

“¿Qué Dios es ese que adoras?”: The Construction of Spectatorship in Sor Juana’s *Loa* for *The Divine Narcissus*

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Everyone sees what you appear to be; few make out what you really are.

— Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il Principe*

Ovid’s well-known rendition of Echo and Narcissus’ myth, undoubtedly familiar to Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, inspired her to write *The Divine Narcissus*, an *auto sacramental* whose sophisticated *loa* is the subject of this essay.¹ From the *auto*’s title, one might say, Ovid’s myth casts its mighty influence upon the *loa* and sets an array of reflecting images in motion. Everything in the play occupies a relative position: no image appears, no word is uttered, and no action takes place, without generating its own counterpart. The *loa* is constructed as an endless chain of replicas, each of which becomes also an original; everything in the *loa*, in short, may be seen simultaneously as an end and as a beginning, as a cause as well as an effect.

Such features are heralded, first, by the arrangement of the *dramatis personae*, and second, by the dialectical struggles that take place among them. The plot, as the reader will recall, revolves around the military and dialectical victory of a Spanish-Catholic group of characters over their Aztec-Heathen counterparts during the first stages of the Conquest of Mexico; as a result, the Aztecs will forsake their “God of the seeds,” embrace Catholicism, and recognize the authority of the King of Spain. On such premises, the characters appear to be divided in two opposing and complementary groups – to wit, the Indians and the Spaniards, or the Heathen and the Catholic. In accordance, América, an Aztec woman, confronts Religión, a Spanish lady; Occidente, a “gallant Indian,” faces Celo, a Spanish captain; and in the background, the

Musicians, a group of Aztec men and women, are matched with an army of Spanish Soldiers.

On first impression, then, a perfectly symmetrical division between Spaniards and Aztecs seems to characterize the play. This mirroring structure, however, unfolds yet again on closer examination. Each of the two sets of *dramatis personae* is divided into a new set of twin images, with an array of internal tensions among them. Thus, within each group there is a female character and her male counterpart, and, simultaneously, a collective chorus in the background mirrors the actions of the two individual *personae* in the foreground. Furthermore, Sor Juana enhances the architectural complexity of her *loa* by presenting us with a new set of duplicities. The group of characters physically present on the stage are set against a different group who are physically absent from it, but whose presence becomes, as Valérie Benoist indicates (74-75), a paramount element in the structure of the play – namely, the Royal Court in Madrid.

What these symmetrical sets of characters illustrate is one of the *loa*'s most remarkable characteristics, namely, the complex relation it establishes between form and content. This relation plays out in the dialogues between different sets of *personae* by means of which the play introduces some of the fundamental conflicts that informed the scholarly, religious, political, and social debates that concerned Sor Juana's and New Spain's intellectual life during the Baroque period.

Such is the case, for example, of the dialogical battle between the Aztecs and the Spaniards, whose confrontation lends the *loa* to insightful readings as an allegorical account of the struggles for the evangelization of the Indians in the early stages of the Conquest as well as a literary reflection of Sor Juana's "intenciones de mujer criolla que conocía y se enorgullecía del pasado histórico de su tierra," as Georgina Sabat de Rivers expresses it (300). The seemingly straightforward plot reveals the true complexity of the issue when considering, as Octavio Paz indicates, the profound theological controversy that the Conquest of the Americas and the spiritual status of their populations had provoked within the Catholic Church. The New World, Paz writes, precipitated a crisis in Catholic theology and the conscience of its missionaries, since the existence of the *new* lands and their populations could be interpreted to contradict the verse of the Gospel in which the resurrected Christ appeared unto the apostles and bade them to go into *all* the world and preach to *every* creature. Obviously, the fact that the American indigenous peoples did not worship the Catholic god seemed to be at odds with Jesus'

words, and the solutions that theologians found to this conundrum, Paz states, were numerous and ingenious. Such was the case of the Jesuits, who maintained that

the Indians' ancient beliefs – either by natural grace or because the Gospel had been preached in America prior to the arrival of the Spaniards – contained a glimmering of the true faith, even though only confused memories of the doctrine survived. In the seventeenth century this belief was extended and affirmed. It was a viewpoint [...] that implicitly undermined the basic principle of Spanish domination of America: evangelization. (37)

Clearly then, Sor Juana's *loa* intervenes in a crucial theological debate with far-reaching political implications. It is noteworthy that this was indeed quite a delicate move on her part; as Anthony Pagden explains, in the context of the Spanish American Empire "any judgment on the *nature* of the Indians" necessarily entailed an engagement with "the whole debate over [which] the justice of the conquest turned." Taking sides in this dispute implied nothing less than a readiness to offer an explanation "for the structure of the whole world of nature and the behavior of everything, animate or inanimate, within it," since each new element introduced would need to be accounted for, which in and of itself was a potential threat for the stability of existing cosmologies (28).

Undoubtedly aware of these implications, Sor Juana tackled the issue with notable prudence and on quite ambiguous terms, in a deft exercise of double entendre. On the one hand, the striking symmetry and resemblance between the "great God of the Seeds" and the Catholic God, as well as the likeness of their respective liturgies, could be interpreted as supporting the Jesuits' viewpoint. In this case, the *loa* would be performing a perilous questioning of the very principle on which the Spanish Crown's domination of the Americas rested, that is, the sacred mandate of the evangelization of the indigenous peoples of the New World. But then again, on the other hand, the play clearly proclaims the firm and rightful loyalty of the Indies to the King of Spain, by means of the customary *captatio benevolentiae* for the *auto* following the *loa*:

CELO:

Siendo así, a los Reales Pies,
En quien dos mundos se cifran,
Pidamos perdón postrados;
Y a su reina esclarecida,

cuyas soberanas plantas
besan humildes las Indias. (473-78)

Therefore, it is impossible to determine what position the *loa* takes in the debate. The Jesuits' conclusions, the Crown's rightful sovereignty over the Indies, or even a parodical account of any of the former – all of these readings are plausible.

It is noteworthy, however, that the justice or injustice of the Spanish-Catholic dominion over native-American peoples is by no means the only issue at play in the *loa*. Rather, an array of different tensions runs throughout the play, all of them interwoven with the general frame of the conflict between the Catholics and the Heathens. These conflicts are brought up – or, more accurately perhaps, insinuated – in dialogues between different sets of characters. Let us take, for example, the Religión-Celo coupling. Their conversations expose, among other matters, the intricate mechanisms that linked the military and religious logics during the Conquest, as well as their crucial role in the consolidation of the imperial system at large. The allegorical marriage between these characters, the male/masculine Celo and the female/feminine Religión, clearly signifies the intimate and oppressive interlocking of both systems of control. As soon as the couple appears onstage, Religión reproaches Celo his lack of action against the Aztec's "idolatry," and he replies,

Religión: no tan aprisa
de mi omisión te querelles,
te quejes de mis caricias;
pues ya levantado el brazo,
ya blandida la cuchilla
traigo, para tus venganzas. (80-85)

By the same token, the *loa* partakes in the controversy about the role of women within the traditionally male-dominated Catholic Church, and about the place of women in the intellectual world at large – two major concerns of Sor Juana's, as attested by her *Respuesta de la poetisa a la muy ilustre Sor Filotea de la Cruz*. In this instance, in a manner that brings to mind the way in which Sor Juana's skillful meekness allows her to perform a full-fledged intellectual tour-de-force in her response to the Bishop of Puebla, Religión claims her right and her ability to wield reason's light in public. América's defeat at the hands of Celo needs to be fulfilled by means that lie beyond the captain's reach:

Sí, porque haberla vencido
le tocó a tu valentía,
pero a mi piedad le toca
el conservarle la vida:
porque vencerla por fuerza
te tocó; mas el rendirla
con razón, me toca a mí,
con suavidad persuasiva. (210-17)

Softly yet firmly, these verses assert women's capacity to resort to reason, and to take an active role within the public domain. And, although female actions need to be wrapped in persuasive softness, they can also fulfill tasks that escape the powers of male "valentía" and physical "fuerza."²

The fact that, as I have tried to show in the previous pages, some thorny issues are woven within the play's seemingly simple and orthodox discourse is undoubtedly a significant stance in itself – all the more so given the circumstance that Sor Juana's participation in public intellectual debates caused deep misgivings in her superiors.³ Precisely for this reason, the only way in which the play could address certain issues while dodging censorship's innumerable manifestations was to perform a dialogue in which the orthodox positions and characters would be privileged at every turn. All of the play's conflicts, in other words, end up being resolved in what one might call a presentable manner. In consequence, the *loa* affirms the Crown's supreme authority, it validates political domination for rightful religious reasons, and it acquiesces to the subordination of women in the spiritual as well as the intellectual realm.

And yet, I would argue that the *loa*'s apparent orthodoxy allows for quite a different reading. Unorthodox ideas and characters must appear as marginal, subordinate, and faulty precisely because only under such forms could they ever become manifest. What the play seems to imply is, in other words, that only as mistaken and subordinated can the mistaken and the subordinated be granted a voice on the public stage – what is considered erroneous and marginal, in sum, must be always represented in strict accordance with the rules of orthodoxy. And yet the *loa*, under a prudent veil of apparent acquiescence, carries an unexpected message, for it equally exposes the extent to which ambiguity is a basic feature of all power relations. In the play, the subaltern characters simultaneously accept and subvert the status they are forced to embody. On the one hand, the Aztecs, the women, and the Americas accept what is granted to them, namely, a voice in a dialogue that

is meant to enhance the predominant values and ideas of Christendom, Spain, and men. And yet, on the other hand, the subordinated characters succeed in inserting their own discourse in such a dialogue – albeit still filtered through a privileged hand that writes such as Sor Juana’s – thus exposing the fissures and faults in the system that is imposed upon them.

As is well known, this is precisely one of the artifices that Josefina Ludmer identifies in Sor Juana’s *Respuesta a Sor Filotea*, one of the “tricks of the weak” by virtue of which the nun tried to elude the intellectual constraints that her superiors wished to force upon her. In situations characterized by hierarchic structures of power, the dominant party’s gesture consists in allowing the weak to speak, on the clear *a priori* understanding that the privilege of speaking must be used in such a way that the governing discourse be adopted by the weak in all their utterances. According to Ludmer, Sor Juana would take the opportunity afforded to her by her superiors – the chance to exercise a voice of her own – as the only available means for her voice to be heard. While seeming to abide by the pact of compliance, however, she would be able to encode her message of resistance, as a way of questioning the very discursive and normative system in which she was forced to inscribe her words (51). Ludmer, in other words, emphasizes the idea that the weak need to encrypt their own presence as well as their discourse in order to survive in a system in which they are considered to be alien – or “other,” in Michel de Certeau’s terms. All adverse situations of power, he writes, force the weak to play by the rules imposed upon them by those who occupy dominating positions. Operating under adverse circumstances and within a hostile “territory,” maneuvering within “the enemy’s field of vision,” the weak need to resort to “tactics” instead of “strategies.” A tactic, he argues, is “an art of the weak [...]. Power is bound by its very visibility. In contrast, trickery is possible for the weak, and often it is his only possibility, ‘as a last resort’: ‘The weaker the forces at the disposition of the strategist, the more the strategist will be able to use deception.’ I translate: the more the strategy is transformed into tactics” (37).

Along comparable lines, Slavoj Žižek shows how some of these tactics may function in circumstances in which censorship threatens to thwart and punish any attempt at getting through messages questioning the established system and its dogmas. Under such conditions, it is still possible to get the subversive message through by resorting to the traditional artifice of “inscribing the very reference to the code into the encoded language, as one of its elements” (1-3). According to Mabel Moraña, this kind of encrypted

language constitutes precisely one of the most remarkable characteristics of literary manifestations of the Hispanic Baroque. Indeed, she proposes that “[I]a lectura del reverso del texto, la búsqueda de lo oculto y camuflado, la interpretación, en fin, de ambigüedades, reticencias, ironías y subterfugios es, en efecto, imprescindible en toda aproximación al discurso barroco” (166). A Baroque text would be, from this perspective, primordially a configuration of “indicios que, expresados muchas veces con el lenguaje y la retórica dominantes, se mimetizan con la visión del mundo hegemónica, la remedan, parodian o utilizan para sus propios fines” (31).

In light of these insights, it becomes inevitable to read Sor Juana’s *loa* with suspicious eyes, as it were. Thus, whenever one either affirms or implies that under the present circumstances it is impossible to speak one’s true mind, what one is actually stating is that one might indeed disagree with whatever he or she happens to be asserting at any given point. Or, to put it differently, whenever it is known that speaking honestly entails a major threat for the speaker, an imaginary question mark looms over the entirety of his or her words. And, once the possibility of falsehood is thus embedded in every utterance, it is practically impossible to ascertain whether any given statement actually means what it seems to mean, or its contrary. Whenever honesty is under siege, then, every remark becomes twofold, since it carries both the affirmation and the negation of its own predicate.

To put it differently, one can approach the *loa*’s words and images as exposed through concealment, or, conversely, as concealed through exposure. Let us recall, for example, Occidente’s rendition to the Spanish Captain:

Yo ya dije que me obliga
 a rendirme a ti la fuerza;
 y en esto, claro se explica
 que no hay fuerza ni violencia
 que a la voluntad impida
 sus libres operaciones;
 y así, aunque cautivo gima,
 ¡no me podrás impedir
 que acá, en mi corazón, diga
 que venero al gran Dios de las Semillas! (237-46)

Occidente’s words are loud and clear. He openly proclaims his rebellion against the system that is being imposed upon him by force, and he declares that his subjugation is exclusively external and apparent. Moreover, he affirms

the inherent pointlessness of attempting to subject an individual's free will by means of violence.

I would argue, however, that even in the case of such apparent openness and honesty as one can find in Occidente's words, the *loa* reveals more than it actually says. The Aztec's rebellious stance suggests a critique of censorship that exceeds the mere denunciation of the unfairness and the futility of Celo's actions, or the reproof of the abuses and injustices brought about by the Conquest. What he exposes is, first, the idea that no military conquest can subjugate reason (Grossi 553). And, secondly, what his words lay bare is indeed the intrinsic perversity of any system based primordially on the recourse to violence. For under the rule of Celo's sword, even if Occidente concealed his rebellious attitude, the possibility that he would acquiesce to the captain's domination due exclusively to his fear would inevitably turn him into a suspect. And yet, the same would apply to the "crowned Indian" were he actually honest about converting to Rome's and the King's authority. In a violence-based system, then, suspicion looms over both loyalty and rebellion; coercion, in sum, creates and reinforces the very reason that allegedly justifies its existence. Moreover, this line of thought could be taken still a little further. In light of Machiavelli's well-known insights, given that honesty in public entails a hazard rather than a virtue, it follows that the possibility of sincerity would be confined to the interior realm of the individual as the only space in which it would have an opportunity to thrive. Therefore, insincerity in its many manifestations (double entendres, deceits, silences) would be not only comprehensible but also inevitable as a tactic for survival under repression. The realm of the public, in sum, would be definitively consecrated as the dominion of utter dishonesty.

A different example of how Sor Juana's *loa* might be inscribing the very reference to the code into the encoded language as one of its elements can be found in Religión's declared plan to make the Aztecs "see" the "true faith":

¿Hasta dónde tu malicia
quiere remedar de Dios
las sagradas Maravillas?
Pero con tu mismo engaño,
si Dios mi lengua habilita,
te tengo de convencer. (270-75)

In this case, the artifice takes on a different nuance with respect to Occidente's. The explicit affirmation of possibly deceitful intentions behind one's

utterances implies that words do not necessarily mean what they seem to be saying. Not *necessarily*, that is, since the key to the entire play lies in maintaining the shadow of a doubt looming over all statements, in suspicion haunting all affirmations. In fact, neither Occidente nor Religión mask their true intentions. The former openly declares that his surrender is forced upon him and that no violence can undermine his true beliefs; the latter candidly affirms that she plans to be deceitful in order to convert the Heathen. And yet, Occidente declares his resolve to be sincere in order to achieve his spurious aspirations (to maintain his loyalty to “blind Idolatry” despite coercion), while Religión affirms her decision to be insincere in order to achieve her rightful purposes (that is, to trick América and Occidente away from their “false gods”). Simply put, the implication would be that one may achieve “goodness” or “truth” through “evil” or “deceit,” and vice-versa. A sense of ambiguity informs the *loa* at its very core, and the structure of the play is such that a number of conflicting interpretations not only become possible but, rather, inevitable; no character, no declaration is complete without its own reflection, echo, or counterpart.

The *loa*'s enhanced dialectical structure produces yet another curious situation, to wit, that from a certain point of view, all dialogues implicitly situate participating interlocutors at a level of equality; or, to express it more accurately, all dialogues denote the speakers' parity as “subjects.” Émile Benveniste suggests such an insight in his discussion of the nature of personal pronouns. *I* and *you*, he avers, refer to no other reality than that of the discourse; *I* refers to “the individual who utters the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance *I*,” and, by introducing the situation of “address,” we obtain a symmetrical definition for *you* as “the individual spoken to in the present instance of discourse containing the linguistic instance *you*.” Therefore,

[*I* and *you*] are always available and become “full” as soon as a speaker introduces them into each instance of his discourse. Since they lack material reference, they cannot be misused; since they do not assert anything, they are not subject of the condition of truth and escape all denial. Their role is to provide the instrument of a conversion that one could call the conversion of language into discourse. It is by identifying himself as a unique person pronouncing *I* that each speaker sets himself up in turn as the “subject.” (218-20)

From this perspective, all of the *loa*'s *dramatis personae* become equals in terms of what Benveniste describes as “irreducible subjectivity” (220), and

such an impression of subjective equality becomes powerfully emphasized by the symmetrical configuration of the two opposing camps, as well as by the correspondence between characters on each side, which suggests that all the *personae* are but complementary images of a two-fold configuration.

One cannot help but notice, however, the sharp contrast between the sense of equilibrium conveyed by the dialectic and formal structure, on the one hand, and the uneven positions that the Spanish-Catholic personages and the Aztec-Heathen characters occupy as they fight their ideological and religious battle. As the plot develops, the Catholic grouping gradually dominates the situation until it finally prevails, at least apparently, when the Aztecs proclaim their rendition:

OCCIDENTE:

¡Vamos, que ya mi agonía
 quiere ver cómo es el Dios
 que me han de dar en comida,
 (*Cantan la América, el Occidente y el Celo:*)
 diciendo que ya
 conocen las Indias
 al que es el verdadero
 Dios de las Semillas! (485-92)

The question arises, then, about the meaning of the blatant contradiction between the formal and structural equilibrium, on the one hand, and the uneven outcome of the plot, on the other. Once again, the *loa* allows for several disparate readings, the most obvious one being that the Spaniards-Catholics owe their final victory to their moral excellence and to the spiritual superiority of the “true faith.” Then again, it is equally plausible to interpret that the symmetry of the *dramatis personae* as well as the sense of equality inherent in the dialogical form itself might serve the purpose of counterbalancing the overwhelming privileging of the “normative” at the level of the plot. The tension between the form and structure on one side, and the content on the other, could be intended, in other words, to disrupt, if surreptitiously, the *loa*’s apparent orthodoxy, and, accordingly, to stress the lack of, and maybe the need for, a balanced, rational dialogue between the Heathen and the Catholic, the women and the men, Mexico and Madrid. This claim becomes quite explicit in the final part of the *loa*:

RELIGION:

Como aquesto sólo mira
 a celebrar el Misterio,

y aquestas introducidas
 personas no son más que
 unos abstractos, que pintan
 lo que se intenta decir,
 no habrá cosa que desdiga,
 aunque las lleve a Madrid:
 que a especies intelectivas
 ni habrá distancias que estorben
 ni mares que les impidan. (462-72)

By virtue of these verses, the play demands the extension of its dialectical structure beyond its own textual limits, across long distances as well as wide oceans, advocating for a conversation among “especies intelectivas.” And, in a comparable move, the final *dedicatoria* designates the King and Queen, the instances of highest authority, as the play’s ultimate interlocutors. I would argue that, by metonymy, the royal couple’s vantage is juxtaposed with that of the spectator, whose presence is elliptically stated when América invokes⁴

a sus Ingenios,
 a quien humilde suplica
 el mío, que le perdonen
 el querer con toscas líneas
 describir tanto Misterio. (481-85)

Thus, the spectators are placed at the highest level of authority. The audience’s perspective is elevated to Royal status by virtue of “la horizontalidad del texto alegórico,” as Verónica Grossi describes it, given that deciphering the allegory’s meaning “no es monopolio de la autoridad sino privilegio del entendimiento humano” (545).

As it corresponds to such a preeminent role, the spectator’s presence is doubly inserted in the *loa* by means of explicit designations (the “Royal Council,” the “Ladies,” and the “Ingenios”) as well as by means of a general appellation to all of Spain’s anonymous “especies intelectivas” who are indeed, as Carmela Zanelli indicates, “los receptores que la poeta tenía en mente” (184). Moreover, the vital role of the spectator is underlined because the play urges him or her to act, to do something, to take action about what he or she sees.⁵ He or she must understand and not let thought be hindered by distance; he or she must use his or her wits, and overcome all sorts of impediments. In other words, the King/spectator is called upon to engage in a dialogue with the play and decipher its meaning. Such an invitation is explicitly issued by Religión in verse 249, its paramount importance proclaimed both from a

formal point of view (it is located in the exact center of the play's 500 verses), and from the perspective of its content (an inquiry about the nature of God, the most fundamental question of all in Catholic cosmology):

¿Qué Dios es ese que adoras?

The call for the spectator to participate, in other words, constitutes not only the axis of the play from a formal perspective but also its overarching theme.⁶ By placing such a fundamental query at the very heart of the play, Sor Juana proclaims that she would not be able to achieve her own purposes without the spectator's setting in motion the *loa*'s meaning-making mechanisms. Such complicity on the spectator's part entails playing his or her acceptance of a part in the *loa*. His or her fundamental mission consists in trying to unravel the uncountable ambiguities and riddles that make up the play, whose "espacio alegórico [...] desestabiliza todo criterio de verdad absoluta" (Grossi 553-54). Only when someone engages with deciphering its codes may the play come alive and set its meaning-making processes in motion. As a mirror, the *loa* only comes into being completely, or meets its own *raison d'être*, when someone looks into it.

This point is deftly laid out by Leo Steinberg's elaboration on the paradigmatic example of Spanish Baroque painting, Velazquez' painting *Las Meninas* (1656). According to Steinberg, the canvas issues an invitation to the spectator – a call, I propose, akin to the one that the *loa* delivers – that produces an intriguing phenomenon when he or she agrees to engage in the game that the work of art proposes. Once the spectator accepts the summons, "the picture reduces the real world and the symbolic world to psychic equivalence, like the two pans of a scale, each acted on by the other" (54). The painting, through the spectator's participation, transcends its own inanimate condition – or, as Martin Heidegger might call it, its "thingness" – and thus becomes a vital presence which makes a living encounter between itself and the spectator possible:⁷

If the picture were speaking instead of flashing, it would be saying: I see you seeing me – I in you see myself seen – see you seeing yourself seen – and so on beyond the reaches of grammar. Confronted with mirrors we are, polarized selves, reflecting one another's consciousness without end; partaking of an infinity that is not spatial, but psychological – an infinity not cast in the outer world, but in the mind that knows and knows itself known. The mirror within 'Las Meninas' is merely its central emblem, a sign of the whole. 'Las

Meninas' in its entirety is a metaphor, a mirror of consciousness.
(54)

As in any vital exchange, then, the work of art becomes the alternate pole in a situation of reciprocal self-recognition – of “pure reciprocity,” in Michel Foucault’s terms – in which the boundaries between the beholder and the object disappear, as both instances become simultaneously the recognizer and the recognized.⁸ This reciprocal game where ends meet beginnings, where the spectator becomes the spectacle, and where gazes are ceaselessly returned, brings to mind once again Ovid’s mythical story of the boy who became perplexed at the sight of his own image on the pool:

Why try to grasp at shadows in their flight?
What he had tried to hold resided nowhere,
For had he turned away, it fell to nothing:
His love was cursed. Only the glancing mirror
Of reflections filled his eyes, a body
That had no being of its own, a shade
That came, stayed, left him – if he could leave it. (99)

Vis-à-vis Echo and Narcissus’ story, Sor Juana’s *loa* seems to deliver quite an intriguing message. As was the case with the young boy’s beloved image, her *loa* comes alive only if and when someone looks at it, or, rather, into it. The core of the play, in other words, does not lie in the final deciphering of its keys; rather, it happens as the spectator engages in the act of deciphering. As in Narcissus’ tale, what creates a beloved image is an inquisitive look projected onto a reflecting surface. Desire creates its own objects, as when Narcissus bent over the mirroring waters, and then fell in love with what he saw.

Thus considered, the messages encoded in the *loa* become mechanisms created for the purpose of preserving the play’s own continuity; the alluring promise of a secret waiting to be revealed is primordially meant to arouse the spectator’s desire to know, to stimulate his or her engagement, and thus bring the artifact to life. Or, to express it differently, it is precisely the belief that there is a secret to be revealed, or an answer to the riddle, that sets the mechanism in motion by enticing the spectator into searching for the keys to the artifact. Analogous to the way in which Narcissus’ lover was created by the ephebe’s love-struck gaze, the artwork comes into being by virtue of the spectator’s desire-driven look. It is the very process of searching that produces knowledge, truth, and beauty; the intellectual and artistic pleasures that the artifact yields are, in this sense, means as well as ends, perceptions as well as fabrications of the onlooker’s.

The spectator's findings, in other words, happen as he or she searches: what he or she encounters is not simply an object lying dormant in the outside world, waiting to be awakened by a glance. In Sor Juana's *loa*, the spectator engages in the play because she believes that she can seize its secrets, unaware that it is she who creates them. Like Narcissus, the spectator is driven by the illusion that what she is looking for exists outside of herself and within her reach. The truth and beauty of a work of art originate simultaneously inside and outside of the beholder, within and beyond her reach. She constitutes the ungraspable object of desire, and is, in turn, constituted by it – as Jacques Lacan puts it, “we are beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world. That which makes us consciousness institutes us by the same token as *speculum mundi*” (75).

It is in the realm of this ceaseless interplay between images and replicas where the artwork comes into being. Sor Juana's play, in consequence, resists any attempt at closed interpretation because her goal was precisely not simply to elicit but also to maintain the spectator's acts of elucidation. By virtue of her work's ingenious architecture, the *criolla* nun turned the world into a chamber of mirrors. That was the paradox, she understood: to make the world see itself, it needed to look at itself in the belief that it was looking at something else, at *another* world. And by making her world see itself, she could see herself seen – she could exist. By virtue of the mirrors in her *loa*, she managed to have her voice seen, at once loud and silent, revealed and concealed, uttered through silence.

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Notes

¹ As Lee A. Daniel points out, the *loa*, initially a brief monologue “entirely prefatory in nature,” evolved until, in the hands of Calderón de la Barca and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, it became a brief yet complex one-act play in its own right (6). Arguably the most prolific *loa* author of Hispanic America, Sor Juana wrote eighteen extant *loas*, some of which are secular-themed brief plays preceding comedias; others are “independent,” in the sense that they do not bear any apparent relation to the following longer works; and finally, a third group consists of religious or sacramental *loas* preceding autos sacramentales.

² Judith A. Kirkpatrick avers that the “male figures” in Sor Juana's text are concerned primarily with “physical and moral power and domination,” while “the women” are given the true power in the play, “for they are the ones directly associated with the all-important word” (57-58).

³ Shortly after the publication of “The Divine Narcissus” in 1689, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, Bishop of Puebla, wrote a letter to Sor Juana under the pseudonym of Sor Filotea de la Cruz in which he warned her about such participation in public intellectual debates. In Octavio Paz' words,

“Sor Filotea agrees with the notion that women may study provided that study not make them arrogant [...]. Then the author voices a reservation, one that is essential: what a pity that Sor Juana had devoted herself to secular and not sacred writing” (413).

⁴ In his book “Barroco,” Severo Sarduy brings together two of the most relevant mechanisms at work in “Las Meninas,” which, as I am trying to show, also inform the loa – the simultaneous ellipsis of the subject as well as his or her centrality are intimately intertwined in the play’s architecture. As Sarduy points out, Velazquez’s picture is structured around a “double ellipsis” which is in turn inextricably related to the idea of the “subject”. On the one hand, there is the subject as that which is imitated by the artwork. In this instance, the ellipsis functions as “absence of that which is named,” as the “crossing out” of that invisible external referent in relation to which the painting presents itself “as a reflection,” as the erasure of “that which the canvas reproduces, of that at which everybody looks.” On the other hand, argues Sarduy, this first ellipsis leads to yet another one that “elevates [“Las Meninas”] to the Baroque,” given that the initial “elided subject” unfolds as the “foundation of the representation.” In this instance, the subject becomes agent, protagonist, and authority; it operates as the paramount organizing principle—or, in Sarduy’s metaphorical formulations, “the king around whom everyone gravitates, and whom everyone sees,” “the organizing gaze” and “the one who sees” (79; my translation).

⁵ “A modo de conclusión, se debe describir al espectador ideal de sor Juana Inés en su función de intérprete competente y privilegiado de la doble obra teatral [...]. Ese lector/espectador ideal de la loa y el auto de sor Juana Inés así recombinan la hermenéutica de mito, misterio, símbolo, concepto y ejemplo en términos de acción poética, agencia teatral y acto devoto” (González-Casanovas 318-19).

⁶ The call to “see” is explicit in several parts of the loa. “¡Abrid los ojos!” exclaims Religión in verse 106, and she re-issues her invitation in verses 401-412. As José Antonio Maravall shows, the idea of education endorsed by most Baroque writers relied greatly on “attracting the senses” (170). Within the general concept of sense-based learning, sight was the privileged means towards knowledge: “En primer lugar, porque lo que se ve nos parece cosa insuperablemente comprobada [...]. Y aunque el escritor barroco guste de poner de manifiesto el ‘engaño a los ojos’ que el mundo nos tiende a cada paso, y aunque sea motivo de particular virtuosismo para el artista barroco la técnica del ‘trompe-l’oeil’, lo cierto es que el hombre del siglo XVII pone en la vista su mayor confianza. Precisamente por eso se divierte en hacerla caer en la trampa. Ese hombre del Barroco valora, sobre todo, aquellos caminos que van de la figuración sensible al conocimiento de lo real” (175).

⁷ In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Martin Heidegger characterizes the artwork’s ability to go beyond its own boundary – to transcend its “thingness” – as its allegorical quality. The German philosopher writes that “[t]he artwork is, to be sure, a thing that is made, but it says something other than what the mere thing itself is, algo agoreuei. The work makes public something other than itself; it manifests something other; it is an allegory. In the work of art something other is brought together with the thing that is made” (145-46).

⁸ The relationship between the artwork and the beholder as a process of self-recognition is also analyzed by Michel Foucault in his well-known essay “Las Meninas,” where he highlights the “condition of pure reciprocity” that characterizes the painting: “What is there, then, we ask at last, in that place which is completely inaccessible because it is exterior to the picture, yet is prescribed by all the lines of composition? What is the spectacle, what are the faces that are reflected first of all in the depths of the Infanta’s eyes, then in the courtier’s, and finally in the distant glow of the mirror? But the question immediately becomes a double one: the face reflected in the mirror is also the face that is contemplating it; what all the figures in the picture are looking at are the two figures to whose eyes they too present a scene to be observed. The entire picture is looking out at a scene for which it is itself a scene” (13-14).

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