

In Search of Paradise: Time and Eternity in Alfonso X's Cantiga 103

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Those who have studied the thirteenth-century Spanish text of the *Cantigas de Santa María*, attributed to King Alfonso X, recognize in that colorfully-illustrated text –which Richard Kinkade considers “one of the four most eminent, yet characteristic creations of the thirteenth century” (95)–¹ a compendium of religious thought, social norms, and legends prevalent in European Christian society of the time. Indeed, as has been noted by scholars such as Keller & Cash and Snow, the Learned King’s musical text gives modern readers insight into a wide variety of topics, concepts, and everyday customs as understood by Alfonso and his court. We are presented, for example, with songs about such mundane happenings as men playing ball in a park and a young boy falling in love (song 42), or a monk who secretly steals away to the monastery library one night to enjoy the pleasures of wine (47). We also find such pious topics as the personal reformation of a lustful knight (137), or a prisoner’s composition of Marian music (291). As a musical form of monastic devotional literature, the collection of cantigas also presents the reader with orthodox theological teaching promulgated by the Church during the thirteenth century: such cantigas as 306 and 320, the former of which recounts the story of a heretic who is cleansed of his lack of belief in the virginity of Mary, and the latter praising Mary for restoring the goodness to earth that Eve had taken away, respond to the ecclesiastic debates and formation of doctrine that were taking place during these years of the Central Middle Ages. In response to the formation of Catholic dogma taking place at this time, Greenia very nicely states that Alfonso X designated himself a “national broker in the economy of salvation” and that “he seemingly felt that he owed it to his people to serve them in facilitating their salvation.” His *Cantigas* “formed an ongoing project for the religious welfare of the masses, and as an unobtrusive educational tool” (340).

As Dales has pointed out, one of the great theological discussions of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was the relation between earthly time and eternity, a topic richly debated among the philosophers of Antiquity, and later by Saint Augustine in his *Confessionum liber* and the *De civitate Dei*.² Although more devotional than theological, the *Cantigas de Santa María* do reflect, within the texts of many of the songs and in the visual representations that accompany them, a great number of the theological debates of the day. The relation between time and eternity is one of them: Cantiga 103, entitled “Como Sancta Maria feze estar o monge trezentos anos ao canto

¹ Besides the *Cantigas*, Kinkade includes in this list of “eminent” creations Gothic architecture, the *Divine Comedy*, and St. Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*. I wish to thank my former professor and current friend Vicente Cantarino for his insights into the formulation of some of the ideas found in this paper.

² For a concise discussion of the topic as it pertains to religious and philosophical discussions of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, I refer the reader to Dales 1982, 1986, and 1988.

da passara, porque lle pedia que lle mostrasse qual era o ben que avian os que eran en paraíso” gives the reader (or listener of the song, or spectator of the illustration)³ a vivid, yet simple, idea regarding orthodox teaching on Heaven and Earth. As we will see here, song 103 not only clarifies the teachings of Saint Augustine and his followers on time and eternity, but it also gives us insight into the very basis of medieval monastic theology and the pious reading known as *lectio divina* undertaken by the ordered religious as part of their daily examination of and meditation on the Holy Scriptures. Though very simple in content, the narrative of this song delves into the very essence of what Heaven represented for medieval theologians and gives us in the twenty-first century a glimpse at that *otium quietis* represented metaphorically in the calm of the medieval monastery and desired by the religious as their form of eternal rest.

I. The Legend of the Bird

The story told in Alfonso’s cantiga 103 is not original to his court writers. In fact, as has been made abundantly clear in several studies to date (Hans-Jörg [Aarne-Thomson] 471A (“The Monk and the Bird”),⁴ Wagner, and Röhrich 124-45), the cantiga story is a variation of a legend that had already existed for at least one hundred years before its inclusion in the *Cantigas* collection (the compilation of which took place during the years spanning from 1257 to 1283).⁵ This claim is supported by evidence given by Herbert and Meyer who, toward the end of the 19th century and beginnings of the 20th, published various Latin versions of the legend of the bird with the intent of showing that “by the end of the thirteenth century it had become one of the most popular *exempla* with which preachers were wont to season their discourses” (Herbert 428). As with a great many legends, especially those of such early and often undocumented

³ For the musical notation of cantiga 103, see Ribera.

⁴ Uther’s catalogue of international folktales shows (in number 471A) that different versions of this tale have been documented in many places, from Estonia to China, from Ireland to Armenia and Mexico. See also Uther’s number 766 (“The Seven Sleepers”), in turn with versions throughout the world (from Lapland to Madagascar, from Ireland to Hungary, from Egypt to North America). “The Monk and the Bird” is clearly related to “The Seven Sleepers” (and therefore to cultures and traditions of a wider scope than those analyzed in this article), although I won’t focus on that relationship in the following pages. Instead, I will pay particular attention to philosophical and literary aspects of the Western dissemination of the “pajarillo” tale. For more information on “The Seven Sleepers”, about its Muslim sources and parallels, and on its existence in the Iberian Peninsula, see Hernández Juberías (121-61). See also for these two tales the monumental *Index exemplorum* by Tubach (particularly entries 3378, 3216 y 4440), as well as Yáñez Neira for the “leyenda del pajarillo.” Pedrosa reminds me of the parallels between “The Monk and the Bird” and several versions of a Russian folktale published by Afanásiev in 1859 (and now translated into Spanish for the first time in Pedrosa 3, “La viuda pobre” [Afanásiev]). For the purposes of this article, I am operating from the exclusive standpoint of the Western Christian tradition. The fact that the tale also appears in many Oriental and Arabic traditions could lead one to explore the similarities between somehow different conceptions of time and eternity in all these cultural contexts. I wish to express my gratitude to Prof. J. M. Pedrosa for his careful reading of this article and for pointing out to me the many comparatist implications of these two tales within a broader folkloric context.

⁵ A discussion of the dates for the different categories of songs within the cantiga collection may be found in Filgueira Valverde XLVII.

times, we do not know the exact origin of the story of the monk and the bird, though popular thought in Spain is that it is a direct reference to the ninth-century Abbot Virila of the monastery of St Salvador of Leyre in Navarra and his preoccupations with the possible non-existence of an afterlife.⁶ Taking this legend into consideration, while also commenting on verse 89:4 of the Old Testament book of Psalms,⁷ Girón Negrón suggests that a now-lost version of the legend

conjugaba el aspecto exegetico y el conjetural –el monje que medita y se cuestiona este versículo bíblico le exige a Dios una prueba de su veracidad– y de ahí que las versiones subsecuentes del milagro se dividieran en dos grupos: las del monje que duda la eternidad de Dios (la leyenda del pajarillo como *exemplum* para los incrédulos) y las del monje que pide una experiencia *ante-mortem* de los gozos celestiales. (40)

That is, the legend sought to expound upon orthodox teaching regarding the existence of an afterlife, in the form of a *similitudine* (an analogy used to clarify religious doctrine), while also giving a glimpse of what awaited those who deserved it. Alfonso X presents the legend of the monk and bird in the following manner, with the refrain *Quen Virgen ben servirá / a Parayso irá* repeated after six lines of song and often interrupting the syntactical flow of the verse:⁸

Como Santa Maria feze estar o monge trezentos anos ao canto da passara
porque lle pedia que lle mostrasse qual era
o ben que avian os que eran en Paraiso

*Quen Virgen ben servirá
a Parayso irá.*

E daquest' un miragre / vos quer' eu ora contra,
que fezo Santa Maria / por un monge, que rogar-
ll'ia sempre que lle mostrasse / qual ben en Parais' á,
Quen Virgen ben servirá...

E que o viss' en ssa vida / ante que fosse morrer.
E porend' a Groriosa / vedes que lle foi fazer:
fez-lo entrar un hũa orta / en que muitas vezes ja
Quen Virgen ben servirá...

Entrara; mais aquel dia / fez que hũa font' achou

⁶ Arrojo-Ramos has written a pleasantly imaginative depiction of this legend, which the reader can find at http://home.sprynet.com/~awhit/arrojo_ramos.htm.

⁷ “Quoniam mille anni ante oculos tuos tamquam dies hesterna quae praeteriit” (*Biblia sacra*).

⁸ Here I give the text of cantiga 103, taken from Montoya's edition of the *Cantigas* (166-68).

mui crara e mui fremosa, / e cab' ela s'assentou.
 E pois lavou mui ben sas mãos, / diss': "Ai, Virgen,
Quen Virgen ben servirá...

Se verei do Parayso, / o que ch'eu muito pidi,
 algun pouco de seu viço / ante que saya daqui,
 e que sábia do que ben obra / que galardon averá."
Quen Virgen ben servirá...

Tan toste que acabada / ouv' o mong' a oraçon,
 oyu hũa passarinna / cantar log' en tan bon son,
 que sse escaeceu sendo / e catando sempr' alá.
Quen Virgen ben servirá...

Atan gran sabor avia / daquel cant' e daquel lais,
 que grandes trezentos ano / esteve assi, ou mays,
 cuidando que no estivera / senon pouco, con' está
Quen Virgen ben servirá...

Mong' algũa vez no ano, / quando sal ao vergeu.
 Des i foi-ss' a passaryn[n]a, / de que foi a el mui greu,
 e diz: "Eu daqui ir-me quero, / ca oy mais comer querrá
Quen Virgen ben servirá...

O convent'." E foi-sse logo / e achou un gran portal
 que nunca vira, e disse: / "Ai, Santa Maria val!
 Non é est' o meu mōesterio / pois de mi que se fará?"
Quen Virgen ben servirá...

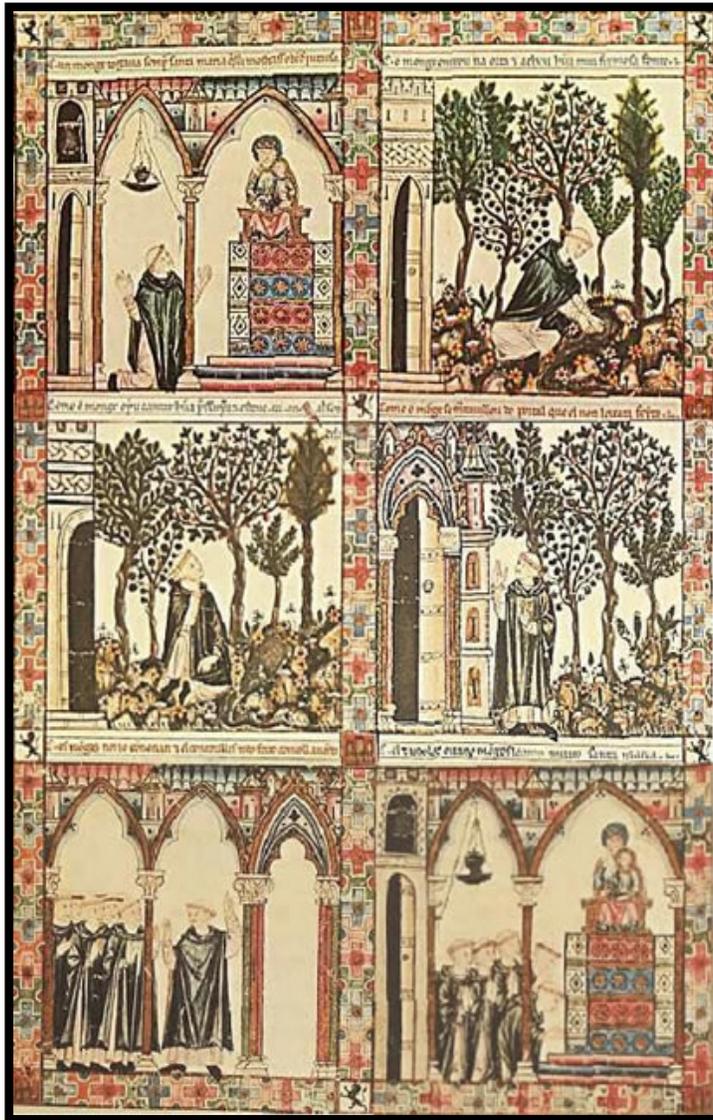
Des i entrou na eigreja, / e ouveron gran pavor
 os monges quando o viron, / e demandou-ll' o prior,
 dizend': "Amigo, vos quen sodes / ou que buscades?"
Quen Virgen ben servirá...

Diss' el: "Busco meu abade, / que agor' aqui leixey,
 e o prior e os frades, / de que mi agora quitey
 quando fui aquela orta; / u seen quen mio dirá?"
Quen Virgen ben servirá...

Quand' est' oyu o abade, / teve-o por de mal sen,
 e outrossi o convento; / mais des que souberon ben
 de como for a este feyto, / disseron: "Quen oyrá
Quen Virgen ben servirá...

Nunca tan gran maravilla / como Deus por este fez
 Polo rogo de ssa Madre, / Virgen Santa de gran prez!
 E por aquesto a loemos; / mais quena non loará
Quen Virgen ben servirá...

Mais do'utra cousa que seja? / Ca, por Deus, dereit' é,
 pois quanto nos lle pedimos / nos dá seu Fill', a la ffe,
 pore la, e aqui nos mostra / o que nos depois dará."
Quen Virgen ben servirá...



Ms. T.I.1 (Biblioteca de San Lorenzo el Real de El Escorial) (*Códice Rico*, Alfonso X's *Cantigas de Santa María*), 'Cantiga CIII'.

Accompanying the song, as with the other songs in the *Cantigas* collection, is an illustration divided into six miniatures, which narrates visually the story we have just read. Though not necessarily the topic of our discussion here, it is interesting to see how the artist portrayed the narrative sequence of the song.⁹ The first miniature shows the monk prostrate before a statue of the Virgin Mary, representing his constant prayer. In the next three miniatures we see the monk washing his hands, gazing upward at the bird sitting atop a tree, and then returning to the monastery. In each of these the architecture of the monastery to the left side of the scene changes, becoming more elaborate as the narrative progresses (representing, possibly, the change from the simple Visigoth architecture of the early Middle Ages to the Romanesque brought by the Cluniac monks in the eleventh century, and finishing with the detailed Gothic brought to Spain by the Cistercians in the twelfth century). The final two miniatures represent, first, the awe of the monks who encounter the stranger who has just arrived at their door and, second, the group of monks prostrating themselves before the same statue of the Virgin Mary seen in the first miniature.

II. Time and Eternity in the 13th Century

The legend of the monk and the bird presents us with a series of happenings that immediately beg for explanation, the primary question being, how could the monk have passed three hundred years in quiet ecstasy without having been noticed or having noticed what was going on around him (not to mention personal necessities and the effects of age on the body)? Secondly, why does the monk not question the presence of a fountain that he had never seen, despite his having come to the garden many times before? These are questions that, though seemingly logical to the twenty-first-century reader, would probably not have been asked by the medieval reader or listener of the tale. The idea of miracles and the intervention of the divine in human affairs were much more accepted in the thirteenth century than today, and if used as an *exemplum* in sermons or spiritual lessons then the common uneducated listener would have no reason to doubt its veracity. To understand the lesson that the *cantiga* narrative embodies, we must look at the medieval Christian discussions of time and eternity, which will, in turn, answer the very questions I have posed here.

What was generally considered the orthodox teaching on time and eternity for medieval Christian theologians and philosophers had come from St Augustine's meditations on the same topic, found in book XI (XI, 11, 13) of his *Confessionum liber*.¹⁰ Speaking at length on the temporal terms "past" and "future," Augustine tells us

⁹ I refer the reader to <http://cantigas.webcindario.com/cantigas/indicecantigas.htm> for a comparative view of the cantiga 103 illustration alongside others from the same collection, as well as to Alfonso X (1979). For a study of the architectural elements of this cantiga, see Domínguez Rodríguez.

¹⁰ Much of what we find in St Augustine's meditations on time and eternity are re-elaborations, from a Christian point of view, of what Plato had already said in his *Timaeus*. Much has been written on this, and I refer the reader to Dales 1982 for extensive bibliography on the subject.

that eternity consists of an eternal “present” in which the passage of time is neither perceived nor existent, for *time* is measured and *eternity* is that which cannot be measured. In reference to those who question the non-existence of time in the eternal bliss of Paradise, Augustine says that

[t]hey do not yet understand how the things are made which come to be in you and through you. Try as they may to savour the taste of eternity, their thoughts still twist and turn upon the ebb and flow of things in past and future time. But if only their minds could be seized and held steady, they would be still for a while and, for that short moment, they would glimpse the splendour of eternity which is for ever still. They would contrast it with time, which is never still, and see that it is not comparable. They would see that time derives its length only from a great number of movements constantly following one another into the past, because they cannot all continue at once. But in eternity nothing moves into the past: all is present. Time, on the other hand, is never all present at once. The past is always driven on by the future, the future always follows on the heels of the past, and both the past and the future have their beginning and their end in the eternal present. If only men’s minds could be seized and held still! (*Confessions* [*Confessionum liber*], Pine-Coffin trans., 261-62)¹¹

Likewise, in book XII, chapter 15 of the *De civitate Dei*, Augustine uses the metaphor of music to compare human time with heavenly eternity. In so doing, he claims that time is the perception of each individual note of the melody in succession, whereas in eternity all the notes of all possible melodies are perceived in intelligible simultaneity. In the passage from the *Confessionum liber* quoted here, we see this conceptualization restated in more theological terms: as Hausheer sums up, “eternity and time are absolutely incompatible [...]. Time implies change, movement, transition, succession, imperfection, and improvement. Eternity is all that time is not [...], the immutable quiescent present, the simultaneous unison of that which unfolds in time” (509).

As medieval thinkers were wont to believe, the average human mind is incapable of imagining such concepts as divine understanding and the limitlessness of eternity. Dales points out, though, that for many medieval Christian writers eternity was not a complex idea, for when one has reached the state of *visio intellectualis*, the state of divine

¹¹ “Qui haec dicunt nondum te intellegunt, o sapientia dei, lux mentium, nondum intellegunt quomodo fiant quae per te atque in te fiunt, et conantur aeterna sapere, sed adhuc in praeteritis et futuris rerum motibus cor eorum volitat et adhuc vanum est. quis tenebit illud et figet illud, ut paululum stet, et paululum rapiat splendorem semper stantis aeternitatis, et comparet cum temporibus numquam stantibus, et videat esse incomparabilem, et videat longum tempus, nisi ex multis praetereuntibus motibus qui simul extendi non possunt, longum non fieri; non autem praeterire quicquam in aeterno, sed totum esse praesens; nullum vero tempus totum esse praesens; et videat omne praeteritum propelli ex futuro et omne futurum ex praeterito consequi, et omne praeteritum ac futurum ab eo quod semper est praesens creari et excurrere? quis tenebit cor hominis, ut stet et videat quomodo stans dictet futura et praeterita tempora nec futura nec praeterita aeternitas?” (Watts ed. and tr.).

knowledge that St Augustine claims as the goal of all Christians,¹² that same divine understanding that one experiences negates all confusion. That is, a human mind, as imperfect creation, can never completely understand that which is divine; a spiritual mind, one which has reached perfection, has gained access to divine understanding precisely because of its perfect state. In the mid-1230s, for example, Alexander of Hales composed a series of questions on eternity in which he concluded that “eternity properly speaking has three conditions: simplicity, invariability, and interminability” (cited in Dales 1988, 30). At around the same time, Robert Grosseteste wrote two treatises, the *Hexaemeron* and the *De finitate motus et temporis*, on the teachings of time found in Aristotle’s *Metaphysica*. In these texts, Grosseteste makes clear that “eternal does not mean perpetual, but simple, instantaneous, and atemporal” and that those held within eternity enjoy “full and complete possession of limitless life all at once” (Dales 1988, 31). Following the same line of reasoning, John Peckham (d. 1292) (Pecham), Franciscan Chair of Theology at Paris, stated in his treatise entitled *Utrum aliquid sit vel fieri potuit de nichilo ordinaliter* that

the ‘now’ of eternity is not the same as the simplicity of an instant, because the simplicity of an instant exists in the simplicity of smallness and limitation, and therefore it cannot embrace several things. But the simplicity of the ‘now’ of eternity is not of smallness but of unmeasured multiplicity; whence it embraces all times. (cited in Dales 1988, 37)¹³

That is, eternity is simple in the fact that it embraces and understands everything all at once. The simplicity of a temporal moment in time cannot be held in equal relation to eternity since the temporal moment can only embrace for the human mind what is physically present at that moment.¹⁴

This brings us to the question of the perception of time within the eternal, a question directly related to the legend of the monk and the bird in Alfonso X’s cantiga 103. Plato had stated in the *Timaeus* that time was a creation of God, and as such must be present within eternity (since eternity is knowledge of all things, created or not, at one time).¹⁵

¹² See St Augustine’s *De Genesi ad litteram*, chapter 12. There Augustine divides understanding into three levels: *visio corporealis*, understanding through physical sight; *visio spiritualis*, understanding through spiritual growth; and *visio intellectualis*, divine understanding attained either through mystical experiences or by the fact that one has physically died and is in now in the very presence of God.

¹³ The original Latin text can be found in Brady II, 163-64: “[Quod si adhuc velles omnino dicere quod non-esse fuisset in nunc aeternitatis,] non est idem simplicitati instantis, quia simplicitas instantis est simplicitatis paucitatis vel arctationis, et ideo plura complecti non potest. Simplicitas autem nunc aeternitatis non est paucitatis, sed multiplicitatis immensae, unde omnia tempora complectitur.”

¹⁴ See also now Potter.

¹⁵ “But inasmuch as the nature of the Living Creature was eternal, this quality it was impossible to attach in its entirety to what is generated; wherefore He planned to make a movable image of Eternity, and, as He set in order the Heaven, of that Eternity which abides in unity He made an eternal image, moving according to number, even that which we have named Time. For simultaneously with the construction of the Heaven He contrived the production of days and nights and months and years, which existed not before the Heaven came into being. And these are all portions of Time; even as ‘Was’ and ‘Shall be’ are

How, then, is change, enacted by the passage of time, perceived within eternity? For Plato, as well as for Christian theologians and philosophers of the Middle Ages, time and change are to be understood by means of eternity, not the other way around. As humans, we mistakenly try to understand the eternal as endless time, a series of ongoing and everlasting events taking place within the realms of some psychologically-created conception of Heaven. However, platonic and Christian neo-platonic thought explains time as a function of the eternal: both eternal and temporal existences are real since “eternity is that mode of reality which includes time by transcending it” (Hazelton 8). Eternal truths, which underlie all temporal existence, are made manifest in individual experiences that take place over and throughout time. As Hazelton explains, “every discovery of truth is the confirmation in experience of what is known already in eternity, as when the ignorant slave in [Plato’s] *Meno* proves for himself the Pythagorean theorem” (Hazelton 8). Thus, time and history, all events that have transpired throughout the millennia of the world’s existence, are manifestations of the eternal truths which pertain to the only true reality of eternity by virtue of exercising immediate causal influence within the created realm of the temporal.¹⁶

Regarding eternal beings’ perception of time, again we often find ourselves led astray. That which is eternal is atemporal, and that which is atemporal cannot consist of material being. Materiality implies creation, which is, as we have just seen, a product of the causality of eternity, a manifestation of eternal truths. Likewise, as Stump & Kretzmann point out, the temporal mind deliberates, anticipates, remembers, plans ahead, all of which are activities that both take place within time and inherently imply the use of time. Within eternity, the necessity of and even the mental realization of time are non-existent. The mental states of knowing (as in *visio intellectualis*) and feeling do not require temporal intervals or refer to any temporal viewpoints. Thus, the feeling of bliss that accompanies divine intelligence is the essence of that which is eternal. Divine knowledge and, consequently, eternal happiness do not change once attained, and that very lack of change constitutes the atemporal nature of eternity (Stump & Kretzmann 446-47).

generated forms of Time, although we apply them wrongly, without noticing, to Eternal Being [...] Time, then, came into existence along with the Heaven, to the end that having been generated together they might also be dissolved together, if ever a dissolution of them should take place; and it was made after the pattern of the Eternal Nature, to the end that it might be as like thereto as possible; for whereas the pattern is existent through all eternity, the copy, on the other hand, is through all time, continually having existed, existing, and being about to exist.” (Plato, *Timaeus* 37d-38c [Bury trans 75-79]). Plato extends his discussion of time and eternity in this section of his book, relating the function of the planets and stars to the measurements of time, all of which he gives non-divine attributes as products of creation and, therefore, existing within, but separated from, eternity. I refer the reader to Bury’s introduction to the *Timaeus* in the above-quoted edition for a succinct discussion of the principle elements of Plato’s discussion

¹⁶ See McTaggart 352-56 for a more detailed discussion of eternal causality.

III. Time and Eternity in Cantiga 103

Returning to King Alfonso's song of the monk and the bird, we can now begin to articulate its relationship to the theological discussions of eternity so prevalent in the religious writings of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The legend-song presents both earthly time and the celestial "now" in a succinct fashion that illustrates the basis of the divine truth that St Augustine and later theologians scrutinized so heavily, that stated in Psalm 89:4 (Quoniam mille anni ante oculos tuos tamquam dies hesternae quae praeteriit"). The monk, desirous of a glimpse of Heaven before leaving earth, is transported through three hundred years of temporal existence in such a way as to make it seem as though he has passed a few idle moments in quiet contemplation. He passes these moments in what Devoto calls "un des-tiempo, un no-tiempo" (10), precisely because the environment in which the story takes place and the actions that the monk performs before the arrival of the bird create a mystical experience of timelessness that cannot occur within the confines of the temporal materiality of earth. Indeed, in order for the monk to pass three hundred years of earthly time, with no human needs and without notice, that existence must take place within a supernatural realm not controlled by created nature but by the creator himself.

The monk's desire for a glimpse into Heaven responds to what the twentieth-century Benedictine Jean Leclercq characterizes as the fundamental goal of Christian monasticism, both medieval and modern. As Leclercq explains, in the *Rule of St Benedict*—the basis of medieval monasticism—"we can distinguish two elements [...]: the knowledge of letters and the search for God. The fundamental fact that stands out in this domain is that one of the principal occupations of the monk is the *lectio divina*, which includes meditation" (13). Although we cannot know to what extent the monk of cantiga 103 has studied and meditated upon the scriptures, we can say without doubt that he demonstrates the search for God to which Leclercq refers—"monastic life is entirely disinterested; its reason for existing is to further the salvation of the monk, his search for God, and not for any practical or social end" (18-19). Regardless of whether the monk desires to see Heaven out of curiosity or out of doubt, as legend scholars have speculated,¹⁷ he embodies the "devotion to Heaven [that] was much practiced in medieval monasticism" (Leclercq 54) while also adhering to the fidelity to the Virgin Mary so prevalent in Cluniac and Cistercian practices of the Central and Late Middle Ages. Because of its inclusion in the *Cantigas* collection, it is to Mary that the monk turns for fulfillment of this wish that he so deeply desires.¹⁸

For the medieval monk, the monastery and its terrains symbolize the tranquility of Heaven, and the singing of the hours represents the eternal song of praise in which the

¹⁷ Thompson gives this theory further support in his catalogue, as well as Aarne (for further ref. see Hans-Jörg, number 471A [and 766]).

¹⁸ Girón Negrón explains (42) that this version of the legend must, of course, be framed within the Mariological tradition for inclusion in the *Cantigas*. As a result, Girón believes that the garden to which the monk takes his meditative rest must be interpreted in the same way as the garden of the prologue of Gonzalo de Berceo's *Milagros de Nuestra Señora*, as an allegory of the Virgin Mary herself.

blessed participate (expressed in the song of the bird in cantiga 103). Medieval monastic writings in general express this desire for heavenly *otium* or *vacatio*, the eternal rest into which the soul enters upon earthly death,¹⁹ reflecting, again, the basis for the existence of monasticism. Leclercq sums up the idea in this way:

Medieval monastic literature is, in large part, a literature of compunction, whose aim is to possess, to increase, and to communicate the desire for God. And this fact opens up to us a whole conception of monastic culture and of monastic life. The latter is considered as an anticipation of celestial life; it is a real beginning of eternal life. Everything is judged according to its relationship with the final consummation of the whole of reality. The present is a mere interlude. (66)

As anticipation, the monastic life is one trapped within the confines of earthly time, though it strives to imitate in its imperfect way the perfections of Heaven. The monk of cantiga 103, inheritor of the monastic tradition who must prepare himself through prayer, song, and meditation for the glories to come, nonetheless wishes to know how the life that he presently leads compares to that of the Celestial Jerusalem. He embodies this “desire for God” and longs for a small peek at the paradise that awaits him.

As a result of his constant pleas that the Virgin Mary grant him knowledge of the hereafter, she guides him into the monastery garden one day where a fountain, never before seen, has sprung forth. Girón Negrón points out that the Alphonsine text is the only one of this legend’s tradition to mention either the presence of a fountain or of the monk’s washing his hands before beginning his meditation and prayer (41). Not only is the fountain in which the monk washes unique to the cantiga text, but it also acts as the link between the realm of the temporal and that of the supernatural, the *purificatio* and the *preparatio* of the soul that the monk must undergo before being allowed to enter into the presence of God.²⁰ Reflecting the practice of baptism instituted by St John the Baptist and considered at length in the Spanish medieval manuscript *Commentaria in Apocalipsim* by Beatus of Liébana (for instance Burgo de Osma, Archivo de la Catedral. Cod.1.a. 1086, fol. 58v et ss.) (undoubtedly known in the court of Alfonso X because of its widespread copying and dispersion throughout Christian Spain), this ritual of washing acts as what Eliade calls a hierophany. For Eliade, there is no other

¹⁹ An excellent example of comparison between the monastic life and that of the eternal rest is to be found in the text known as the *Lettre d’Or*, written by Abbot Guillaume de Saint Thierry in 1144. In this letter, written to the Brothers of Mont-Dieu, the author gives a beautifully-written description of what monastic life consists of and the attitude that brother monks must take with regards to one another and the life that they have chosen to lead.

²⁰ Devoto relates this ritualistic washing to that of the priest and of the people before and during the Roman Catholic Mass: “¿Cómo no pensar en el lavatorio de la misa, con su mención del salmo 25: ‘Lavabo inter innocentes manos meas’? ¿Y cómo no pensar en la antífona pascual de la aspersión que precede a la misa dominical, reemplazando al salmo 60 recitado en los otros tiempos del año: ‘Vidi aquam egredientem de templo a latero dextro, alleluia: et omnes ad quos pervenit aqua ista salvi facti sunt, et dicent, alleluia, alleluia?’” (8-9).

way for the divine to express itself to humans than through symbols, whether in the form of something visually perceived or in the form of actions:

The sacred always manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from “natural” realities. It is true that language naively expresses the *tremendum*, or the *majestas*, or the *mysterium fascinans* by terms borrowed from the world of nature or from man’s secular mental life. But we know that this analogical terminology is due precisely to human inability to express the *ganz andere*; all that goes beyond man’s natural experience, language is reduced to suggesting by terms taken from that experience [...]. To designate the *act of manifestation* of the sacred, we have proposed the term *hierophany*. It is a fitting term, because it does not imply anything further; it expresses no more than is implicit in its etymological content, i.e., that *something sacred shows itself to us*. (10-11)²¹

As we see in the cantiga 103 legend, the water that emanates from the ground serves not just as a fountain in which the monk washes and next to which he sits later in the story, but it is the manifestation of purity represented in Jesus’ baptism and resurrection, which all must accept in order to experience the *visio intellectualis* of the divine. As a representation of the sacred, it “becomes something else;” but as part of the environment of the garden, “it continues to remain *itself*, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu” (Eliade 12).

Having ritually washed himself in the sacred fountain created by the Virgin Mary, the monk takes up his prayers once again, asking to be given a glimpse at Heaven. This comes in the form of yet another hierophany, the song of the bird, heard coming from atop a tree under which the monk sits. Whereas the first manifestation of the divine, the fountain, serves as a preparative symbol of ritual, the second is the actual representation of Paradise that the monk has longed to experience. It is at this point, in my opinion, that we find the break in the time / space relationship. The sacred space of the Edenic garden of Paradise, free of time constraints and separate from the physical world of the monk’s earthly life, constructs itself around him and without his notice. It is equally unnoticeable for the brother monks, or anyone else, in the physical domain of the monastery because the new constructed space exists within the realms of the eternal, not those of time. Eliade explains that

[w]hen the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany, there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse. The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world. (21)

²¹ The term *ganz andere* refers to the “wholly other” that Eliade imposes upon the sacred object. The object is, physically, something of the material world while also representing something totally different from the spiritual world.

Thus, the true reality described earlier in the theoretical discussion of time as a function of eternity is here brought to light. The monk spends what he believes to be just a few brief moments, but upon leaving the sacred realm of the divine he finds that three hundred years have passed. This is a concrete, albeit literary, example of the transcendence of eternity over time as discussed by Hazelton, a singular experience used to prove the existence of the universality of eternity and of the one true reality within which the temporal has its existence. By fixating his eyes on the bird and listening in quiet tranquility, the monk illustrates the idea inherent to that of eternity, as mentioned by St Augustine when he contrasts time, which is in constant motion, to eternity, which “is forever still” (*Confessionum liber XI*, 11, 13).

Upon returning to the monastery, which the cantiga composer tells us has changed drastically since the monk first passed through its portals at the beginning of the song, both protagonist and the brother monks express terror for what has happened. The former recognizes neither the monastery nor its inhabitants, and the latter question his very presence among them. This terrible feeling of ignorance and of invasion plays a crucial role in the monk’s understanding of the divine, for this initial terror leads him and his new monastic brothers to spiritual insight that, in turn, proves to them that their existence is made possible because of the work of the divine within the material. In his discussion of the “frightening” and the “irrational” as part of the religious experience, Otto (*Das Heilige*) speaks of “the *feeling of terror* before the sacred, before the awe-inspiring mystery (*mysterium tremendum*), the majesty (*majestas*) that emanates an overwhelming superiority of power”; and “*religious fear* before the fascinating mystery (*mysterium fascinans*) in which perfect fullness of being flowers.” These feelings represent what Otto calls the *numinous*, an experience “induced by the revelation of an aspect of divine power [...] it is like nothing human or cosmic; confronted with it, man senses his profound nothingness, feels that he is only a creature” (cited in Eliade 9-10). Within and because of the numinous experience the believer finds his very physical and spiritual existence, an existence whose reality can only be understood and made manifest through the sacred.

This, of course, brings us back to the truthfulness of eternal reality, within which earthly temporal existence is simply a manifestation. The terror caused by an experience with the divine may be seen as a religious equivalent to the sublime, the deep feelings of terror and awe that one feels when confronted with the grandiosity of nature, a grandiosity that forces one to recognize his minuteness relative to nature’s creation. The result of such feelings, for both the religious and the spectator of nature, is a clearer understanding of the physical world in which one lives as well as a deeper appreciation for the higher powers underlying all that has been created. The monk, forced to confront the new environment in which he must now live, and the brother monks who must now accept him into their community, stricken with fear and confusion, are enlightened by the power of the divine and, as we see in their songs of praise at the end of the cantiga, realize that their own existence is one of a twofold reality. On the one hand, they live within the created time of the world, to which they adhere ritually through the monastic practices of reciting the hours and marking their calendars according to ecclesiastic

seasons. On the other, their physical measured temporality transpires within the unalterable atemporal realms of eternity, as demonstrated in the protagonist's stillness and lack of change during the moments of contemplation in the garden.

Alfonso X's cantiga 103 gives modern readers insight into a much-discussed theological topic of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It reflects the desire of the Church to understand and to fix within its system of beliefs an explanation of eternity, which had been, up to that point, only theorized by such non-Christian thinkers as Plato and Aristotle and such Christians as St Augustine, Robert Grosseteste, and Alexander of Hales. The cantiga legend, developed well before Alfonso's *Cantigas* were compiled, served as a *similitudine* that preachers could use to teach the masses; however, its inclusion in the *Cantigas* collection demonstrates the desire on the part of the Learned King to join in the theological debates. He considered himself not only the king of his realms, but also as a teacher of Catholic orthodox faith and facilitator in the salvation of his subjects. At a time when Christians were fighting Muslims, in Iberia and in the Holy Lands, and when the Church greatly needed codification of dogma in the face of heresy and dissent, Alfonso X joined the theological discussion by creating within his own courtly documents representations of teachings laid down by the Church. Cantiga 103 shows us, in written narrative as well as visual, the enigma of eternity and how best one could understand that state of timeless rest.

Appendix
Cantiga 103²²

He who serves the Virgin well / will go to Paradise.

Regarding this, a miracle / I would like to tell,
 that Holy Mary performed / for a monk who prayed
 constantly that she show him / the good things of Paradise,
 (Refrain)

And that he see them in this life / before he died.
 So look at what / the Glorious One did for him:
 She made him enter a garden / that many times already
 (Refrain)

He had entered; but that day / she made a fountain flow
 that was very clear and beautiful / and next to it he sat.
 And after washing his hands well / he said, 'Oh, Virgin,
 (Refrain)

If I could see Paradise / as I have often asked of you,
 at least for a short time / before I leave here,
 and know what awaits him who works well / and the reward he will have.'
 (Refrain)

As soon as the monk / had finished his prayer,
 he heard a small bird / begin to sing such a sweet song
 that he remained there / and kept his eyes fixed upon it.
 (Refrain)

Such great pleasure he took / in such a beautiful song
 that a long three hundred years / he remained there, or longer,
 believing that he was there / only a short time, the same as
 (Refrain)

When a monk at times / takes a walk through the garden.
 As soon as the small bird had gone / which left the monk saddened,
 he said, 'I must leave here now / for it is time for the monastery
 (Refrain)

To eat.' And so he departed / and saw a great doorway

²² Here I give my own version of cantiga 103, based roughly on the prose version of Kulp-Hill.

that he had never before seen, and said, / 'Holy Mary, help me!
This is not my monastery. / What will happen to me?'
(Refrain)

He then entered the church, / and filled with fear
were the other monks who saw him. / And the abbot asked him,
saying, 'Friend, who are you / and what do you seek?'
(Refrain)

And he said, 'I seek my abbot, / whom I left here just now,
and my monastery and the monks, / whom I left here
when I went to the garden; / who can tell me what became of them?'
(Refrain)

When the abbot heard this, / he took it as a bad sign,
as did the rest of the community; / but when they learned well
how this had happened, / they said, 'Who has ever heard
(Refrain)

Of such a great miracle / that God for this man performed
because of his prayers to his Mother, / Holy Virgin, without equal?
Because of this we praise her; / but who will not praise her
(Refrain)

Above all other things? / For, by God, I will tell you,
that what we ask of her in faith / her Son gives to us
because of her, and here he shows us / that which he will give us later.
(Refrain)

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