

# Letras Hispanas

## Volume 8.2, Fall 2012

**TITLE:** Saint John of the Cross' *Spiritual Canticle*: A Christian Perspective of a Jewish Love Affair

**AUTHOR:** David Navarro

**AFFILIATION:** Bates College

**ABSTRACT:** The religious consequences of the Reformation and Counter Reformation in Europe forged in Spain's Golden Age literature a new theological concept which sought to transform the ways and customs which, from that point, prevailed in the religious sphere. Individual identification with Christ became the engine that drove the believer in his approach to God, launching a new relationship between man and his Creator. This idea led to the production of several important mystical pieces, including *Spiritual Canticle* by Spanish Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591). The aim of this article is to analyze this work as a Christian hypertext of the biblical text of *Song of Songs*. In the Spanish version, Saint John borrows the story and rich imagery of the Biblical account and transforms it to create a similar mystical love affair with its own theological background. In this article, three aspects from both works will be explored and compared: characters, scenery, and the metaphors of the dove, the human eye and wine.

**KEYWORDS:** Hypotext, Hypertext, Jewish, Christian, Exegesis, Marriage

**RESUMEN:** Las consecuencias religiosas surgidas de la Reforma y Contrarreforma en Europa originaron dentro de la España del Siglo de Oro una nueva concepción teológica que perseguía transformar los modos y costumbres que hasta ese momento imperaban en el ámbito religioso. La identificación con Cristo se convirtió en el motor que impulsaba la conversión del individuo y su acercamiento a Dios, estableciéndose un nuevo modo de relación entre el hombre y su Creador. Esta idea derivó en la producción de un número considerable de piezas místicas como *Cántico espiritual* de San Juan de la Cruz (1542-1591). El objetivo de este artículo persigue analizar la obra del místico español como un hipertexto cristiano de la fuente original bíblica del *Cantar de los Cantares*. En la versión castellana, San Juan transforma y moldea el contenido del poema bíblico para crear una pieza similar de corte amoroso, pero dotada con su propio trasfondo teológico. Para ello, se discutirán y compararán tres aspectos empleados en ambos trabajos que proporcionan una perspectiva diferente en su significado alegórico: los personajes, el paisaje, y las figuras simbólicas de la paloma, el ojo humano y el vino.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** hipotexto, hipertexto, judío, cristiano, exégesis, matrimonio

**DATE RECEIVED:** 03/06/2012

**DATE PUBLISHED:** 10/09/2012

**BIOGRAPHY:** David Navarro is a Visiting Lecturer in Spanish at Bates College, Maine. His doctoral dissertation 'Interacciones narrativas árabe, cristiana y judía: *convivencia* literaria en el Medioevo peninsular' (Arabic, Christian and Jewish Narrative Interactions: Literary Co-Habitation in Medieval Iberia) develops a critical study based on identity theory, intergroup contact, and social discourse of cultural relations between the three religious communities in the literary framework of the Iberian Peninsula. Recent scholarly contributions have been published in *eHumanista: Journal of Iberian Studies*, *LEMIR (Revista de Literatura Española Medieval y del Renacimiento)*, *Medievalia*, and *Sephardic Horizons*. His areas of specialization include Medieval and Golden Age Literature, religious minorities in Medieval Iberia, and Sephardic Diaspora.

## Saint John of the Cross' *Spiritual Canticle*: A Christian Perspective of a Jewish Love Affair

David Navarro, Bates College

The new philosophical and literary concepts developed during the Renaissance marked a return to the divine and to the religious study of secular subjects, a feature that had already appeared in the Middle Ages (Wardropper 153). In the medieval period the literary world was dominated by the position of the Church, while in the Renaissance a return to themes of divine love became one of the most common benchmarks of religious orders and spiritual thought. They carried a profound emotional meaning, which did not exclude intimacy or affection, and the lyric became their channel of transmission (Asún xxi). Humanism encouraged the development of new narrative themes, such as the exaltation of nature as a source of life, harmony, passion, and love as opposed to physical and material union. The Platonic movement influenced a re-examination of the concepts of body and soul. Among the authors who projected this spiritual and loving message was the Spanish mystic, Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591), who did so in his sixteenth century piece *Spiritual Canticle*. The poem is made up of thirty-nine stanzas written at different periods of time. Based on the biblical text *Song of Songs* it describes the journey of the soul from when it begins to serve God until it reaches its final stage of perfection—the spiritual marriage with God.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this article is to analyze Saint John of the Cross' work as a Christian hypertext of the biblical source that itself borrowed the mystical Jewish framework and its characters' love affair. In this sense, the story is transformed to create a similar mystical meaning for a Christian audience

with its own theological and cultural background excluding any geo-political reference present in the biblical account.<sup>2</sup>

The anthropocentric ideas of the Renaissance that placed man as the centre of the universe reflected religious material in the form of *Christicism*: Christ became the origin of life and the pathway for the human soul to achieve its divine union with God. In the case of Saint John of the Cross, he conceived the notion that the only way to approach God was through Christ, and love for God and His Son became the driving force and central message of salvation. His Christian mysticism was founded on the oppositional conceptions of how to define the world and God's relationship with mankind: apophatic and cataphatic. The former referred to a negative conception of theology, describing what God was not, while the latter defined God by a positive and affirming perspective. Apophatic theology found its origin in Greek and Hebrew sources. In the pre-Socratic and Platonic thought, the idea of divinity was conceived of as "ultimately a transcendent being known internally through intuition" (Ellis 111). The concept of negative theology was developed by the Neo-Platonist movement and had a great influence on the Jewish, Islamic and Christian mystical traditions during the first centuries of the Common Era. The most important figure in this aspect was Plotinus (c. III), who in his work *The Enneads* outlined the idea of Being or God as an entity "absolutely transcendent, indescribably indivisible" (III, 17). Another influential character in apophatic theology was the Syrian monk Dionysius the Areopagite (c. VI). On the basis of Neo-Platonist

theories he held that God was above Being, and divine knowledge was accessed through absolute negation. In other words, Dionysius stated that the way to know and understand God is explaining not who or what He is but what He is not (Dionysius 203). On the other hand, cataphatic theology supported the ability to know God through reason and contact with reality. Creation, seen as the work of God, became the instrument through which man could discover the attributes of the Creator. Christian mysticism portrayed then not only the individual's personal experience and direct contact with God through ecstasy or deep meditation, but was also conceived of as a historical phenomenon (Scholem 1961: 19).

The exegetical interpretations of biblical texts played a very important role in the development of Jewish and Christian mysticism. Among the most influential works was *Song of Songs*, or *Canticum Canticorum* as known in the Vulgate version, one of the canonical books of the Old Testament.<sup>3</sup> It is conceived as a series of love poems within a single dramatic unity that narrates the story of a young beautiful maiden known as Shulamite who is captured by King Solomon to become part of his harem of wives.<sup>4</sup> Solomon, with the help of his concubines, tries to win the love of the girl who is already betrothed to a young shepherd of the region. After four failed attempts and, as homage to her loyalty and true love to her beloved, Solomon releases the girl who is allowed to return to her country home and lover. The text, read in a non-figurative form, represents a hymn of profane and erotic discourses that alternates with dialogues between the Shulamite and her male lover. The allegorical interpretation of the *Song* in Judaism first appeared in the *Talmud* (150-500 ACE) and more particularly in the *Targum*, a Hebrew commentary on the same text in the sixth century. It was interpreted as the love of Jehovah (Husband) towards His chosen people (Wife), referencing the Jewish exodus from Egypt, their journey through the desert, and their covenant at Sinai (Buttrick 32). Jewish exegesis also interpreted it as a

royal wedding between God and the People of Israel (Robinson 191). This allegorical heritage was passed on to Christian exegetes along with the canon of the Hebrew Bible. However, in Christian readings of the *Song of Songs*, especially as popularized by Origen of Alexandria, the interpretation of the poem read by Jews as the love between God and Israel found their "true" sense as the love between Christ and the human soul (Matter 51; Suarès 8). Saint John of the Cross composed his *Spiritual Canticum* with the same connotation; its protagonists are represented by a bride and her bridegroom, both symbolizing the spiritual marriage between the Christian soul (the wife) and Christ (the Husband) in a similar way as the love relationship between the young Shulamite and her shepherd from the biblical account. The poem avoids almost entirely the religious subject, making it a secular text following the same pattern as *Song of Songs* in content and theme. The structure of the *Canticum* is organized with three interventions of the chorus, and two dialogues between the lovers (Tavard 129):

Bride	stanza 1-4
Chorus (I)	stanza 5
Bride	stanzas 6-12
Bridegroom	stanzas 13
Bride	stanzas 14-27
Chorus (II)	stanza 28
Bridegroom	stanzas 29-31
Bride	stanzas 32-33
Bridegroom	stanzas 34-35
Bride	stanzas 36-39
Chorus (III)	stanza 40

The structure of *Song of Songs* is made of 8 stanzas with its characters and plot distributed as follows (Robinson 192-94; Segal 470-90):

Stanzas 1-2	Shulamite longs for her absent lover
	Chorus of the Daughters of Jerusalem
	Solomon's attempt to win Shulamite
Stanzas 2-3	Shulamite's dream of her shepherd lover

Stanzas 3-4	Solomon's proposal to Shulamite
Stanzas 4-5	Encounter between Shulamite and her beloved
Stanzas 5-6	Chorus of women
Stanzas 6-7	Solomon's third proposal to Shulamite
Stanzas 7-8	Solomon's final proposal to Shulamite Reunion between Shulamite and shepherd and return to Shulam

Saint John of the Cross maintains several aspects of the hypotext: the landscape and geographical setting, the flora and fauna, as well as the temporal space of the story. The biblical text places the story in an area that included part of the Persian Empire and the regions administered by the kingdom of Israel under King Solomon. This information is obtained through names of places, such as the vineyards of Ein Gedi, the mountains of Beth, or the forest of Lebanon.<sup>5</sup> The Spanish poet employs a similar natural setting surrounded by trees, meadows, valleys, mountains, rocks and pillars, which bring to mind the Sierra Nevada in Granada, where the author wrote several of the stanzas. Furthermore, the texture and description of the landscape evokes the style of the Italian eclogue (Tavard 46)<sup>6</sup> and lacks of a political overtone found in *Song of Songs*. The scenery description has an important role in both works, representing the idea of Paradise on earth and God as the Source and Creator of life. In contrast, Saint John makes use of this landscape to project Christ, represented by the Husband, as the Creator of this nature, providing his text with its own original and personal structure:

You forest, thicket, dene,  
Which my beloved set in close array;  
You meadow-land so green,  
Spangled with blossoms gay,  
Tell me, oh, tell me, has he pass'd your way?  
(SC 4)

In this respect, Colin P. Thompson remarks that,

It is clear that San Juan took considerable liberties with the Biblical text in the creation of his poem. He used the *Song* not as a whole, but as a quarry from which he could draw his poetic material. He was not interested in preserving the sequence of images he found in the *Song*, but in the evocative quality of each, and where he thought it right he reshuffled them and altered them. (69)

Stanzas 14 and 15 are the most significant regarding the Bridegroom's [Christ] creative power, portraying him as the source of life through the bride's words [the human soul]. In his own commentary on *Spiritual Canticle*, Saint John explains that,

[in these two stanzas] the Bride says that her Beloved [Christ] is all these things, both in Himself and also for her. [...] It must be understood that each of these grandeurs which are spoken of is God, and they are all of them God; for, inasmuch as in this case the souls is united with God, it feels that all things are God in one simple being [...]. (76-77)

Saint John is expressing in his verses the doctrine that the presence and being of God may be read in the natural order. His creation and creatures testify to His existence. As Thompson adds,

Nature does not provide the colouring for human emotions, but seems rather to be a participant in the unfolding drama, a protagonist independent of the others. In this sense she is 'outside' the poem's action: not as a passive onlooker, but as a force to be reckoned with in the course of the search the poem is describing [...] Nature is endowed with the power of speech. Woods, thickets, and flowery meadows are questioned to see if the Beloved has passed through them [...]. (99)

A feature of the *Canticle* is the lack of logical order of the stanzas, due to the influence of Hebrew syntax used by Saint John who tries to imitate in his verses the Hebrew syntactical structure from the hypotext. In this attempt of “Hebraizing” his *Canticle*, Luce López Baralt suggests that,

The ‘Canticle’ literary doubles the nuptial mystery because we noticed that reading is the work of a single author [...] a Renaissance writes composing an Italian style poem which its content is more biblical and Semitic than European. (38)

Saint John’s version may have been based on earlier translated versions of *Song of Songs* from Hebrew into Latin and vernacular, or he might have also attended courses on Hebrew language at Salamanca University between 1565 and 1566 which allowed him to read the original version (Rodríguez-San Pedro Bezares 249). Thus, he retains the Hebrew syntactic scheme and applies it into Castilian directly, in a similar way that other contemporary authors had done with Latin (Ynduráin, “Mi amado” 171). This can be observed in the absence of the Spanish verb *ser* (to be) particularly in stanza 14 which consists exclusively of nominal phrases. This poetic construction is due to the arbitrariness of the Hebrew language pertaining to the use of the verb ‘to be’. Although “to be” exists as a form, the verb is usually omitted in written and verbal input. The Semitic syntactical structure Saint John employs provides textual parallels in both content and style with the source narrative:

My love [is] as the hills,  
The lonely valleys clad with forest-trees,  
The rushing, sounding hills,  
Strange isles in distant seas,  
Lover-like whispering, murmurs of the breeze.

My love [is] hush-of-night,  
[Is] dawn’s first breathings in the heav’n above,  
Still music veil’d from sight,  
Calm that can echo move,  
The feast that brings new strength—the feast of love.  
(SC 14-15)

This similar, yet different structure shared by both pieces in the geographical and temporal settings, is also reflected in the conception of the characters. The description of the protagonists and the allegorical meaning of several concepts—the dove, the human eye, and wine—in *Spiritual Canticle* represent two main features that distinguish both works, providing Saint John’s poem with a well defined Christian message. The main characters of the hypotext are King Solomon, the Shulamite and her beloved, as well as a choir formed by a group of maidens and the brothers of the beloved.<sup>7</sup> Their physical descriptions are very abundant in details, especially concerning the young maiden. Saint John’s hypertext, however, disregards the physical descriptions of the protagonists. The *Canticle*’s bride does not receive the physical attention that the young Shulamite does. This detail, as noted by José C. Nieto, is there because “Jewish anthropology is not ascetic and not ashamed of the body, a creation of God” (106). The Spanish mystic only maintains one common feature between the bride and the Shulamite from *Song of Songs*—the bride’s dark skin. Moreover, the verse repeated is taken directly from the Vulgate Latin version used by Saint John for his *Canticle*. Additionally, the apology for the dark skin in stanza 33 is similar to popular ballads compiled in the Spanish *Romancero*. As stated by Dámaso Alonso, this feature did not appear in cult lyric that regarded blonde colour to beauty (107):<sup>8</sup>

Despise not my humble ways,  
For if my colour is brown,  
On me you may well gaze,  
For your look is the crown,  
Of every grace and beauty I have. (SC 33)

The geographical origin of Husband and wife from the hypertext are unknown; the latter does not form part of a harem of women as occurs in the hypotext and Saint John does not include the figure of the king. This absence of the character of Solomon allows



the poet to avoid the geo-political element of the biblical text from his poem, thus enhancing its Christian message. Finally, the chorus of the hypertext is formed by a group of shepherds and by nature, who the bride addresses directly:

Ye shepherds, soon to be  
 Among those sheepcotes on the hillside high,  
 If ye perchance should see  
 Him that I love pass by,  
 Say to him that I suffer, grieve and die. (SC 2)

*Spiritual Canticle* reflects several symbolic love images adopted from *Song of Songs*. The different symbols and figures used by Saint John stand for one or more abstract ideas, more or less popularly attributed to it. The idea conveyed by these symbols is in direct relation to the main theme of love, of union and of transformation. They are centred on the lovers either expressing their own personal characteristics, which contribute to their union, or indicating the actions and media necessary to attain this end. However, I will argue here that these are employed with a different allegorical meaning than portrayed in the biblical text. These images refer to the metaphor of the dove, the eye, and the wine. As it happened with the Christian meaning of nature provided by Saint John in which Christ is reflected as the Creator of life, he envelops these three love-related concepts with the same Christian message in the *Canticle*.

The symbol of the dove was used as an emblem of love in previous lyric traditions: it was the bird of Syrian goddesses Ishtar and Astarte, the Greek goddess Aphrodite, and the Roman Venus (Ferber 61). It represents affection as well as virtue, purity, innocence and happiness. The young Shulamite and her beloved are portrayed on several occasions as a dove in the hypotext. She is described as having “dove’s eyes”, and like a dove, she is high up on the mountain out of reach, but is nevertheless nearby.<sup>9</sup> Both expressions suggested to Jewish exegesis that “just as clear eyes indicate physical health, so Israel has

religious leaders—the eyes of the community—who will lead them to spiritual health” (Kravitz and Olitzky 10). Similarly, her beloved appears personified as a dove descending from heaven in the Shulamite’s garden.<sup>10</sup> The *Targum* interpreted this verse as the acceptance of the prayers of the prophets and the people by God. Like a person gathering lilies from the garden, God has gathered His people from Babylonia by bringing them out of exile through the actions of leaders such as Cyrus, Ezra, and the elders of Judah (Kravitz and Olitzky 72). In Christian exegesis, Origen of Alexandria was the first exegete to relate the dove with the Holy Spirit in his commentary on the *Song of Songs*: “[...] for the dove is the emblem of the Holy Spirit to understand the Law and the Prophets in a spiritual sense, therefore to have the eyes of a dove” (170). Furthermore, he emphasized the meaning of love and fidelity attributed to this creature:

They say it is the nature of the turtle-dove that the male bird never mates with any female but one, and the female similarly will not suffer more than a single mate; [...]. This bird spends its life in the more hidden and remote localities, away from crowds; it loves either mountain wastes, or the secret parts of the forests, is always found far from the multitude, and it is stranger to crowds. (146, 241)

Saint John employs the same image of the dove to conceive of it as a Christian symbol. In this case, to embody the bride through her bridegroom’s words like a dove flying over nature:

[Bride] Withdraw thy gaze apart,  
 For, lo! I soar aloft.  
 [Bridegroom] Return, my love!  
 See where the stricken hart  
 Looks from the hill above  
 What time he hears thy beating wings, my dove!  
 (SC 13)

The scene of the flight by the *Canticle*’s wife or human soul can be interpreted as the moment of ecstasy in her union with her Husband or

Christ. Through this mystical encounter the soul reaches the Divine. In this sense, the symbol of the dove is directly linked to the flight image; both symbolize the elevation of the soul, a constant of the Christian tradition, and in this particular stanza are employed together to enhance the meaning of purity. The flight, like the dove, becomes a pure element, while the ground or earth is stained and degrading, clouding the mind. As Duke Mancho adds, “in ascending air, the soul is released and purified, stripped of imperfections [...] and allows air to immerse itself in the solitude of the Godhead, deepened in the celestial spaces while transforming the spirit” (242, 246). Furthermore, this Christian message is also connected to several images from the New Testament such as Mary offering two doves after the birth of Christ, and the Holy Spirit descending on Christ at His baptism, enhancing its loving meaning in Christian terms (Stewart 138).<sup>11</sup> Like the young shepherd descending in the form of a dove in the Shulamite’s garden, the *Canticle’s* turtledove (human soul) returns to her Beloved (Christ) who is waiting in a green and flowery place that evokes the Garden of Eden:<sup>12</sup>

See, where the milk-white dove  
Bears to the ark the pledge of flood-freed ground,  
And the comrade of her love  
The turtle-dove has found,  
On verdant banks, with pastures all around.  
(SC 34)

Along with the dove, the eye image is also borrowed in *Spiritual Canticle*. The eye is the part of the face that receives more descriptions in both poems, expressing feelings, physical sensation and perception (Ferber 71). However, Saint John portrays this image with a Christian message based on biblical exegesis by Spanish contemporary spiritual writers such as Fray Luis de León and Benito Arias Montano. To do so, he projects the Hebrew word for eye (*ayin*) in a physical sense: firstly, like a stream or source, and secondly with a deeper value, by adding the adjective

‘crystalline’.<sup>13</sup> This is shown in stanza 12 where he employs a personification with the image of Christ as a *crystalline sparkling stream*:

O crystalline spring so fair,  
Might now within thy silvery depths appear,  
E’er as I linger there,  
Those features ever dear  
Which on my soul I carry graven clear!  
(SC 12)

This stream or fountain is, on the one hand clear like crystal water, and on the other hand a symbol of purity and faith of Christ the Husband, as the mystic poet describes in his commentary on the *Canticle*:

She calls faith ‘crystalline’ because it is from Christ, her Husband, and it has the properties of crystal in being pure in its truths, and strong, and clear, free from errors and natural forms [...] from it there flow to the souls the waters of all spiritual blessings. (65)

The image of the fountain has its roots in a long tradition from the fountain of Narcissus, and the beach or river in which shepherds reflect themselves to the pastoral character of Albano in Garcilaso de la Vega (Alonso 33). The reader therefore encounters the allegorical image of the bride’s soul who tries to enter into the crystal clear waters in the hope of encountering the face of God, “those features ever dear” (SC 12: 4; Ellis 64). As Helmut A. Hatzfeld says,

the only desire of the soul is that the fountain of faith, whose dark depths contain Christ and His mysteries, becomes transparent and shows the eyes that look at her, the eyes of Christ, that is, the rays of His divine essence. (56)

This image, which appears in previous works such as Plotinus’ *Enneads*, is adapted by Saint John to project water as a purifying element used by the bride [human soul] to wash herself in preparation for her sacred marriage with her Bridegroom [Christ].<sup>14</sup> It also

represents the Holy Spirit entering in the believer who accepts Christ's message of salvation as it appears in the New Testament.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, the image of the stream that bathes the Garden of Eden with fresh water in *Song of Songs* symbolizes the four major rivers of antiquity, the origin of life, and Israel.<sup>16</sup> They also portray the physical cleansing of the female's body, an important part of woman's daily obligations in traditional Judaism.<sup>17</sup>

The last symbol to analyze is the metaphor of wine, also found in both poems. Wine has been represented in classical literature as Dionysus's blood offered to the gods, as well as being synonymous with love in classical works like Ovid's *Ars Amandi* (Ferber 237). In Genesis, it embodied one of God's gifts to humanity along with wheat. Jewish exegesis interpreted the image of wine as a perfect union between two lovers, established by the Old Covenant between God and Israel.<sup>18</sup> The first image of wine in *Song of Songs* appears in the first verse with an erotic connotation: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth / for thy love is better than wine" (1: 2). The Shulamite's love is more intense and deeper than the well being sensation caused by this drink. Later on, the vineyards are used not only as a geographical setting of the poem, but also as a mechanism to describe the Shulamite's body by her beloved. In this case, it is represented in a more physical manner to evoke the covenant between Israel and the Lord:

[...] Thy breasts shall be as clusters of the vine,  
And the smell of thy nose like apples;  
And the roof of thy mouth like the best wine for my beloved,  
That goeth down sweetly,  
Causing the lips of those that are asleep to speak.  
(SS 7: 8-9)

The relationship between wine and the allegory of marriage amid God and Israel is observed on three terms that appear metaphorically intertwined in the biblical text. They derive from the same morphological root [*k-d-sh*]: *kiddush*, *kiddushin* and *kaddosh* (Pike 129). These three concepts do not

appear explicitly in the text, however, their combination through allegorical images projected on the young Shulamite, her lover and the wine emphasize the symbolic idea of this holy marriage between Jehovah and Israel. The *kiddush* ceremony, or *sanctification*, is the prayer recited during the blessing over the wine at the opening of the Sabbath. This celebration is central to Jewish life, and serves as a reminder of the world's creation and the covenant between God and the Jewish people. Hebrew literature and poetry sometimes refer to the Sabbath as a bride, which commemorates the covenant between Yahweh and Israel (Dosick 127). The next term is *kiddushin*, or *holiness*, which refers to the marriage ceremony. And lastly, *kaddosh*, or *sacred*, relates to the Holy Ark or Ark of the Covenant (*Aron HaKodesh*) that contained the Ten Commandments that sealed the sacred pact between God and the Israelites. These three concepts are reflected metaphorically in the following verse:

[Shulamite]: I would lead thee and bring thee  
Into the house of my mother,  
She who used to instruct me.  
I would cause thee to drink of spiced wine,  
The nectar of my pomegranate.  
...  
[...] I awakened you under the apple tree.  
(SS 8: 2, 5)

The *Targum* interpreted this verse with the Messianic era. The people of Israel, personified in the young Shulamite, speak to the Messiah, and together they will bring him to the Temple where he will teach Israel to fear the Divine and walk in the way of God (Kravitz and Olinski 95). The allegorical figures employed in the stanza establish the use of these three symbolic terms with the ideas of marriage; the young Shulamite invites her beloved into "the house of my mother" (SS 8, 2: 2). This place represents the holy (*kaddosh*) setting in which the couple meets to consume their union. The image evokes the Holy Temple built in Jerusalem in which the



Ark of the Covenant was placed to remind the Israelites of their agreement with God. Then she offers her beloved “to drink of spiced wine, / the nectar of my pomegranate” (SS 8, 2: 4-5). The expression “spiced wine” comes from the Hebrew *yayin harekah*, and it is used to describe the traditional cup of wine mixed with perfume and aromatic liquors drunk by the bride and groom during the Jewish wedding ceremony. The young Shulamite is described throughout the poem as a bride (*kalah*) by her lover. This analogy intensifies her role as a spouse within this holy union with her shepherd. It also permits the couple to be perceived as husband and wife, reminding the reader of the *kiddushin* or marriage ceremony. Finally, the last image employed, the wine (*kiddush*), appears throughout the poem to highlight this sacred union consummated “under the apple tree” (SS 8: 5).

In *Spiritual Canticle*, Saint John uses the same sensual image of the wine related to marriage as appears in the hypotext. However, he portrays it by reflecting the Christian message of the union of the bride and bridegroom, personified in Christ and the human soul. Like the couple from *Song of Songs* they celebrate their spiritual union with “spiced wine”, and fulfilled “beneath the apple-flower”:

[Bride]: [...] To taste thy spiced wine,  
To be anointed with thy balm divine.

Within his secret store,  
Of my beloved drank I deep indeed.

...  
[Bridegroom]: Beneath the apple-flower  
To plight my troth to thee, my love, I came.

...  
[Bride]: Mount we at last on high  
Ev'n to the caverns of the rocky mine.  
Enter we, thou and I,  
Those secret haunts divine,  
To drink of the pomegranate's ruddy wine.  
(SC 17: 4-5; 18: 1-2; 29: 1-2; 37)

“The house of my mother” (8: 2) shown in *Song of Songs* that symbolizes the Holy Temple, is replaced by the Christian mystic with the expression “caverns of the rocky mine”

(36: 2). This rock represents Christ as exposed in the writings of Saint Paul.<sup>19</sup> The deep caverns contain the mysteries of Christ. The bride does not enter alone in the cave but asks her bridegroom to come along with her. They both take part in this holy entrance (*kaddosh*), and ascending to the rock they prepare to celebrate their encounter like a married couple (*kiddushin*). By tasting together the wine of the pomegranates they illustrate the joy of their sacred mutual love (*kiddush*) embodied, in this case, in the Christian Eucharist. The term “new wine” (*adobado vino*) used by Saint John relates to the “spiced wine” from the biblical source.<sup>20</sup> The author projects a literal meaning of this expression in his commentary on the *Canticle*:

This spiced wine is another and far greater favour which God grants at times to souls that have made progress, inebriating them in the Holy Spirit with a wine of love that is sweet, delectable and strong, for the which cause she calls it spiced wine (324).

This Christian interpretation of the “new wine”, unlike the Old Covenant where it symbolizes the union between God and Israel and the world to come, in Saint John's poem it enhances the New Covenant from the New Testament under the figure of Christ, overshadowing the former (Monferrer Sala 363).<sup>21</sup> The wine, like spiced perfume, consecrates the spiritual union between the couple through the sacrament of the Eucharist. Through this way, Saint John manages to illuminate to his Christian audience the significance of this sacred union. The human soul (wife) and Christ (Husband) reach their final destination, becoming a marriage, in a single holy bond and communion.

## Final remarks

*Spiritual Canticle* is without a doubt one of the most symbolic and representative poems of the sixteenth century Spanish mysticism. Saint John of the Cross, as evidenced by *Song of Songs*, created a mystical poem

during a period of time where the emerging aesthetic and philosophical ideas of Platonism dominated, leading to an amalgam of secular and Christian elements. These secular and religious works shared the same rhythm, vocabulary and themes. As the rest of his contemporary mystics, Saint John's human soul's goal was its union with God. The way to pursue this was through Christ, and love became the driving force and central message of the poet's work. Thus, taking the two lovers from *Song of Songs* Saint John projected in his *Canticle* the symbol of the union of soul with its transcendent and crystalline source, combining the Neo-Platonist aesthetics with Christian mysticism. Through allegorical interpretation and using the translation of the biblical account, Saint John provided his hypertext with a Christ-centered view, where the figures of Jehovah and Israel from Hebrew exegesis are transformed into Christ and the human soul. The message of the Old Covenant between God and His people set out from the exodus from Egypt, is now transformed by the poet into a New Covenant between Christ and the human soul, remaining in line with Christian exegesis. Christ guarantees the gift of the Spirit and the Father's love, and He becomes the ultimate way to achieve union with God. Love becomes the instrument that enables this mystical union, and therefore, this use of love in the *Canticle* is the mechanism to bridge the gap between the human being (soul) and the Divine (Christ). Saint John's interpretation of some symbolic images is used to project the message of Christ's love and his marriage to the soul. The landscape and nature represent Christ as the creative source of life. The dove is the symbol of the couple's immaculate love, and the Holy Spirit. The crystal fountain and the eye symbolize the purity of the Husband, while the spiced wine seals the couple's sacred union. The arch-typical image of the beloved couple simplifies, in an effective manner, the mysterious and love relationship between God and the human soul in a similar approach to the more profane version of the hypotext. In this way, Saint

John captivates the attention of his audience in order to incite them to begin, with courage and resolution, the arduous ascetic path that prepares the human soul for its encounter with the Divine.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Saint John wrote the first 31 stanzas of the poem during his captivity in Toledo in 1578. After his release from prison he moved temporarily to Baeza, in the southern province of Jaén where he might have written stanzas 32 to 34 (Macdonald 167; Ynduráin 2002: xxxiv-xxxvi). In 1584, during his stay in Granada he added five more stanzas by request of a Carmelite nun from the convent, as well as a comprehensive review of his *Canticle*. Later on, Saint John reshaped and expanded the text altering the order of some stanzas and redirecting certain passages of the poem. The result was a second version of the poem made of 40 stanzas and known as *Canticle B* or *Codex of Jaén*, while the first version, containing 39 stanzas became known as *Canticle A* or *Codex of Sanlúcar de Barrameda* (Tavard 37). The first complete edition of his *Canticle* was published in 1630 (Ynduráin, "Introducción" xxiii). This article has used the version of *Canticle A* from the translated text *The Spiritual Canticle & Poems* by Allison Peers, following the order in which the stanzas were printed in the Sanlúcar codex, with Stanza XI added. The quotations from *Song of Songs* are extracted from the revised version of King James Bible edited by George Arthur Buttrick et al. The initials SS (*Song of Songs*) and SC (*Spiritual Canticle*) have been used to quote both works throughout the article.

<sup>2</sup>Gerard Genette defines *intertextuality* as "a relationship of co-presence between two texts or among several texts [...] the actual presence of one text within another" (1). As part of this connection the author distinguishes the relationship uniting a text B, known as *hypertext*, to an earlier text A or *hypotext* (5). The *hypotext* represents the source narrative, while the *hypertext* is a new version based on the *hypotext*.

<sup>3</sup>Some sources have ascribed *Song of Songs* to King Solomon; however, considering the topic of the text, this theory has been rejected. Most scholars agree with the idea of several scribes as the authors of the text who might have belonged to a poetic school during Solomon's reign between 970 and 930 BCE (Segal 481-82; Suarès 8).

<sup>4</sup>The word *shulamite* comes from the village of Shulam or Shunam, the girl's country home in the Galilee region (see Joshua 19: 18). It has also been connected with the words *shalom* (peace) and *Shalem* (perfect) in reference to the harmonious union of the spouses (Pike 158). It may also refer to the feminine form of *Solomon* (Jasper and Prickett 187).

<sup>5</sup>"My beloved is my cluster of henna blooms from the vineyards of Ein Gedi [...] and be thou like a roe or a young hart upon the mountains of Bethel. [...] King Solomon made himself a chariot of the wood of Lebanon" (1:14; 2:17; 3:9).

<sup>6</sup>These types of physical images are found in the hypotext: *vineyards* (1: 14), *trees of the wood* (2: 3), *mountains and hills* (2: 8), or *clefts of the rock* (2: 14).

<sup>7</sup>O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon. [...] Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where thou makest thy flock to rest at noon: for why should I be as one that turneth aside by the flocks of thy companions? (SS 1: 5-7)

<sup>8</sup>The Vulgate text reads as follows: "nolite me considerare quod fusca sim quia decoloravit me sol filii matris meae pugnaverunt contra me posuerunt me custodem in vineis vineam meam non custodivi" (SS 1: 6). The King James Version also translates the text directly from its Latin source: "Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me: my mother's children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept".

<sup>9</sup>Behold, thou art fair; thou hast dove's eyes [...] O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely [...] My dove, my undefiled is but one; she is the only one of her mother [...]. (SS 1: 15; 2: 14; 6: 9)

<sup>10</sup>"My beloved is gone down into his garden, to the beds of spices, to feed in the gardens, and to gather lilies" (SS 6: 2).

<sup>11</sup>Luke 2: 22-24:

And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every

male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves, or two young pigeons'.

Matthew 3:16: "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him".

<sup>12</sup>Marcel Bataillon affirms that since Aristotle and Pliny the Elder the symbols of the dove represented marital fidelity, was represented by the dove, not the turtledove, which was later on adopted by Christian patristic (291-306).

<sup>13</sup>The eye is one of the four bodily "fountains", the other three being mouth, skin and urethra. In the case of the eye, cleansing through tears is produced in estates of grief or sorrow, leading to a more spiritual purification (Hoffman 220; Pike 102).

<sup>14</sup>In Book I of the *Enneads*, the same purifying message of the soul can be found:

[...] When therefore the soul is purified, she becomes form and reason, altogether incorporeal, intellectual, and wholly of the divine order whence is the fountain of beauty and all that is akin thereto. [...] Therefore, we must investigate the beautiful and good, and the ugly and evil, by the same process; and in the highest rank we must place the Beautiful Itself, which is also the Good Itself, of which Intellect is the immediate emanation and the first beautiful thing. (I, Tractate 6)

<sup>15</sup>See Ephesians 5: 25-27:

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.

See John 7: 38: "Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them."

<sup>16</sup>These four main rivers are Arnon, Jabbok, Jordan, and Yarmuk (Kravitz and Olinski 52).

<sup>17</sup>The *Targum* associated the sealed fountain with the woman's chastity that is pure and preserved in her walled garden. This image of water

represents also a reference to one of women's *mitzvot* or commandments, the ritual immersion of Jewish women in the *mikvah* for their spiritual and physical cleansing (Kravitz and Olinski 54).

<sup>18</sup>Genesis 27: 28: "Therefore God give thee of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine."

<sup>19</sup>See 1 Corinthians 10: 4: "and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ."

<sup>20</sup>In the original version: "[...] al adobado vino, / emisiones de bálsamo divino. / En la interior bodega / de mi Amado bebí [...]" (SC 17: 4-5; 18: 1-2).

<sup>21</sup>See Matthew 2:22: "And no man putteth new wine into old bottles: else the new wine doth burst the bottles, and the wine is spilled, and the bottles will be marred: but new wine must be put into new bottles." The idea of wine as a couple's union in the New Testament takes all its essence at the scene of the *Wedding at Cana*. The miracle of changing water into wine at the wedding represents the new covenant and the sacrament of baptism as the new pact with God through Christ, replacing the old covenant at Mount Sinai (John 2: 7-10).

## Works Cited

- Alonso, Dámaso. *La poesía de San Juan de la Cruz*. Madrid: Aguilar, 1958. Print.
- Asún, Raquel. "Introduction." *Poesía completa y comentarios en prosa por San Juan de la Cruz*. Ed. Raquel Asún. Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 1989. xi-liii. Print.
- Bataillon, Marcel. "La tortolice de *Fontefrida* y del *Cántico espiritual*." *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* 8 (1953): 291-306. Print.
- Biblia Sacra Vulgata*. Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ané, 1921. Print.
- Buttrick, George Arthur et al., eds. *The Interpreter's Bible: the Holy Scriptures in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, vol. 5. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1957. Print.
- Cross, Saint John of the. *The Spiritual Canticle & Poems*. Tran. E. Allison Peers. London: Burns & Oats, 1978. Print.
- Cuevas García, Cristóbal, ed. *San Juan de la Cruz: Cántico espiritual; Poesías*. Madrid: Alhambra, 1979. Print.
- De la Cruz, San Juan. *Poesía completa y comentarios en prosa*. Ed. Raquel Asún. Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, S.A., 1989. Print.

- Dionysius, the Aeropagite. *On the Divine Names and Mystical Theology*. Tran. C. E. Rolt. Greek Text 1. New York: MacMillan, 1920. Print.
- Dosick, Rabbi Wayne D. *Living Judaism: The Complete Guide to Jewish Belief, Tradition, and Practice*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995. Print.
- Elia, Paola, and María Jesús Mancho, eds. *San Juan de la Cruz: Cántico Espiritual y Poesía Completa*. Barcelona: Crítica, 2002. Print.
- Ellis, Robert Richmond. *San Juan de la Cruz: Mysticism and Sartrean Existentialism*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1992. Print.
- Ferber, Michael. *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999. Print.
- Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. Print.
- Hatzfeld, Helmut Anthony. *Estudios literarios sobre mística española*. Madrid: Gredos, 1955. Print.
- Hertz, Dr. J. H., ed. *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*. New York: The Soncino Press, 1960. Print.
- Hoffman Joel M. *In the Beginning: A Short History of the Hebrew Language*. New York: New York UP, 2004. Print.
- Jasper David, and Stephen Prickett, eds. *The Bible and Literature: A Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1999. Print.
- Johnston, George. *Opening the Scriptures: A Journey through the Stories and Symbols of the Bible*. Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1992. Print.
- Kravitz S. Leonard, and Kerry M. Olitzky, eds. *Shir hashirim: A Modern Commentary of the Song of Songs*. Tran. Leonard S. Kravitz. New York: UJR Press, 2004. Print.
- López Baralt, Luce. *San Juan de la Cruz y el Islam: Estudio sobre las afiliaciones semíticas de su literatura*. México: Colegio de México, 1985. Print.
- Macdonald, Inez Isabel. "The Two Versions of the *Cántico Espiritual*." *The Modern Language Review* 25. 2 (1930): 165-184. Print.
- Mancho Duque, María Jesús. *Palabras y símbolos en San Juan de la Cruz*. Madrid: Universidad Pontificia Española; Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca, 1993. Print.
- Matter, E. Ann. *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1990. Print.
- McGinn, Bernard, ed. *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*. New York: The Modern Library, 2006. Print.

- Meek J., Theophile. Introduction. *The Interpreter's Bible: the Holy Scriptures in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*. Eds. George Arthur Buttrick et al. vol. 5. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1957. 91-98. Print.
- Monferrer Sala, Juan Pedro. "Un apunte sobre el símbolo del vino en el *Cántico Espiritual* de Juan de la Cruz." *Boletín de la Asociación Española de Orientalistas* 51 (2005): 359-364. Print.
- Nieto, José C. *Místico, poeta, rebelde, santo: En torno a San Juan de la Cruz*. México; Madrid; Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1979. Print.
- Origen of Alexandria. *The Song of Songs. Commentary and Homilies*. Tran. R. P. Lawson. New York: Pauline Press, 1957. Print.
- Pike, Samuel. *A Compendious Hebrew Lexicon Adapted to the English Language*. Cambridge: Hilliard and Metcalf., 1811. Print.
- Plotinus. *The Enneads*. Tran. Stephen MacKenna. 2nd ed. London: Faber & Faber, 1956. Print.
- Robinson, George L. "An Outline for Studying the Song of Songs." *The Biblical World* 20.3 (1902): 191-95. Print.
- Rodríguez-San Pedro Bezares, Luis Enrique. "La formación universitaria de San Juan de la Cruz." *Actas del Congreso Internacional Sanjuanista*. 2 vols. Valladolid: Junta de Castilla-León: 1993. 221-249. Print.
- Scholem, G. Greshom. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. New York: Schocken Books, 1961. Print.
- Segal, M.H. "The Song of Songs." *Vetus Testamentum* 12.4 (1962): 470-490. Print.
- Suarès, Carlo. *The Song of Songs: The Canonical Song of Solomon Deciphered According to the Original Code of the Qabala*. Berkeley; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1972. Print.
- Stewart, William. *Dictionary of Images and Symbols in Counselling*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1998. Print.
- Tavard, George H. *Poetry and Contemplation in Saint John of the Cross*. Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1988. Print.
- Thompson, Colin P. *The Poet and the Mystic: A Study of the Cántico Espiritual of San Juan de la Cruz*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977. Print.
- Wardropper, Bruce. *Historia de la poesía lírica a lo divino en la cristiandad occidental*. Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1958. Print.
- Ynduráin, Domingo. "Introducción." *San Juan de la Cruz: Cántico Espiritual y Poesía Completa*. Eds. Paola Elia, and María Jesús Mancho. Barcelona: Crítica, 2002. xxi-clii. Print.
- . "Mi amado las montañas." *Boletín de la Real Academia Española* 77 (1977): 165-196. Print.