



Echoes of a Dream

The cross-cultural reverberations of oneiric spaces in literature

This paper examines literary dreams from a comparative perspective, with a special focus on the kind of narrative space created by a dream sequence within a literary work. In particular, I look at how traces of the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi's famous butterfly dream appear as echoes in the oneiric fictions of Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, and how, in turn, Borges' dream-worlds have inspired Chinese author Can Xue to create a new kind of literary dreamscape. These literary dreams are shared, not only by author and reader, but by several authors who double as readers. The question, so famously raised by Zhuangzi,¹ of who is dreaming and who is being dreamt of, thus arises on the meta-textual as well as the diegetic level of the works.

In the short stories of Borges and Can Xue, the dream motif creates its own intimate space, a space of what Gaston Bachelard in his book *The Poetics of Space* calls poetic *reverberation*, that is a space, which not only resonates with the reader, but which she can inhabit as her own: "In the resonance we hear the poem, in the reverberations we speak it, it is our own,"² Bachelard writes. This space of reverberation momentarily fuses the positions of reader and writer, as the reader speaks the text as her own. In the works of Zhuangzi, Borges and Can Xue this complex relation between reader and writer is repeated on the diegetic level in the relations between dreamer and dreamed.³

By comparing these literary texts involving dreams and dreaming, I hope to shed light on the limits and possibilities of the literary dream motif, not only as a metaphor but as a special kind of narrative space. Tracing the travelling dream of Zhuangzi through modern South American fiction and further on to avant-garde Chinese fiction, we can get an idea of the cross-cultural potential for *reverberation* which the dream motif seems to possess.

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¹ Though, according to Hans-Georg Möller, not necessarily so to be so understood in a Daoist context: Möller, Hans-Georg (1999): 'Zhuangzi's "Dream of the Butterfly" - A Daoist Interpretation.' *Philosophy East & West*, Vol. 49, No. 4.

² Bachelard, Gaston (1994): *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press: 7.

³ Wolfson, Elliot R. (2014): 'In the Mirror of the Dream: Borges and the Poetics of Kabbalah.' *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. summer; Yao, Zhihua: "'I Have Lost Me": Zhuangzi's Butterfly Dream.' *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. 40, No. 3-4; Cheng, Kai-Yuan (2014): 'Self and the Dream of the Butterfly in the Zhuangzi.' *Philosophy East & West*, Vol. 64, No. 3.