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Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: The Mexican Baroque as Portal

Mexican churches of the colonial period were often built and decorated in the Baroque style, which demonstrated both the religious sentiment of the people and the wealth of the church (Burkholder 177). Mark Burkholder notes in his history, *Colonial Latin America*, that “The Baroque period, roughly the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in Latin America, was marked by great technical skill, exuberance in decoration and a concern for the fabulous and supernatural” (227). Octavio Paz, the Mexican poet and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature (1990), commented on this excess by explaining that, “It has often been said. . . that the Mexican baroque was an exaggeration of the Spanish models” (qtd. in *Poems, Protest xxxi*). Baroque artists aimed to produce a visual sense of movement in their art. The overall effect to the visitor was important, not the small details. It was in the details of these structures however, that secrets were hidden from all but the discerning eye. Near Puebla, Mexico, are two churches which demonstrate the overwhelming power of baroque ornamentation. The churches of Santa María Tonanzintla and Acatepec are alive with thousands of cherubs, angels and other figures which reflect the indigenous roots of their craftsmen. Even the name of one of the churches, *tonanzintla*, refers to “earth mother,” and shows an integration of the indigenous and the Spanish faiths, as Santa María is the Spanish name for Mary, the mother of Jesus, and *tonantzin*, the Aztec goddess of the earth. During the colonial period, many of the churches in Mexico were built by an indigenous labor force which took the opportunity to express itself in often very

personal terms. Those ever-present details reveal to the keen observer, figures with indigenous features and the flora and fauna of the “new world.” The expression of the Spanish Baroque, therefore, took on a new character in which one world informed the other.

The Baroque form, however, was not limited to architecture; the literature of the new world expressed the Baroque “pushing of the limits,” as well. Octavio Paz has noted that the literature of the “new world” built on and changed continental models: “Indeed, like all imitative art, the poetry of New Spain attempted to surpass its models; it was the extreme of baroque, the apogee of strangeness,” (qtd. in *Poems, Protest* xxxi). It became a literature so filled with complex allusions and conceits, that it resembled the ceilings in Puebla. It would be easy, as readers of the twenty-first century, to dismiss the excesses of the seventeenth century Spanish Baroque as artificial ornamentation, as well as artistic or linguistic exaggeration. It is true that writers of baroque forms were known for their complicated figures of speech and the overabundance of their descriptions; it is interesting, then, that a nun living in Mexico, and writing within the walls of her isolated and simple cell would choose to chart the journey of a soul in a form so nearly inaccessible and hidden from view by the twists and turns of a phrase. Within the poetic twists and turns of “*Primer sueño*” (“First I Dream”), Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz has hidden, from casual glances, the quest of the soul for knowledge.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz began her life in 1651 as the illegitimate daughter of Doña Isabel Ramírez de Santillana, a humble beginning which would dictate the path her life would take. She would have had to decide between the convent or marriage, the latter made all the harder by her lack of dowry. By all reports that are available to us today, Sor Juana was a singularly beautiful and intelligent child who grew into an attractive and intellectually gifted

woman. She spent time in court as the lady-in-waiting to the Countess of Mancera, who was willing to sponsor her because of her beauty and ability. Life at court, however, did not challenge her intellect and we learn through her own writings that she yearned for a sheltered place where she could pursue the intellectual life without interruption. To that end, she entered the convent where she lived out most of her adult life, always recognized both by the church and the community as a brilliant thinker and prolific writer. In the convent, however, Sor Juana was not immune from the ramifications of being an educated woman in an epoch that did not value education for all, for she soon found herself in a contest of wills with a church hierarchy which was structured to keep women silent.

Of all of the writing that Sor Juana produced (some 26 plays, 70 poems, and approximately 20 miscellaneous works), she reports that the poem, “Primer sueño,” a *silva* of nine hundred seventy-five verses, was the only piece she wrote for her own pleasure. Licia Fiol-Matta, in her article “Visions of Gender: Sor Juana and the *First Dream*” notes that Sor Juana has crossed over a line in this work, from public writing to the very private, “In the *Dream*, her ‘scrap of paper’ that she has written ‘for herself,’ lie the first insinuations of an author who considers her writings to be her own” (355). This extraordinary poem was written in a style which imitated one of the contemporary poets, Luis de Góngora of Spain. Góngora’s style was highly intellectual and crammed to overflowing with detailed descriptions, allusions to mythology, as well as complex Latinisms. University students of the day were fond of reading and quoting Góngora in order to prove their academic proclivities. It is no wonder that a nun in Mexico, who spent her life in study, would also be attracted to the intellectual discourse in Góngora’s writing; especially a woman who desired an education so much that she once

proposed to dress as a boy in order to attend the university (a desire soon quelled by her mother).

Sor Juana specifically chose this extremely intricate form to be the vehicle to carry her deepest thoughts about the journey of the soul. Of course, we will never know exactly why she entrusted her revelations about the soul to this complex and convoluted form, but we can interact with the poem in order to experience the special nature of its form and means of communication. The poem is a *silva*, which is a traditional Spanish verse form consisting of seven and eleven syllable lines, with no proscribed rhyme scheme. Within the strictures of this form, Sor Juana used many of the techniques she learned from reading Góngora, such as an inverted word order which mimics Latin, the use of mythological figures, complicated allusions, metaphors and descriptions. Spanish Baroque literature in general presents a multilayered approach to expression which is characterized by paradox, contradiction, and contrast, particularly of light and dark. The images and descriptions often employ exaggeration. Writers of this Baroque style were lovers of language, who often concealed meaning within intricate anagrams, word plays and symbols. Otis Green in *Spain and the Western Tradition*, notes that writers of the baroque style “. . . were no longer concerned solely with communicating an experience, they were also concerned-often more so-with fabricating a novel, attractive object, a dainty device” (209).

“Primer sueño” or “First Dream,” which has also been translated as “First I Dream” (*Poems, Protest* xxxviii) due to the possibility that the word *sueño* in Spanish could be the noun, “dream,” or the verb *soñar* in the first person, hence, “First I Dream,” is a long narrative poem which begins with the world going to sleep. Octavio Paz, in his definitive biography of Sor Juana, divides the poem into three main sections; “The Sleep,” “The Voyage,” and “The Awakening” (Paz 368). In the section referred to as “The Sleep,” readers encounter first the

sleep of the world, then the sleep of the body. The section on the sleep of the body includes an inventory of the organs of the body which keep working during sleep. Finally, sleep claims all. During sleep, the body communicates with the senses through humors and vital spirits (Paz 370), and the rational soul is free. The soul then ranges through the universe in a vain attempt to encompass it, realizing that it is an impossible goal. However, the soul is so overwhelmed by the diversity of the universe that it cannot reason, founders in line 566 and washes up on the mental shore of the vast sea of complexity. Nearly spent, the soul reasons that the universe is too vast and labyrinthine to be understood all at once. Perhaps the best way to comprehend something so daunting, is to take one part at a time and understand each element in turn, beginning with the simplest form of life in the sea. The enumeration proceeds, but soon yields frustration because reason cannot reveal even such things as the shape of a flower (line 730), or the wayward course of a spring (line 714). The soul realizes that the task, monumental as it is, would be even greater if there were no center, if human could not struggle for union with the Divine. The soul hesitates again, but renews itself by remembering the ancient story of Phaeton, Apollo's son who drove the chariot of the sun, who wanted to make his name, even in ruin (line 810). But the soul's journey is hindered because the body is waking up, the images flee like those of a magic lantern on the wall (line 875). The sun battles its way back into the world, and the body awakes to a world of light.

The theme of this poem, the journey of the soul, was not a new one, even in Sor Juana's time; there had been many authors who expressed their beliefs about the soul. Paula Findlen, in her review essay, "Ideas in the Mind: Gender and Knowledge in the Seventeenth Century," found parallels in a number of women philosophers, for instance, "Reading the recent editions of early

modern women's writings together, it becomes apparent that the relationship between the mind and the body was a topic of special interest to women philosophers. . ." (188). Sor Juana, however, approached this theme in new ways. First of all, she declared that the soul does not have a gender. The soul in her poem, which leaves the body and goes on a journey among the stars is neuter; an important concept for a woman who observed first-hand the deep grief that gender can cause. Living as a nun under the heavy weight of the male-dominated world of the Roman Catholic Church, she personally experienced the pressure that could still the feminine voice. The neuter soul in her poem is free from gender-related bonds which restrict its reach. At the same time, the soul in "*Primer sueño*" is also free from earthly limits as it pursues its spiritual journey through space and time. In the last line of the poem, she returns to her body with the words, "*yo despierta.*" Stephen Hart, in "Is Women's Writing in Spanish America gender specific?", characterizes Sor Juana's worldview within his discussion of her play, *El Narciso*. Hart concludes that, "In Sor Juana's world-vision, thus, a harmonious relationship between the sexes is impossible and can only be transcended through the transfiguring role of Christianity's redemptionism" (341-2). It can be said that, the male dominated institution provided the structure, i.e. i.e. prayers and meditation that set the genderless soul free.

In fact, the practice of the church in the New World encouraged just such mystical union with the divine. Brian Larkin, in "Liturgy, devotion and Religious Reform in Eighteenth-Century Mexico City" notes the relationship between liturgy and mystical union with the divine:

Liturgical piety was a central feature of Spanish Catholicism in colonial Mexico. Through the orchestration of symbolic actions that recalled the life and death of Christ or the saints, Catholics constructed mystical "unions" with divinity, collapsing time, invoking

the mystical but real presence of the holy figures imitated, and participating in salvation history. Liturgical devotions rested on the belief in the real presence of divinity—that divinity could inhere physically or mystically in objects and actors within the world. The real presence of divinity in turn constructed and rested upon an epistemology that united the sign and signified—an epistemology in which the sign did not simply bring to mind but instead truly made present what it signified. (510)

There are three prominent figures in the poem, the body at rest, the rational soul, and the creator. Each of these is delineated through the use of multiple layers of meaning, much like Baroque architectural ornamentation, which applied layer after layer of figures and symbols. The layers, however, strengthen rather than obscure the relationship between these figures. To construct the layers in this poem, Alan S. Trueblood lists the following fragments used by Sor Juana: myths from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Pliny's *Natural History*, Roman poetry, atmospheric, cosmology, physiology, St. Thomas, Galen, Aristotle, the Great Chain of Being, Plato, two wonders of the ancient world; (the lighthouse at Alexandria and the pyramids), optics, physics, geometry, law, public policy, natural phenomenon, as well as literary conceits (23).

The opening lines of the poem immerse the reader immediately into the intricacies of the Baroque style as Sor Juana describes the coming of night and the resultant sleep of the body as “Pyramidal, doleful, mournful shadow born of earth, the haughty culmination of vain obelisks thrust toward the Heavens, attempting to ascend and touch the Stars. . .” (Protest 79). In this image, night is not imposed from the heavens down, but rather comes from the earth itself, and is described in geometric or architectural terms. In Sor Juana's time, the use of Egyptian imagery was very common, but we should not lose sight of the fact that the New World had its pyramids

as well, built by both the Mayas and the Aztecs. The ancient people studied the heavenly bodies, as archaeologists have found evidence at many Mexican sites, including Chichén Itzá in the Yucatán and at Xochicalco near Cuernavaca. These ancient pyramids and structures were a means of communicating with the gods. Sor Juana's immediate reference to the pyramids sets the scene for the soul's quest for knowledge later in the poem.

Sor Juana imagines nightfall and preparation for sleep as both a mythological and physical phenomenon. She calls on such figures as Nyctimene, the daughters of Minyas, Ascalaphas, and Harpócrates, each having a role in ushering in the coming of night. In the physical realm in lines 80-85, the wind and the sea prepare for night. The breeze is so calm that it doesn't stir an atom, for fear that even the slightest sound would disturb the calm. The sea itself has settled and the fish, those creatures without words, are twice dumb; once in life and once in sleep.

Sleep becomes the equalizer because all are subject to its power, which equates "the roughest homespun cloth with fine brocade" (line 191). The human body in sleep appears as a "mortal shell" (line 200-1), a "cadaver" (201), and "dead in life" (203). The body, although dead to life still carries on its vital functions, which Sor Juana inventories: the heart, the lungs, and the digestion, all working involuntarily to pass on the vital vapors which keep the brain alive. In Sor Juana's time, medical science theorized that during sleep the body released spirits and humors, or vital fluids responsible for health and well-being, to the soul (Paz 370). Her descriptions of the workings of the body reflect a mechanistic view of human physiology (José Gaos qtd. In Paz 370) with the heart as a human watch, a vital balance wheel; the lungs become bellows, a magnet for wind, an aqueduct (conduit); the stomach, described as a "competent and scientific

laboratory”, “Vulcan’s furnace,” and a “cauldron of human heat” (lines 200-260). These images blend together to present a living picture of the body at rest.

With the body thus occupied, the rational soul is free to follow its desire, to observe and understand the workings of the world, “. . . the soaring intellect that now, unchecked, measures the vastness of the Sphere, observes the harmonious, though richly various, rotation of heavenly bodies. . .” (lines 302-305). The soul is described as a “beauteous essence and discarnate being” (line 293) which can be symbolized by the pyramid shape which moves continually upward, as “. . . the striving flame burns upward toward the Heavens, a blazing pyramid, is, too, the human mind mimics that model and climbs. . .” (Lines 404-408). Also in line 424, Sor Juana refers to the “sublime pyramid of the mind” in which the soul found itself housed. She contrasts here the human constructions of the pyramids and the Tower of Babel with the position of the soul. The architects wanted to reach the heights with their designs ever pointing upward, but their reach was short, compared to the soaring of the soul. As it ascends through the universe, ever higher and higher, the soul is joyful and content, but also constantly marveling, astonished by the diversity and profusion and grandeur of all creation (435-451). The soul, in throwing itself to the greatest heights and opening itself to the immensity of creation becomes overwhelmed “(bewildered by such rich profusion, its powers vanquished by such majesty)” (line 451-452) and “with cowardice withdrew” (line 453). The soul, which before was strong and joyful is in line 479, “indecisive,” “its intellectual faculties dulled,” (line 482) that “weakened faculty” (line 501) finds itself “dazed by the enormity of all that lay before her eyes” (line 541).

Sor Juana’s images open a space for us to contemplate the soul in its effort to attain knowledge. Octavio Paz states that Sor Juana’s beliefs were a combination of neoplatonism and

scholasticism (370). The poem specifically shows the struggle between faith and reason which was a characteristic of the age. A look at the time period reveals an age of nascent scientific discovery. People interpreted the world in terms of reason, through what Mark Burkholder, in his history of Colonial Latin America, calls “rational inquiry and measurement” (227). In Mexico there was, he notes, an “. . .inherent tension between the competing claims of reason and religion” (227). Scholasticism was a school of thought which formed the basis for education in the Middle Ages. The philosopher Boethius set the tone for the school with his work *The Consolation of Philosophy* in the sixth century in which he exhorted his readers “As far as you are able, join faith to reason” (Britannica 3). This conjunction of “faith and reason” (Britannica 4) became the very foundation of scholasticism, as writers and thinkers carried the argument in many directions. Although as a school, scholasticism ended with the Renaissance, its influence continued. In the sixteenth century, two Spaniards, Francisco de Vitoria and Francisco Suárez brought scholastic thought into its “Silver Age” (Britannica 12).

We return to the soul in Sor Juana’s poem and note that it undertakes the path of reason in order to understand the universe around it. Failing that, the soul resorts to a logical categorization of the universe, following Aristotle’s ten categories from his work, *Organon*, “in the first treatise, the ‘Categories,’ Aristotle gives a classification of all concepts, or notions according to the classes into which the things represented by the concepts, or notions, naturally fall” (Catholic Encyclopedia, “Aristotle” 4). Aristotle’s theory of understanding the world is to ascend from the smallest part toward the universal (Catholic Encyclopedia, “Aristotle” 3). This system soon proves to be overwhelming for the soul in the poem, because reason cannot understand even the smallest element of the universe.

The object of all this striving is God, the Creator of the universe, for as Sor Juana says in line 696-699:

Perhaps more blessed than other forms
 it was designed that
 Man, through loving Union
 should join with the Divine.

Sor Juana describes the Creator in various ways throughout the poem. We first find reference in line 295 where the poet sees creation as made in the image of Creator or “high Being” and recognizes and “treasures” the “spark of the Divine” it holds within itself. The “spark of the Divine” is a reference to the first century Gnostic belief which holds that each human shelters part of the divine light and that the ultimate goal of the Gnostic was for that divine light to re-merge with the godhead.

Following the imagery of the upward pointing pyramids, Sor Juana describes the Creator as the “Prime Mover, or First Cause” (Line 409). In this instance she followed Aristotelian terminology, as we find that Aristotle discusses the idea of the “first mover” in *Metaphysics*, where he says “The first mover, then, exists of necessity. . .” (146). If the universe exists, then there had to have been a “first cause.” Sor Juana continues in this section to describe the “Prime Mover” as a center point “toward which all lines are drawn,” a circle whose circumference contains all “essence” (Lines 409-411). This description of the Creator is a theory found in a number of Sor Juana’s writings. Octavio Paz states that this the description of God as a circle whose center is everywhere echoes Nicholas of Cusa (374), a 15th century Cardinal of the Roman Catholic church who was a both a mathematician and a patron of “experimental knowledge”

(Britannica, “Scholasticism” 5). However, Aristotle, in *Metaphysics*, Part seven, also spoke of the First Cause in terms of a circle, “[The eternal mover originates motion by being the primary object of desire.]. . . There is, then, something which is always moved with an unceasing motion, which is motion in a circle” (145). Sor Juana’s spirit, following the symbolism of the pyramid, climbs ever higher toward that “Prime Mover.”

Two of Sor Juana’s images of the Creator are Trinitarian, that is, refer to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In Line 654-658 she calls on “. . . the supreme and marvelous triadic combination,” and again in Line 675 she refers to “. . . the Three in One, the Wondrous Maker . . .” The use of the Trinitarian doctrine demonstrates that the author was, on the one hand, well within the borders of Roman Catholic orthodoxy at that time. However, at the same time, she pushed those borders in order to express her position as an intelligent woman living in a time period which did not allow women freedom of intellect. Her poetry delineates both her struggle and the perimeters of her life of faith.

Sor Juana describes attributes of the Creator in Line 670 where she credits the creation of the “inner qualities” to the All-knowing, All-powerful Hand. This metaphor alludes to the work of creation and again mentions the circle, this time “joining Heaven with Earth” (Lines 671-2). There are other metaphors, such the “Divine” in Line 699, a word often used to describe the Creator, coming from the Latin word *divinus* or *divus*, meaning God or deity.

The Baroque language of this poem creates a magnificent and elaborate portal through which we can pass to experience the soul’s journey toward discovery and understanding of the Creator and creation. It is interesting that in 1680 Sor Juana was commissioned to design a real portal, a triumphal arch, for the entrance of the new Viceroy of New Spain, don Tomás Antonio

de la Cerda into the cathedral in Mexico City. This arch, constructed of wood, cloth and plaster, reached about thirty yards in height and took a month to complete (Paz 156). The surface of the structure was completely covered with paintings and inscriptions which drew on a complex blending of mythology, history and current events to form an overall allegory of the life of the viceroy. This archway represented his life in a three dimensional sense, just as the poem, "First Dream" becomes a spiritual archway for the reader to enter the intellectual and religious life of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

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