



Christ as Divine Narcissus: A Theological Analysis of “El Divino Narciso” by Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz

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Seventeenth-century Mexico saw the emergence of a remarkable woman, Sor (Sister) Juana Ines de la Cruz, who from behind convent walls managed to build a monument,¹ produce plays, compose liturgical sequences sung in major cathedrals, and write a theological treatise. Appreciation of the various dimensions of her work and person have evolved over the past thirty years. Long considered one of Mexico’s greatest lyric poets, more recently she has been of interest to feminists because of her remarkable letter answering church critics in a spirited defense of the right of women to be intellectuals. Nobel laureate Octavio Paz, Sor Juana’s most renowned biographer, in his brilliant study considers her play *El Divino Narciso* (the Divine Narcissus) one of the greatest Spanish sacramental dramas. It combines three cultural traditions present in the evolving Mexican (*criollo*) culture of the seventeenth century: Greek and Roman classical antiquity, which was the basis of formal education; post-Tridentine theology, with its emphasis on what distinguished Catholicism from Protestantism; and the culture of the indigenous peoples, present, but for the most part ignored in the cultural representations of the period.

Only recently has the theological aspect of her work begun to come under

¹One of her first commissions was the “construction” of a triumphal arch through which the new viceroy, Tomás Antonio de la Cerda, entered the cathedral in Mexico City in 1680.

significant consideration.² Paz, for example, is less than admiring: “It is not easy to take her theological opinions very seriously; rather than deep convictions, they were brilliant speculations to be uttered in a lecture hall, in a convent locutory, or on the stage of a theater.”³ As a theologian I find her religious thought exciting precisely because the diverse settings for which she wrote and the varied forms, including the drama and poetry in which her work is embodied, gave her flexibility for developing novel angles on theological material. In *El Divino Narciso*, for example, Sor Juana combines forms of baroque theater, including allegorical characters, pagan mythology and the conventions of the sacramental drama, into a subtle but forceful theological argument with a potentially subversive political impact.

Examination of the *patterning* of traditional themes, images, and arguments reveals that Sor Juana was presenting theological positions which challenged standard accents of post-Tridentine theology, especially regarding revelation and salvation, by relativizing the relationship between natural and revealed religion and by stressing the universality of the divine salvific will.

In so doing, she has consciously adopted the two basic ideas developed during the previous century by Bartolome de Las Casas, great defender of the Indians and critic of the Spanish conquest, in order to become the advocate of the Indians at the court of the Spanish King, Charles the Second. In the following analysis I try to demonstrate the construction of the argument within the play and also to give an impression of the complexity of the imagination at work in it.

I. CHRIST AS THE DIVINE NARCISSUS

The image of Christ as Divine Narcissus takes us straight into the world of the Spanish baroque, a world in which the universe was viewed (again in Paz' words) "through the mirror of analogy which converted beings and things into images which radiated both contradictory and complementary meanings." Baroque drama often incorporated self-conscious constructions and discussions about what it was doing. Thus, typically, *The Divine Narcissus* begins with a conversation about constructing an allegorical play which is already itself an allegorical play. Two women enter dressed as nymphs: Synagogue and Paganism, each with her accompanying chorus of nymphs and shepherds. Synagogue sings the praises of "the Lord of all humans" (a variation of the first line of Psalm 116, "Praise the Lord all you peoples"). Paganism applauds Narcissus and his divine beauty. Human Nature, also a woman, enters dressed "in a bizarre manner." As "the mother of both of them according to natural law" (v. 124)⁵ Human Nature

²George Tavares's recent *Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Theology of Beauty: The First Mexican Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), is the first specifically on this topic, though Marie-Cecile Benassy-Berling's excellent *Humanisme et Religion chez Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz: La Femme et la Culture aux XVIIe Siecle* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1982) treats a number of theological themes.

³Octavio Paz, *Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, or The Traps of Faith*, tr. Margaret Sayers Peden (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988) 343.

⁴*Ibid.*, 340: "The Europeans of the Baroque Age contemplated the universe in the mirror of analogy that converts things and beings into images that irradiate contradictory and complementary meanings."

⁵All quotes from *El Divino Narciso* are my translation of the verses cited in the edition of Alfonso Mendez Plancarte, *Autos y Loas*, vol. 3 of *Obras Completas de Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1955) 3-97.

addresses both and proposes to present an allegory which will take its meaning from Synagogue and its voice from Paganism. In a second rendering of the relationship (v. 133), she says that Synagogue will "give a body to the idea" which Paganism will dress, ("*tu el vestido le cortas*"). Though maintaining the conventional ordering of revealed over natural religion on the surface, a shift from a clear primacy of revealed religion is introduced through the costuming of the allegorical figures, and through their described family relationships. Both Paganism and Synagogue appear as nymphs whereas Human Nature, identified as their mother, does not have the clothes of any people or period, but is only described as bizarrely dressed. Furthermore, *Natura Humana*, as their mother, speaks to them both as equally her daughters. Though she first describes Paganism as a "perishable beauty" (v. 64) and Synagogue as "certain in the discourses of her prophets" (vv. 66-67), she goes on to remind them (and the audience) that a time will come when they will change places, an obvious reference to the rejection of the gospel by the Jews and its acceptance by the pagans. Concluding her assignment of roles, Human Nature

introduces what I propose to be one of the major ideas the play wishes to convey: “Through their frequent conformity divine and human letters tell us that the highest mysteries can begin to come into view even through the pen of pagans” (vv.125-130).

This idea is reinforced as the play combines the stories of Narcissus of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and Jesus of the gospels. Ovid’s Narcissus is a proud young man; disdaining the love of other young men and women, the most famous being the nymph Echo, he roams the woods as a hunter until one day he falls in love with his own image reflected in a forest pond. Tormented by this frustrated love he cries out, “Oh, I am he! Oh, now I know for sure/The image is my own; it’s for myself/I burn with love; I fan the flames I feel./ What now/ Woo or be wooed? Why woo at all?/ My love’s myself—my riches beggar me.”⁶ He wastes away leaving not even his bones, but a flower, a golden cup surrounded by white petals (an image later used to represent the eucharist). Sor Juana stays close to the plot of the fable, even incorporating in poetic paraphrase parts of Ovid’s text. Yet her use of biblical material gives a distinctive cast to the personality of Narcissus. Narcissus is not a hunter but the good shepherd of the gospels, who, as in the Lukan parable, goes off in search of the one lost sheep (Human Nature) and, as in John’s gospel, becomes in his death the shepherd who gives his life for his sheep.

In the unfolding drama, Human Nature, speaking in a paraphrase of the Song of Songs, is introduced as the beloved seeking her lover, Narciso. By patterning the relationship between Human Nature and the Divine Narcissus after the words of the Song of Songs, Sor Juana transforms the search from that of the master for his property (shepherd/sheep) to the mutual search and longing of lovers equally anxious and equally confronted with limitations and frustrations. From a theological perspective, this patterning implies a radical friendship of God and humanity. Not only is God/El Divino capable of suffering and dying, but he is portrayed as driven by a passionate, suffering love toward his beloved. Thus Narciso (even as divine) is shown to be suffering “pain without equal which had outraged his being” (vv. 1576-79) because of the lack of response of his image. The

⁶Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, tr. A. D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 64-65.

text itself raises the question: “How can divine impassible being be so fiercely subjected to such inhuman pain?” (vv.1590-1594). Love has so wounded Narciso that his beauty suffers: “Love has made my perfect beauty mortal” (vv. 1601-3). Narciso’s death scene is a comment on the pain of the fire of love. His words: “Scant is the material of one life for the form of such a great fire” (vv.1694-5).

Narciso has become the God of whom the mystics speak, who is no longer king but suffering lover. Sor Juana draws from the writings of the great Carmelite mystics, John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila, to enrich her idea by reversing their imagery. For example, in one of Teresa of Avila’s poems God, the gentle hunter, hits her soul with a poisoned dart of love which unites her to her Creator who is “my lover for me and I am for my lover” (“*que es mi Amado para mi/ y yo soy para mi Amado*”).⁷ Similarly, John of the Cross has the bride refer to the wounds the hunter has made in the heart of the beloved.⁸ Sor Juana has Divine Narcissus wounded rather than wounding. He speaks of the arrows of love that have so painfully wounded him that he will die for love (vv. 1694-1616).

Though Divine Narcissus may correspond to the God of the mystics, Sor Juana’s

interpretation of the bride of the Song of Songs is not the traditional one. She is not the individual soul or the mystic, nor the synagogue or the church, but rather “human nature” universalized. This novel interpretation marks another shift in theological accent. *El Divino Narciso* is not dying for the love of a chosen single person or people, but his chosen one is all humanity.

Narciso’s metamorphosis from shepherd to lover occurs at the fountain when he falls in love with the image he sees reflected there. The image he recognizes as his own is the composite image of Human Nature and Grace, who, hidden in the branches on either side of the fountain, are looking into it. A human other, not the cold reflection of himself (as in Ovid), meets his eyes, and his song of delight resembles Adam’s cry of recognition at the sight of Eve in Genesis 2: bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh.

Much has been written about the meaning of the spring or fountain which, at first mention, seems to correspond to the baptismal font through which the stain of original sin is washed away.⁹ One problem with this interpretation is that it fails to consider the play’s use of water imagery in connection with sin. Sor Juana has Human Nature repeatedly speak of her sin and the sins of humanity throughout history in terms of water: “I call my sins filthy waters, whose obscene colors disfigure and decompose my beauty, and so alter my features that if Narciso were to see me he would not recognize me” (vv. 232-39). She describes the sin of the first human as being “a sea, whose foam no one escapes.” She speaks of many streams, of many obscene rivers of sinners, in which Human Nature is always submerged and which hide her beauty (vv. 240-49). Though at one point Human Nature does speak of washing her sins (vv. 270-71), when she finally arrives at the fountain it is not to wash but to have her face reflected in the water of the pure fountain. In

⁷Teresa de Avila, *Obras de Santa Teresa de Jesus* (Madrid: Editorial Apostolado de la Prensa, 1964) 1120.

⁸*Cantico Espiritual*, in *Obras de San Juan de la Cruz* (Madrid: Editorial Apostolado de la Prensa, 1966) 553.

⁹*El Divino Narciso*, 533.

another shift from the expected, the fountain has become the one immaculately conceived, the Virgin Mary, through whose intercession (here the clear waters of this fountain) Human Nature can hope for salvation. In a duet both Grace and Nature call upon the fountain to mediate a clear reflection of Human Nature, revealing her true beauty, so that the beautiful Narcissus will fall in love with her. Sor Juana’s shifting of the meaning of the fountain from the expected baptismal font to the Virgin Mary’s immaculate humanity parallels the shift in her interpretation of the bride in the Song of Songs. It is a movement away from the identification of the image with a rite in a particular religious tradition, baptism, to the figure of a generalized purified humanity which is the object of passionate divine love.

II. *EL DIVINO NARCISO*, LAS CASAS, AND THE CONQUEST

The particular significance of the universalizing tendencies in the theology of *El Divino Narciso* as well as its connection with Las Casas become apparent when considered together with its accompanying short untitled preface play (*loa*). The *loa* is also an allegory. Its characters are two couples: Occidente (the West) and America, dressed in festive Indian dress; Religion, a

Spanish lady, and Celo (Furious Zeal), as an armed Capitan General conquistador. The Spanish couple stumbles onto the Indians celebrating in song and dance the great god of the seeds.¹⁰ In the conversation which follows, the Indian couple explain their devotion to their gods, describing the ceremonies and customs which baffled and intrigued the Christian missionaries among the Aztecs: reverence for the priesthood, a type of baptism, an individual confession of sins, and absolution. They even explain human sacrifice and its attendant ceremonies, including a meal after the sacrifice in which cakes in the form of human figures, made of seeds held together by a paste of victims' blood, were consumed. America argues the *reasonableness* of human sacrifice based on the idea that the best life was to be given in order to sustain life, an argument also found in Las Casas' 1550 *Defense of the Indians*.¹¹

With remarkable compactness Sor Juana captures the phases of the relationship between the missionaries and the conquistadors in the interaction of Religion and Zeal. After observing the celebrating Indians, Religion chides Zeal for not being offended by the idolatry he sees. The conquistador says that soon he will draw his sword to avenge the insults to her.¹² As the Indians enter again singing and dancing, Religion says she needs to try to convince them peaceably before he unleashes his fury. She tells America and Occidente that the Indians' religion is the

¹⁰Most scholars consider the God in question to be Huizilopochtli (ibid., 504). Early in the conquest of Mexico, Pedro de Alvarado "ordered an unprovoked massacre of the leading Aztec chiefs and warriors as they celebrated with song and dance a high religious festival in honor of Huizilopochtli": Benjamin Keen, *The Aztec Image in Western Thought* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1971) 54.

¹¹Lewis Hanke, *All Mankind is One. A Study of the Disputation between Bartolome de Las Casas and Juan Gines de Sepulveda in 1550 on the Intellectual and Religious Capacity of the American Indians* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974) 93-94. Chapter 35 refers to Defense.

¹²In the disputations of 1550 Sepulveda argued that because in the Old Testament God destroyed idolatrous peoples that it was justifiable to wage war on the Indians, destroying their religious culture even before they were missionized: *Tratados de Fray Bartolome de las Casas*, vol. 1, ed. Lewis Hanke, Manuel Gimenez Fernandez, Juan Perez de Tudela Bueso, Agustin Millares Carlo, Rafael Moreno (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1965) 337.

work of the devil and demands they open their eyes and believe the true doctrine. America and Occidente conclude she is crazy and continue their dancing.¹³ Zeal, furious at the insult to his "gentle beloved spouse," threatens violence. When America and Occidente refuse to believe him, he and his soldiers attack. In a stylized dance of battle the Spanish couple advances, the American couple retreats and finally surrenders. Zeal is ready to kill them at once, but Religion cries out, "I need them alive" (v. 207). She explains to the astonished Zeal that his role was to vanquish, hers to use gentle persuasion. Both America and Occidente, on hearing this, protest that they will not be so easily persuaded. Though vanquished they still have free will to keep to their own beliefs. They would rather suffer martyrdom than give up their veneration of their great god of the seeds. Only at this point does Religion ask them about their beliefs in order to learn how better to persuade them of the truths of the Catholic faith.¹⁴ After showing how the Aztec beliefs in baptism, sacrifice, confession, and a sacrificial meal have their superior equivalents in Christianity, Religion proposes that Occidente and America watch a play. In it they will see the prefiguring of the mysteries of the Holy Eucharist in the history of other pagans (the Romans), and they will understand that this same God was behind their own religious customs.

It is clear that the play is not only or even primarily to explain the mystery of the eucharist, but to convince the Indians of the principle that the true God was working, though in a hidden manner, in their traditional religions.

III. SOR JUANA'S THEOLOGICAL COMMITMENT

Sor Juana wrote *El Divino Narciso* at the request of her friend and patron, the Countess of Paredes, wife of the Viceroy of Mexico. The countess, who was returning to Spain, intended the play to be performed at the court of the Spanish King, Charles II, as part of the celebrations of the feast of Corpus Christi, a feast which since the Reformation had become a vast public declaration of loyalty to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the eucharist.¹⁵ Though the play was published in both Spain and Mexico the year following the countess' return (1688), it was apparently never performed for its designated audience.¹⁶ Considering the climate of the times, it is hard not to speculate that it might have been considered offensive. Charles II was known to be very pious, limiting his "entertainment" to visiting shrines and churches and marking special events by *autos de fe* (public condemnation of heretics by the Inquisition). One such occasion

¹³Sometimes the Indians regarded the missionaries as demented because of their strange language and ascetic practices. Juan Guillermo Duran, *Monumenta Catechetica Hispanoamericana*, vol. 1 (Buenos Aires: Facultad de teologia de la Pontifica Universidad, 1986) 90-94.

¹⁴Similarly only after it became apparent that the Indians were not easily converted by mere exhortation did the missionaries begin to ask them questions about their religion and culture, initiating what were to become the great studies of Sahagun, Motolinia, Duran and others (see note 21).

¹⁵Maria Esther Perez, *Lo Americano en el Teatro de Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz* (New York: Eliseo Torres and Sons, 1975) 23; Perez explains that at the Council of Trent the Spanish theologians who dominated the discussions insisted on a formal affirmation of the existence of the sacrament of the altar as the most effective defense against the errors of Protestantism.

¹⁶Marie-Cecile Benassy-Berling, *Humanismo y religion en Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico, 1983) 366.

was Charles' wedding at which 118 persons were sentenced, some to die at the stake.¹⁷ It was also a time of a general decline of the empire, a time in which the exploits of the conquistadors were glorified.¹⁸

Over a century before (1550-51), the great debate at the royal court between the renowned Renaissance scholar Juan Gines de Sepulveda, proponent of Aristotle's idea of natural slavery, and Bartolome de Las Casas, defender of the Indians based on the idea that "all humanity is one," had passed without resolving the question of the humanity of the Indians and the church's responsibility to them.¹⁹ As early as 1577²⁰ the Spanish crown suspended the dissemination of the works of the great chroniclers of Aztec customs, Franciscans Sahagun, Mendieta, Motolinia, and Dominicans Diego Duran and Las Casas.²¹ In the seventeenth century their works were largely forgotten; it was a century described as "hostile" toward the Indians.²² When Sor Juana wrote *El Divino Narciso*, Las Casas's *Brief History of the Destruction of the Indies* had been banned by the Inquisition for thirty years.²³

One senses Sor Juana's political awareness in the apology for her play which she constructs in the dialogue at the end of the *loa*. Though the fiction of the preface play is that the

sacramental drama, *El Divino Narciso*, will teach the Indians the mysteries of the Catholic doctrine of the eucharist, Religion makes a point of saying the play will be performed in Madrid, “center of the Faith and the royal seat of the Catholic kings to whom the Indies owe the light of the Gospel” (vv. 436-443). Zeal, the conquistador, not a very bright character, still objects that it does not seem proper to write something in Mexico which will be performed in another place. Religion answers this with another question: “Has it never been the case that something is made in one place to be useful in another?” (vv. 445-448). Though she does not say it directly, it is clear that this was the relationship of Christianity to Mexican culture. She then adds that this is not her idea, but something she is doing under obedience. Zeal asks again more pointedly, “Why introduce the Indies in order to take them to Madrid?” (vv. 457-461).Religion then replies that the persons introduced were not real, but abstractions which could easily be transported from one place to another. Here again, in a subtle manner, Sor Juana is asking the audience to abstract from the concrete to the general, suggesting that ideas transcend physical boundaries and, by implication, that what comes from Mexico can be understood in Madrid (vv. 462-472). Then all the characters in flattering words make deep bows to the king and queen and the lords and ladies of the court. The *loa* ends as the characters move back to the fiction that the following play is intended to teach the Indians, and all exit dancing and singing: “Blessed be the day that I learned of the great God of the Seeds!” (vv. 498-99).

¹⁷R. Trevor Davies, *Spain in Decline: 1621-1700* (London: Macmillan, 1965) 142.

¹⁸Benjamin Keen, *The Aztec Image in Western Thought* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1985) 175.

¹⁹Lewis Hanke, *Aristotle and the American Indians: A Study in Race Prejudice in the Modern World* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1959) 97.

²⁰Benassy-Berling, *Humanismo y religion*, 308, see also 312.

²¹Keen, *The Aztec Image*, 118-121.

²²*Ibid.*, 173.

²³*Ibid.*, 174.

Given the failure of Las Casas’ rational discourse in the previous century, it appears that Sor Juana, in a more representative epoch, is turning to drama as a vehicle for ideas similar to his. As such, even in its coded allegorical form it was a bold political statement. The period loved decoding and expected to be looking for the ideas beneath heavily allegorized presentations. What seems hidden to us would have been more obvious to them. Like Las Casas, Sor Juana is suggesting that the Aztec religion is at least as potent a vehicle for the divine mysteries as those of ancient Greece and Rome. Like him, she insists on the equality of all humanity, pagans and Christians. The closing words of the *loa* (above) mirror the second play’s opening refrain: “Praise to the Lord of all humanity!” (v. 1). The great god of the seeds (also understood as the Lord of the eucharist) is the God of all humanity. The play insists on this idea by repeating this refrain eleven times in the first two scenes. The correspondence between the two religious systems is further underscored by the opening setting of the *loa* and the closing of *El Divino Narciso*. *Loa* begins with a hymn on the Aztec equivalent of the Corpus Christi feast, and the sacramental drama ends with Human Nature leading all the characters in a paraphrase of the “*Pange, lingua*,” the great hymn composed by Thomas Aquinas on the mystery of the eucharist, especially associated with the feast of Corpus Christi. Sor Juana’s version makes some changes

in Aquinas' text, emphasizing the succession of the new mystery over the old ones. She also alters the standard prayer praising the Trinity in the final verses of the play, replacing the Spirit with "Love which proceeds from both" Father and Son, thereby ending the play with the word that best describes the Divine Narcissus, who for the love of humanity ran the risk of death. For, according to Sor Juana, "Even God in the world finds no loves without danger" (vv. 2125-26).

From today's perspective in Latin America, where living experiments with the radical meaning of the love of God in base communities and in the writings of liberation theologians have often been suppressed or criticized by the powerful, both in the churches and in government, Sor Juana's appreciation of the dangers of love still speaks to us. Moreover, her flexibility in the choice of her vehicles of presentation, her imaginative reconstruction of theological argument, and her sensitivity to the cultural diversity out of which she was writing are all qualities called for today when the churches of the Americas look with ambivalence toward the future.