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## **Comments**

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## Spain's Camino de Santiago: Dramatic Space for Literary Creation

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This project investigates the image of Spain's *Camino de Santiago* (The Way of Saint James) from a historical and literary point of view and in light of theories of space. It is postulated that the Camino serves as a dramatic space, a type of theatrical stage that serves as an integral backdrop for the production of many literary pieces throughout time. This stage set, or the image of the Camino, changes with the political and social ambiance of the historical moment. In this study four different types of literary works are considered: medieval legends of the Camino de Santiago; poetic literature from the thirteenth century which revolves around the miracles of the Virgin Mary; a short story, *El Camino de Santiago*, by Alejo Carpentier written in 1958 but set in the sixteenth century; and *The Pilgrimage*, a novel by Paulo Coelho, written and set at the end of the twentieth century.

These literary pieces reveal a geographical space inscribed with social and historical codes that unveil a variety of images. For example, in many of the legends set on this road the Camino serves as a dramatic space for outlining a Christian agenda and in addition, for justifying the war against the Muslims. In the *Canticles*, Alphonse the Wise as well as Gonzalo de Berceo paint the picture of a divine space for praising the Virgin Mary and also promoting Christian values. Carpentier creates a stage for exposing the contradictions inherent in Christian doctrine during Spain's Golden Age and Paulo Coelho illustrates the Road to Santiago as a venue for a rite of passage, an individual struggle for self-actualization. The image of the Camino created at different historical moments is important in the revelation of social commentaries and the world-view that emanates from literary works that highlight the Camino as an important backdrop.

The old adage, "All the world's a stage," has been a popular literary trope since Shakespearean times. John Gilles speaks of the relationship of theater and cartography in the Renaissance through the figure of the *Theatrum Mundi*; the stage was a globe and the Globe a theater. Peter Brook, theater director and theoretician, also touches on this metaphor, but from a different angle in his 1968 study on drama and spatial configurations entitled *The Empty Space*: "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (9). Traveling across an empty space is indeed the most basic description of what one does to a road. Those who walk along the Camino are often accompanied by fellow pilgrims, but many times they find themselves alone. Brook explains that in order for the "act of theater to be engaged" someone must be watching the one walking across the empty space. If we think of this spectator in literary terms, we may consider this spectator to be the reader, or metaphorically they may be considered the eye of society, or the great eye of the divine; thus, even a person walking solo is in some way being observed. For example, in one of the early legends of Saint James, the eyes from above watch and intervene in order to save; divine intervention serves as the foundation for the encounter between the bridegroom and the fishermen.

This anecdote entitled *La Vieira (The Scallop)* is bathed in an intermingling of historical fact and literary legend. After the death of Christ, the apostle James is said to have gone to Spain to spread the gospel. Upon his return to Jerusalem he was beheaded by Herod in AD 44. The remains of James were transported by sea back to Spain to be buried there. When the boat was approaching the coast of Galicia the sea was overcome by a strong storm. A wedding was taking place in town at that time and the groom noticed a struggling boat in dangerous waters. He jumped to the rescue upon his horse when suddenly a wave overtook him. The rider thought all was lost. However, he made a pious plea to the skies for deliverance and at that moment the sea became calm. The boat safely landed on shore and the groom emerged from the waters, still on horseback, the two of them covered in a lovely array of scallop shells. It was believed that these shells were a sure sign of divine intervention by Saint James (*Leyendas* 7).<sup>1</sup> This is only one of the many legends that set the initial stage for the image of the Road to Santiago; it promotes the figure of James as a miracle worker and thus reinforces the importance of the apostle and his Christian teachings in Spain.

The Road to Santiago, then, might be conceived as an outdoor, medieval theater space where, initially, Christian values were the main attraction. The Camino became an ideal venue for the expression of Christian ideals and for the promotion of Spain's war against the Moors; Saint James was eventually

crowned with the title, *Matamoros*, or Moor Slayer. Several legends depict Saint James as Commander in Chief of the Army or a fighting soldier. In one tale entitled *Santiago le aparece a Carlomagno* (Saint James appears to Charlemagne) James visits Charlemagne in a dream and outlines a mission for him: free the lands from the hands of the Moors. Charlemagne's troops kill more than a hundred thousand Muslims in a single battle according to one version of this legend. (*Leyendas* 9). Another legend, *Clavijo* narrates how Saint James, always mounted on a white horse, fought alongside King Ramiro I on the Camino in the battle of Clavijo to defeat the Muslim troops of Abderramán II. This battle dubs Saint James as Patron Saint of the Reconquest.

These legends manifest the road to Santiago as what might be termed a "holy theater" featuring scenes in a territorial and holy war. In his fore mentioned study, *The Empty Space*, Brook outlines different types of "empty spaces" on the stage that are transformed into theatrical experiences. Among them is included the Holy Theater or what he terms "The Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible: the notion that the stage is a place where the invisible can appear..." (42). He explains that many spectators have reported a sensation of transcendence after "they have seen the face of the invisible through an experience on the stage..." (42). Brook exposes a few examples of an experience of the "invisible" as translated through colors, sounds, music and movement. William Egginton touches on the same topic from a metaphorical perspective in his study, *How the World Became a Stage*. He speaks of the insertion of medieval experience in modern theatrical spatiality in terms of "the crypt." For Egginton, the presence of the past in the spaces of the present has the power to invoke "the miraculous." He states that "the crypt is also that which responds to and guides the visual desire to reveal that which remains concealed; it is the promise of *reality* in a world of endless illusion" (7). As concerns the literary works set on the Camino, this "face of the invisible" or the invocation of "the crypt" might be likened to the supernatural figures that appear in legends and other medieval writings. The didactic function of literary and cultural production in the Middle Ages vied for the transformation of the individual through religious conversion mediated by such ethereal figures as the Virgin Mary or Saint James, among others. The expectation was that those who witnessed or heard about the miracles, i.e., experienced the power of the invisible, would be transformed and vow to lead a more Christian lifestyle; theoretically, a more orderly society would emerge which would in turn uplift humanity.

In this light, the *Cantigas de Santa María* (Canticles of Saint Mary) and the *Miracles of Our Lady* "make visible" an essentially invisible entity, the Virgin Mary, in order to illustrate that the correct road to follow in life is the one founded on Christian ideals. One particular miracle is narrated in poetic verse both by Alphonse X in Canticle #26 and by Gonzalo de Berceo in Miracle #8: "The Pilgrim Deceived by the Devil." The story comes from the oral tradition and is one of the most well known anecdotes regarding the Camino de Santiago. It emphasizes the importance of confession as a Christian practice and reveals catastrophic results for those who fail to repent their sins, in this case the sin of sex outside of matrimony. Mary is seen as an important intermediary and judge in the salvation of the pilgrim who lost his soul due to a trick by the devil. The devil impersonates Saint James and urges the pilgrim to cut off his genitals and behead himself as an appropriate penance for his vile behavior. The pilgrim, who had failed to confess his sin before setting out on the Camino, complies with the devil's requests in good faith believing that he is doing the will of God. James is appalled at the deception and confronts the devil while he and his followers are carrying the soul of the pilgrim to the fires. The poetic voice in Miracle #8 by Berceo narrates:

They were carrying it (the soul), and not gently;  
Saint James, whose pilgrimage it was, saw it;  
he came out in great haste to the road  
and stood before them in the front rank.

"Free," he said, "oh evil ones, the prisoner that you carry,  
for he is not quite as surely yours as you think;..."

Had you not told him that you were Saint James,  
had you not shown him the sign of my scallop shells,  
he would not have harmed his body with his own scissors  
nor would he lie as he lies, outside the road. (Berceo 51-52)

The Virgin Mary is called upon to hear the case in the dispute between St. James and the devil and each presents his arguments before her. She is the intermediary with authority and states her final judgment:

The soul over which you have the dispute  
Shall return to its body and do penance,  
Then as he merits shall he be judged. (52)

It is interesting to note that the pilgrim lies "outside the road" when he is dead and immediately upon resuscitation after the verdict read by the Virgin, he repents, requests his backpack and regains his place back on the Road to Santiago. The image of the Camino is that of a golden ladder that leads to life and the spaces off-road are conceived as potential pitfalls which may lead to death at any given moment. The pilgrim was spared his life, but he remains castrated. The message rings clear: straying from the correct path, interpreted as the Christian way or the Way of Santiago may result in dire consequences. This legend illustrates that even a repentant sinner could be pardoned and at the same time severely punished for his mortal crime. Such stories may be interpreted as a means of social control by instilling a sense of fear of the unknown in the individual; there is no escaping the ever-watching eyes from above, the invisible made visible, the presence of the crypt, in these poems staged on the Camino.<sup>2</sup>

The development of the Camino provided not only for the creation of a religious literary space; geographically it became a center for economic, cultural and political activity. This is evident in Alejo Carpentier's 1958 story entitled *El Camino de Santiago*, which is set in the sixteenth century. Juan, the protagonist is so distracted by his drive for economic gain that his original motive for walking on the Camino, his religious sojourn, is converted into an endless wandering, a search for adventure and material gains. The Camino in this literary piece ultimately becomes "the road not taken." However, it remains as a constant point of reference, a counterpoint to the road that leads the protagonist to the New World, one of deceit and injustice. The Camino in this piece can be viewed as a stage for exposing the contradictions inherent in "Christian" practices during the age of Spanish exploration and expansionism.

In his previously mentioned study on theatricality and spatiality, William Egginton outlines the notion of mimetic space during the Renaissance. Based on the Aristotelian concept of mimesis, he explains it as a space in which actors are charged with the responsibility of communicating their truth in special ways in which "spectators can see their own 'conversations, givings and takings and passions of the soul' played out for them in ways that are recognizable because they imitate their own" (102). Spectators, or readers in this case, who witness the wanderings of Juan de Amberes through and around the Camino de Santiago see a humanistic portrait of a character more concerned with material reality than spiritual offerings. It is easy to identify with Juan in light of his decisiveness as he undertakes the noble task of walking the Camino in religious gratitude for having been cured from the fevers of the plague. It is also just as easy to relate to his change of heart when a better opportunity arises; his spiritual promise to walk through the doors of the Cathedral in Santiago is indefinitely deferred. The roads which lead him away from his goal of reaching Santiago, however constantly direct his attention back to the Camino and at the same time serve as the background for illustrating acts performed by the Inquisition and reveal discriminatory attitudes and actions toward all groups who do not conform to the dominant religious ideology. Thus, the historical and social circumstances that encompass Juan's steps on and off the Camino are highlighted. For example, there are many references in the text, given with ironic overtones, that point to the "war against the heretics, enemies of our saintly religion" (34).<sup>3</sup> At one point the narrator speaks in detail of the beheading of more than six hundred Calvinists in the New World and reminds the reader that Juan de Amberes, as a trooper in the army of the Duke of Alba, already had seen hundreds of Lutherans burned alive in Flanders as well as many women buried alive (41-42). The descriptions of violent acts starkly contrast with the peaceful image of a pilgrim walking on a holy road. Thus, on the one hand, the Camino historically represents the pure spirit and healing power of the disciples of Christ, demonstrated in the medieval legends and poetic miracles of the thirteenth century. On the other hand, the destructive acts performed by ecclesiastical bodies such as the Inquisition in Carpentier's *Camino de Santiago* point to contradictory practices and put into question the starry image of the Road to Santiago.

The geographic and astronomical correlation of the Camino with the stars of the Milky Way reinforces its designation as a natural, divine space. But, in the narrative descriptions the Camino is outlined as an absent presence, an important spatial reference that implies it is indeed present yet

unreachable and out of sight, like stars on a cloudy day. Such a technique might be likened to an inversion of Brook's concept of the "invisible-made-visible" which in this narrative instance becomes the "visible-made-invisible" at certain moments to relay Juan's personal trajectory. For example, the Camino is often described in relation to Juan's actions; as he walks the Camino he begins to contemplate discontinuing the journey at one point. When he starts filling his water jug with wine instead of water the narrator announces: "In the sky, the Camino de Santiago is forever painted. But Juan, with his wine in hand, enlivening his spirit doesn't see the starry field any more like he did the night the plague crept up on him with a shivering warning of punishment for his many sins" (21). Then, when he arrives in Burgos and makes the definite decision not to continue his pilgrimage, the narrator states that "the many clouds that hover over the city that night hide the Camino de Santiago" (28). The changing face of the Camino, its fluctuating presence and absence, serves as foreshadowing of the events to come that culminate in a dream Juan has in the eighth chapter. He finds himself entering the city of Santiago and sees the towers of the cathedral rising so high as to become lost in the clouds. The vultures slowly flying next to the towers are described as "black crosses that float as dark omens" (49). He approaches the entrance to the cathedral and tries to open the doors, but they are locked. In a rage he pounds and scratches on the door and then he flails on the floor like one who is possessed, sobbing and screaming "Santiago!" This scene is a presage of Juan's destiny; his subconscious desire to complete his pilgrimage is fogged in by the realities of his character. The Road to Santiago no longer exists for him; it is a space of infinite contradiction and indecision.<sup>4</sup> The Camino outlined in Carpentier's work paints the picture of a world which historically permeates sixteenth century Spain, an imperial power entrenched in religious splendor, by all appearances and at the same time, equally enmeshed in worldly intrigue.

William Egginton emphasizes the importance of cultural and historical aspects when considering theoretical ramifications in the study of theater and spatial considerations. Basing his ideas on Heidegger's notion of spatiality, Egginton affirms that individuals "do not order their world within the confines of a pre-given but neutral space, but rather this pre-given but neutral space is one historical manifestation of the individuals' *spatiality*: the experience of space that underlies their interactions in the world and that is specific to their own (culturally and historically specific) world. The individuals' experience of space, their specific spatiality, comes to them via the ordinary, everyday practices and conventions peculiar to their world" (4). Thus, the image of the Camino created in literary works is modified according to cultural and historical circumstances. The depiction of the Camino in medieval times remains in contrast with its literary manifestation in the Golden Age as seen in the medieval legends and poetry as opposed to the piece by Carpentier set in the Renaissance.

In contrast to these literary works and times, the Road to Santiago as a dramatic space for the twentieth century is depicted in Paolo Coehlo's 1987 novel, *The Pilgrimage: A Contemporary Quest for Ancient Wisdom*. In this novel the Camino is seen as a route that leads the main character through a rite of passage.<sup>5</sup> His mission is to find his sword, a metaphor for the secret mission of finding himself through a series of tests and exercises. This twentieth century Camino promises the ultimate experience of self-actualization. His guide is not the figure of Saint James incarnate, nor the Virgin Mary, but rather a man named Petrus, who he later finds out is one of Europe's foremost designers of the times; a modern day guru. He is also a member of the mysterious Order of the RAM (Rigor, Adoration, Merci or *regnum, agnus, mundi*), a secret society of the "Tradition" to which both he and the protagonist, Paolo belong. Petrus guides Paolo on the Camino and leads him through the necessary exercises for contacting the inner self; this journey will be one of discipline, reflection, meditation and self-examination.<sup>6</sup>

In this light, the novel may also be conceived as a type of self-help manual. At the end of almost every other chapter there is a list of detailed instructions on how to do the very same exercises and meditations that Paolo is instructed to do by Petrus at certain points on the Camino. There are a total of eleven activities outlined that range from the Seed Exercise, similar to certain yoga practices, to the Blue Sphere Exercise, a meditation on love and world peace. Theoretically and practically, the reader may follow the Camino so to speak in their own home by performing the same rituals indicated in the text. The "empty space" of the home, then, may be conceived as a type of personal stage, a dramatic space for visualizing a walk on the Camino. The reader is implied as an active participant in Paolo's journey, a fellow pilgrim who has the potential to experience his walk in the comfort of their own personal space.

Along the route Paolo discovers his inner power and other strange powers that take possession of him. In one adventure he is given the gift of tongues and serves as exorcist; he expels the demons from a town cursed by a gypsy fifty years earlier. Paolo vows that the foreign language that overtook him had protected him from the dog possessed by the demons. Early on Paolo is advised by Petrus to pay

close attention to the road because “It is the road that teaches us...and the road enriches us as we walk its length” (40-41). These words personify the Camino as a teacher and nurturing mother. The Road in essence is a character playing a vital role in Paolo’s quest for wisdom and at the same time it is an open “empty” space for traveling and reflecting. It is a dramatic backdrop for self-transformation. The image of the road as both a character and a dramatic space emphasizes the Camino’s versatility as an entity characterized in the context of the 1990s: Eventually Paolo will become “one with the Road.”

Just before he is about to find his sword, he makes several references to a miraculous phenomenon: “After so much time spent walking the Road to Santiago, the Road began to ‘walk me’” (253). The image of the Camino is one of a friend holding his hand: he is his friend and his friend is himself; they are one. This is Paolo’s sense of total surrender to the Will of the Way. He recovers his sword not in the holy city of Santiago, but in a humble chapel near El Cebrero, one of the highest crossing points on the Road to Santiago. This is significant in the rendering of the world-view of the novel: It is not the glorious destination that counts but rather the true license is found in the journey itself, in this case, the personal communion with the Camino de Santiago.

The legends, poetry and narrative pieces explored in this study are just a few of the many works that feature Spain’s Camino de Santiago as a dramatic space for literary production. The world-view painted in these works is testimony of an historical moment. The many literary images that evolve around this road – the golden ladder to salvation, a starry road of contradictions, the road not taken or a catwalk to the self – verify the Camino’s capacity as an empty page for the staging of dramatic scenes in infinite literary worlds.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> To this day, the scallop shell is an adornment worn on backpacks or around the neck that identifies pilgrims on their way to the city of Santiago.

<sup>2</sup> The anecdotes presented in the *Miracles of Our Lady* and the *Canticles* are extremely imaginative and possess a high theatrical quality; both Canticle 26 and Miracle #8 contain extensive verbal interchanges among the characters depicted. In the introduction to the translation of *Miracles of Our Lady*, Richard Mount and Annette Cash speak of the dramatic design of the *Miracles*...which are set on the Camino and explain that the works were designed to be recited or even acted out keeping in mind an audience of religious pilgrims.

<sup>3</sup> All quotes from Carpentier’s text are my translation.

<sup>4</sup> Carpentier’s work can also be looked at in light of the year it was written: 1958, a key moment in the history of his native land, Cuba. It is a historical moment of turmoil and ideological clashes and contradictions prior to the Revolution in 1959.

<sup>5</sup> Shirley MacLaine’s book, *The Camino: A Journey of the Spirit* might also be looked at in this light.

<sup>6</sup> Paolo’s plight, as his name suggests, might also be likened to the Biblical Paul and his conversion on the road to Damascus.

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