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Sor Juana



Portrait of Juana Inés de la Cruz

Sor Juana

OR, THE TRAPS OF FAITH

OCTAVIO PAZ

Translated by Margaret Sayers Peden

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Preface

 IN HER LIFETIME, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was read and admired not only in Mexico but in Spain and all the countries where Spanish and Portuguese were spoken. Then for nearly two hundred years she and her works were forgotten. After the turn of this century taste changed again, and she began to be seen for what she really is: a universal poet. When I started writing, around 1930, her poetry was no longer a mere historical relic but had once again become a living text. What sparked the revival, in Mexico, was a small book by a poet, Amado Nervo; his *Juana de Asbaje*, 1910, dedicated “to all the women of my country and my race,” can still be read with pleasure. Between 1910 and 1930 numerous scholarly works appeared, devoted primarily to unearthing and establishing the texts. The labors of Manuel Toussaint were followed by those of Ermilo Abreu Gómez, who gave us the first modern editions of *First Dream*, the *Carta atenagórica*, and the *Response to Sor Filotea*.

Sor Juana's writings appealed greatly to the Mexican poets of the time, above all Xavier Villaurrutia, who edited her sonnets and *endechas*, and Jorge Cuesta. In those years, spurred by Cuesta's enthusiasm, I read Sor Juana's poems for the first time; I was especially taken by the sonnets. It was not until 1950, in Paris, that I began to read her again. The magazine *Sur* was planning to commemorate the tercentenary of her birth and asked me for an article. I accepted the assignment, went to the Bibliothèque Nationale, dug into the old editions, and wrote a little essay, the distant ancestor of this book.

Like an almost cyclically recurring presence, Sor Juana reappeared twenty years later. In 1971–72 I was to be the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard University, and was invited to give a course or two in addition to the Norton Lectures. When asked what the subject of one of the courses would be, without giving it much thought I replied, “Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.” By then Alfonso Méndez Plancarte had published his exemplary edition of her complete works. I went back and read her again, and read what had been written about her, much of which I had forgotten or had not known. The Harvard libraries provoked and satisfied my curiosity. In the stacks I used to encounter Raimundo Lida; we would talk of Sor Juana, of music, of hermetic numerology. I gave the course again at Harvard in 1973, and in 1974, at the Colegio Nacional, delivered a series of lectures on Sor Juana, her life and her work. Afterward it occurred to me, in reviewing the notes and materials I had accumulated, that I might draw upon them for a book that would be simultaneously a study of the age in which she lived and a consideration of her life and her works, a blend of history, biography, and literary criticism. I began to write intermittently, with many interruptions, and by 1976 had completed the first three parts; then nothing, for several years. Finally, feeling a twinge of remorse, I returned to the unfinished manuscript and, in the first half of 1981, wrote the last three parts.

My book is not the first on Sor Juana, nor will it be the last. The bibliography of writings, in many languages, on her person and her work is large and constantly growing. I owe much to my predecessors, and have tried to give them due credit in the course of the book. I am also indebted to a number of friends for their help and encouragement, especially Jose Luis Martínez, who gave me full access to his library, provided photocopies of several books, and gave me the benefit, as always, of his friendship and his advice; and Antonio Alatorre, who generously and rigorously reviewed the pages of the Spanish text.

For the English-language edition, I have made a few changes with the book’s new audience in mind. I have deleted occasional observations addressed to my fellow countrymen, and have pruned certain passages—for example, analyses of intricate Spanish verse forms—unlikely to be of interest to those who do not read Spanish. In addition, I have compressed the discussion of Sor Juana’s principal biographers and the overview of the publication history of her works and have shifted them

from the opening pages of Parts Two and Five, respectively, to a section of Notes on Sources at the back of the book.

I have used the text of the Méndez Plancarte edition, the *Obras completas* published in four volumes by the Fondo de Cultura Económica in Mexico City, and have referred to the poems by their numbers in that edition.

O.P.

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I am indebted to more people than can be listed here for the help and information I received from them; it is my hope that they will recognize themselves and accept my appreciation. Among that large number, I am especially grateful to Luis Harss, who read this translation for Harvard University Press with informed care, and whose suggestions, along with those of other editors, improved it. Last, but always first, my enduring thanks to William Peden.

M.S.P.

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. . . al ánimo arrogante
que, el vivir despreciando, determina
su nombre eternizar en su ruina.

. . . *to the undaunted spirit
that, disdainng life, determines
to immortalize itself in ruin.*

—*First Dream*

Prologue

History, Life, Work



OF THE MAJOR POETS of our hemisphere, a number are women, among them Juana Inés de la Cruz, Emily Dickinson, Gabriela Mistral, Marianne Moore, and Elizabeth Bishop. It is not hard to see that these five have several things in common, apart from their sex. All, for example, were unmarried and all lived somewhat at the fringes of their time and their world, vitally conscious of their singularity both as women and as poets. Nevertheless the distinctiveness of Sor Juana, of her personality as well as her work, is the most pronounced. Indeed, her case is unique. The others are modern figures—Emily Dickinson belongs to the late nineteenth century and the other three to the twentieth—whereas Juana Ramírez (her original name) lived in the twilight era of the Hispanic seventeenth century, the period of the Spanish empire's decline, and in a faraway place, the city of Mexico. There are additional factors that set her apart: she was a nun, and she was an illegitimate child.

There was nothing ordinary about her person or her life. She was exceptionally beautiful, and poor. She was the favorite of a Vicereine and lived at court, courted by many; she was loved and perchance she loved. Abruptly she gives up worldly life and enters a convent—yet, far from renouncing the world entirely, she converts her cell into a study filled with books, works of art, and scientific instruments and transforms the convent locutory into a literary and intellectual salon. She writes love poems, verses for songs and dance tunes, profane comedies, sacred poems, an essay in theology, and an autobiographical defense of the right of women to study and to cultivate their minds. She becomes

famous, sees her plays performed, her poems published, and her genius applauded in all the Spanish dominions, half the Western world. Then suddenly she gives up everything, surrenders her library and collections, renounces literature, and finally, during an epidemic, after ministering to stricken sisters in the convent, dies at the age of forty-six.

No less than her life, her literary work sets her apart from most of our great writers. What is surprising above all is its extent and variety: she cultivated almost all verse forms, from the popular ballad to the love sonnet and the burlesque epigram. She wrote a long philosophical poem that reminds one not of her contemporaries but of such modern poets as Valéry and Eliot. She was the author of religious plays in which theology occupies the place that philosophical and political theories have in serious drama today. Finally, she was a remarkable essayist. It is not easy to find in the history of Pan-American literature a body of work offering such a variety of themes and subjects, united almost always to perfection of form.

The word "seduction," with its varied resonances, intellectual and sensual, conveys the nature of the attraction the figure of Sor Juana exerts. When she entered the convent, her confessor, the Jesuit Antonio Núñez de Miranda, is said to have rejoiced, for (according to his contemporary biographer) "having recognized . . . the uniqueness of her erudition coupled with her beauty, which attracted the attention of many who would like to know her and would happily court her, he was wont to say that God could not do greater harm to this realm than by allowing Juana Inés to remain in the public eye." Father Núñez' fears were realized, although in a way he could not have foreseen. Neither the scarcity of information about the crucial episodes in her life nor the dispersal of most of her personal papers and her voluminous correspondence has shielded Juana Inés from the public eye. For more than half a century her life and work have intrigued and fascinated scholars and critics. Why, when so young and beautiful, did she choose to become a nun? What was the true nature of her emotional and erotic inclinations? What is the significance and the place of her *First Dream* in the history of poetry? What were her relations with the ecclesiastical hierarchy? Why did she renounce her lifelong passion for writing and learning? Was that renunciation the result of a conversion or an abdication? This book is an attempt to answer such questions as these.

The enigma of Sor Juana is many enigmas, those of her life and those of her work. It is clear that an author's life and work are related, but the

relation is never simple: the life does not entirely explain the work, nor does the work explain the life. There is something in the work that is not to be found in the author's life, something we call creativity or artistic and literary invention. Among the studies of Sor Juana are two that illustrate the limitations of the approach that attempts to find in the life an explanation of the work. The first is the biography written by the Jesuit Diego Calleja, her contemporary. He was her first biographer. Calleja depicts Sor Juana's life as a gradual ascent toward saintliness; when he notes some contradiction between this idealized life and the import of her work, he either minimizes or glosses over the contradiction. The work becomes an illustration of the nun's life, that is, an edifying tract. At the opposite pole we find a German professor, Ludwig Pfandl. Influenced by psychoanalysis, he diagnoses Sor Juana as the victim of a father fixation that leads to narcissism, a neurotic personality in whom strongly masculine tendencies predominate. For Father Calleja, Sor Juana's work is an allegory of her spiritual life; for Pfandl it is a mask for her neurosis. In either case Sor Juana's writing ceases to be a literary work; both critics read her work as a projection of her life—a saintly life for Calleja and a neurotic conflict for Pfandl. The work becomes a hieroglyph of the life; as work of art, it vanishes.

I do not deny that biographical interpretation is one way to approach a work. It is, however, a path that goes only to the threshold; to comprehend truly, we must cross it and step inside. At that moment, the work is detached from its author and becomes autonomous. Immersed in reading, we are no longer interested in the subconscious motives that may have led Cervantes to write *Don Quixote*. Nor are we interested in his intentions; that is a matter of interpretation and we—tacitly, by the mere act of reading his book—superimpose our interpretations upon his. The work shuts out the author and opens to the reader. The author writes impelled by conscious and unconscious forces and objectives, but the sense of the work—and the pleasures and surprises we derive from the reading—never coincides exactly with those impulses and objectives. A work responds to the reader's, not the author's, questions. The reader stands between the work and the author. Once written, the work has a life of its own distinct from that of its author, a life granted by its successive readers.

In contrast to the biographically oriented critics, others approach the text as an independent and autonomous entity. They begin with the justified assumption that the work has characteristics that cannot be ex-

plained by the author's life. It is valid to see in Sor Juana's poems certain traits that, even if psychological in origin, are departures from the styles prevailing in her time. These distinctive traits make her work unique and self-sufficient. Nevertheless, even though it seems to us—and indeed is—unique, it is clear that Sor Juana's poetry is related to other past and contemporary works, from the Bible and the Church Fathers to Góngora and Calderón. Those works form a tradition, and thus present themselves to the writer as models to be imitated or rivals to be equaled. The study of Sor Juana's work takes us immediately to other works, and these works, to the intellectual and artistic climate of their time, to everything that constitutes "the spirit of an age." Spirit and, something even more powerful, *taste*. To a writer's life and work we must add a third term: society, history. Sor Juana is strongly individual and her work is undeniably unique; at the same time, the woman and her poems, the nun and the intellectual, exist within the context of a society, New Spain at the end of the seventeenth century.

My intention is not to explain literature through history. The value of sociological and historical interpretations of works of art is all too limited. Yet it would be absurd to close our eyes to this elementary truth: poetry is a social, a historical, product. To ignore the relation between society and poetry would be as grave an error as to ignore the relation between a writer's life and his work. Freud warned us that psychoanalysis cannot entirely explain artistic creation; and in the same way that there are elements in art and poetry that cannot be reduced to psychological and biographical explanations, there are elements that cannot be reduced to historical and sociological explanation. In what sense, then, is it valid to attempt to place the things that are unique to Sor Juana—her life and work—within the context of the history of her world, the aristocratic society of the city of Mexico in the second half of the seventeenth century? We are facing complementary realities. Both life and work unfold within a given society and thus are intelligible only within the history of that society; at the same time, its history would not be what it is without the life and works of Sor Juana. It is not enough to say that Sor Juana's work is a product of history; we must add that history is also a product of her work.

I have stated that a work exists not in isolation but in relation to other works, past and present, that are its models and its rivals. I must add that there is another, no less determinant, relationship: that of work to reader. Much is written today about the reader's influence on the work,

and on the author himself. In every society there is a system of prohibitions and sanctions: the domains of what can and cannot be done. There is another area, usually broader, that is also divided into do's and don'ts: what can and cannot be said. Authorizations and prohibitions encompass a range of nuances that vary from society to society. Even so, they can be divided into two broad categories, the expressed and the implicit. The implicit prohibition is the more powerful; it is what is never voiced because it is taken for granted and therefore automatically and unthinkingly obeyed. The ruling system of repressions in each society is based upon this group of inhibitions that do not need to be monitored by consciousness.

In the modern world, the system of implicit authorizations and prohibitions exerts its influence on writers through their readers. An unread author is an author who is a victim of the worst kind of censorship, indifference—a censorship more effective than the Ecclesiastical Index. It is possible that the unpopularity of certain genres—poetry, for example, following Baudelaire and the Symbolists—is a result of the implicit censorship of a democratic and progressivist society. Bourgeois rationalism is, in a manner of speaking, constitutionally averse to poetry. Hence poetry, from the beginnings of the modern era—that is, since the last years of the eighteenth century—has been a form of rebellion. Poetry is not a genre in harmony with the modern world; its innermost nature is hostile or indifferent to the dogmas of modern times, progress and the cult of the future. Of course some poets have sincerely and passionately believed in progressive ideals, but their works say something quite different. Poetry, whatever the manifest content of the poem, is always a violation of the rationalism and morality of bourgeois society. Our society believes in history: newspapers, radio, television, the *now*; poetry, by its very nature, is atemporal.

In other societies, in addition to the anonymous community of ordinary readers, there is a group of privileged readers called the Archbishop, the Inquisitor, the Secretary General of the Party, the Politburo. These are fearsome readers, and they had as much influence on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz as her admirers. In her *Response to Sor Filotea de la Cruz* she left us a confession: "I want no quarrel with the Holy Office." Her dread readers are a part—and a significant part—of her work. Her work tells us something, but to understand that something we must realize that it is utterance surrounded by silence: the silence of the *things that cannot be said*. The things she cannot say are determined by the

invisible presence of her dread readers. When we read Sor Juana, we must recognize the silence surrounding her words. That silence is not absence of meaning; on the contrary, what cannot be said is anything that touches not only on the orthodoxy of the Catholic Church but also on the ideas, interests, and passions of its princes and its Orders. Sor Juana's words are written in the presence of a prohibition; that prohibition is embodied in an orthodoxy supported by a bureaucracy of prelates and judges. An understanding of Sor Juana's work must include an understanding of the prohibitions her work confronts. Her speech leads us to what cannot be said, what cannot be said to an orthodoxy, the orthodoxy to a tribunal, and the tribunal to a sentence.

This brief description of the relation between author and readers, between what can and cannot be said, omits an essential fact: usually the author is a part of the system of tacit but imperative prohibitions that forms the code of the *utterable* in every age and society. Nevertheless, not infrequently, and almost always in spite of themselves, writers violate that code and say what cannot be said, what they and they alone *must* say. Through their voices speaks that *other* voice: the condemned voice, the true voice. Sor Juana's contemporaries soon perceived in her voice the outburst of the other voice. That was the cause of the misfortunes she suffered in the last years of her life, for such transgressions were, and are, punished with severity. Furthermore, it is not unusual that in some societies, as in seventeenth-century New Spain, the writer himself becomes an ally, even an accomplice, of his censors. In the twentieth century, by a kind of historical regression, there are abundant examples of writers and ideologues who have become their own accusers. The similarity between Sor Juana's final years and these contemporary examples led me to choose as subtitle of my book "The Traps of Faith." The phrase is not applicable to all of Sor Juana's life, nor does it define her work; but I believe that it does describe an evil common to her time and our own. The recurrence of the evil is worth emphasizing, and that is why I have used the phrase: as a warning and example.

A work survives its readers; after a hundred or two hundred years it is read by new readers who impose on it new modes of reading and interpretation. The work survives because of these interpretations, which are, in fact, resurrections: without them there would be no work. The text transcends its own history only by being assessed within the context of a different history. I believe I can say in conclusion: understanding the work of Sor Juana demands an understanding of her life

and her world. In this sense my book is an attempt at restitution; I hope to restore to their world, to seventeenth-century New Spain, Sor Juana's life and work. In turn, Sor Juana's life and writings can restore her distant world to us, her twentieth-century readers. This restitution is historical, relative, and partial, a twentieth-century Mexican's reading of the work of a nun of seventeenth-century New Spain. We can begin.

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