of expression in any form and the ineffable are diametrically opposed leads to the creation of paradoxical images and concepts to achieve its ends. If contemplated in terms of mental landscaping, "Cántico Espiritual" is necessarily illogical because, in theory, thought follows non-linear patterns, as does surrealism. Therefore a seemingly illogical montage of paradoxical resources, the language of surrealism, serves well as a tool for attempting to express the ineffable.

Returning again to the example of symbolic mental landscaping, de la Cruz employs images from nature to express the contemplation of the divine. He utilizes nature-inspired symbolism just as Salvador Dalí chooses to convey the concept of illogical thought as scattering black points (actually ants) in *Persistence of Memory*. Paralleling the symbolic dreamscape, de la Cruz also expresses the chaotic thoughts of the protagonist/narrator:

Y todos cuantos vagan,
de ti me van mil gracias refiriendo,
Y todos más me llagan,
Y déjame muriendo
Un no sé qué que quedan balbuciendo. (de la Cruz 578)
[And they all wander,
About you they gave me many thanks,
And others wound me
And leave me dying
Babbling an I do not know what.]

Because the pronoun "todos" (modifying creatures of nature) acts as a tool for expressing mental process, this word is suggestive of and interchangeable with "thoughts." If this is true, then this stanza seems to present a confusion of thought. These thoughts "vagan" [wander], "llagan" [wound], and remain babbling something incomprehensible: "Un no sé qué que quedan balbuciendo." These thoughts seem to refer to a type of confusion caused by not being able to put to words the experi-

ences felt; however, it is difficult to determine if that frustration belongs to the protagonist on her quest, or to the author in the action of trying to express union with the divine. This frustration is also paralleled in *Wonderland* where Alice becomes impatient with enigmatic characters who utter “nonsense.” The frustration of expressing the ineffable is also perfectly symbolized by the phonetic significance of the last line “un no sé qué que quedan balbuciendo”—an expression that stutters with alliteration.

De la Cruz’s paradoxical attempt to give substance to the intangible is possible only through the creation of a surreal atmosphere which suggests oneiric space, a symbolic dream world. His figurative use of paradox is a major tool in expressing the ineffable in the context of oneiric space. Even the definitions of “paradox” (the means of de la Cruz’s expression) and “dream” (the end result of expression) seem to collaborate in meaning; the first “exhibiting inexplicable or contradictory aspects” occurring within the latter “state of abstraction” (*American Heritage College Dictionary*). Because his very act (expressing the inexpressible) is paradoxical, he utilizes paradoxical images, abstractions, and concepts as illustrations of the union with the divine: “la música callada” [silent music], “la soledad sonora” [the sounding solitude] (de la Cruz 580), “llama que consume y no da pena” [flame that consumes but does not wound] (585). These juxtapositions of antithetical words illustrate the inconsistency of logic that occurs within oneiric space. This inconsistency of logic also appears at the Mad Hatter’s tea party in *Wonderland*, where the guests are celebrating their “very merry unbirthdays.”

Strikingly similar to the visual impact and “nonsense” offered by the colorful *Alice in Wonderland*, San Juan de la Cruz artfully constructs, through the creation of an oneiric space and the use of paradox, a surreal world where the ineffable union with the divine amazingly becomes palpable in poetry. As aforementioned, one main difference between “Cántico Espiritual” and *Alice in Wonderland* is the apparent nonexistence of a meta-fiction in “Cántico Espiritual.” However, the presence of oneiric space implies a meta-fiction in that it demonstrates

dream context—even though there is no “Alice” protagonist asleep against a tree trunk to bridge the gap between the representations of sleeping, a physical state, and its product, dreaming, a mental state.

WORKS CITED

The American Heritage College Dictionary. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997.

de la Cruz, San Juan. *Obras*. México, D.F.: Editorial Séneca, 1942.

de Jesús, Santa Teresa. *Las Moradas*. 7th ed. Madrid: `Espasa-Calpe, S.A., 1962.