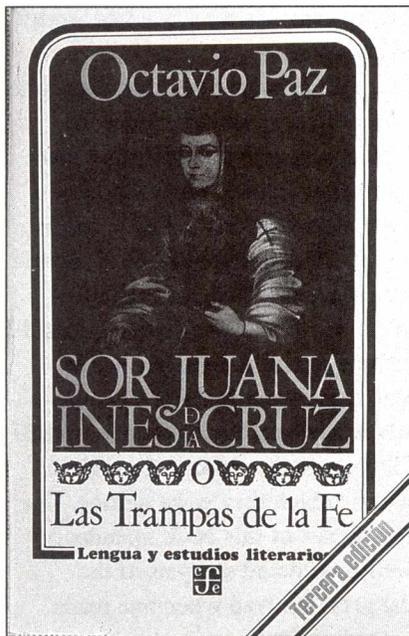


Reviews



Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o las trampas de la fe

(Sor Juana or The Traps of Faith)

Octavio Paz

Fondo de Cultura Económica,
Mexico City, 1982, 673 pp.

Sor Juana seen through the eyes of Octavio Paz

Octavio Paz's fascination for the figure of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was first expressed in writing in a brief 1950 essay which synthetically compressed ideas which decades later were expanded in a book of impressive proportions: *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o las trampas de la fe* (Sor Juana or The Traps of Faith). Both the essay and the book manifest, for example, the conviction that the poetess' life and work can be understood only in the context of the enigma of her renunciation of

literature. Thus, we see how the final silence alludes to a space—that of the unspeakable—marked by the implicit rules which indicate a society's political, religious and moral foundations. Abjuration becomes a symbol which reveals—without naming them—the unavoidable consequences of transgressing those unquestionable norms.

Thus, this book presents Sor Juana's life and work in close connection with the history of the society in which she lived: the world of late 17th-century New Spain. Paz's aim is clearly articulated: his intention is not to reduce her life and work to the history of the society in which they unfolded, nor to read the literary works through the double text of a life and the fabric of society; but rather to study the interpenetrations and intersections of these three realities within what might be called a system of communicating vessels.

It is on this basis that the author makes use of several methodological models without subordinating himself to any one of them. This eclectic attitude, moving easily between psychoanalysis, stylistics, formalism and historically oriented contextualism, provides a rich interpretation deriving from the conjunction of a plurality of perspectives, each casting a partial and limited light upon different aspects of the three mysteries, without ever exhausting them. Far from a single methodological focus, this is a singular and untransferable example of eclecticism guided by a sensibility

unwilling to recognize any exclusive barrier between critical, analytical activity and the creative passion which seeks to discover, in the work of others, correspondences and rhymes with its own obsessions.

This interested and partisan posture—which can be seen in all of Paz's artistic and literary criticism—involves an unquestionable advantage: it updates the object of study. Thus, through Paz's writing, Sor Juana miraculously appears as our contemporary—or almost—while her life and work become loaded with resonances which persist through our own times. The corollary to this attitude is the risk of imperceptibly loosening the ties between Sor Juana and her world. One of the richest and most dangerous experiences for the reader of this book is to place him or herself within the fascinating oscillation between a contextualist vision and a transhistoric one linking Sor Juana to the modern intellectual and poet. Although not necessarily incompatible, a tension exists between the two impulses, and at times it seems on the point of exploding.

A synthesis and compendium of Paz's many personal obsessions, "The Traps of Faith" may be viewed as an expansion and prolongation of previous essays, such as *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950) and *The Arc and the Lyre* (1956). The former heralds the desire to decipher the nature of New Spain and study the characteristics of its cultural models and artistic expressions; the latter is a first attempt at clarifying the

paradoxical and marginal condition of the work of art, which appears simultaneously as a social product and a challenge to or negation of the social institution which give rise to it. The two lines come together in this book, where New Spain is seen in the first part as a patrimonial regime characterized by a series of balances and rivalries between the different powers: economic power, divided among Spaniards and *criollos* [people of Spanish descent born in the New World]; in the political sphere, the viceroy and Audience; ecclesiastic power, divided between the archbishop of Mexico City and his rival in Puebla and, as a third element with a certain degree of autonomy, the interests of the various religious orders. One consequence of this is that religious orthodoxy, so monolithic in appearance, did not exclude the elaboration of syncretic doctrines in which—above all in Jesuit versions—some notions and figures from the indigenous and pagan tradition were seen as prefigurations of Catholic doctrine. Various myths from this syncretist tendency would later be used as powerful arguments for legitimizing the *criollos'* separatist and nationalist aspirations.

The syncretism of the Jesuits had its origin—according to the author—in Renaissance hermeticism, a belated moment of an ancient tradition deriving from the *Corpus hermeticum* of Hermes Trismégistus, which influenced several Church fathers, flourished once again in the neo-Platonism of the Renaissance and reached all the way to the poetic thought of the Romantics, the Symbolists, and, in the 20th century, the Surrealists. The thread running through all these mutations can be summed up in the

magical notion of the universe as a complementary or harmonious system. Sor Juana's point of contact with this tradition—where science, magic, alchemy and religion come together—was the German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1601-1680), whose books were read in New Spain and who, surprising though it may seem, maintained an epistolary relationship with Alejandro Fabián, friend of the bishop of Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, the "Sor Filotea" of Sor Juana's *Response*.

Religious syncretism had its equivalent in the Baroque aesthetic, which permitted the assimilation of particularities, singularities and irregularities within a universal harmony. Yet despite the pursuit of "complementariness" and the tendency to incorporate the other into an ingenious synthesis, artists and intellectuals always ran the risk of clashing with a rigid orthodoxy which placed limits on intellectual activity in everything touching on the ideological sphere.

This preliminary setting of the scene—which follows the author's ideas—is the prelude to the book's second section, dedicated to the life of Juana Ramírez before she entered the convent. Using available data, Paz imaginatively reconstructs the girl's early intellectual curiosity, pointing out the important figures of the father (absent), the stepfather (intrusive), the "earthly" reality of her mother and Juana's relation to her grandfather, interpreted as the sublimation of masculine sexuality in book learning. This psychoanalytically derived interpretation suggests that the library—and later the convent "cell"—functioned as a refuge from the world and as a regression to the sexual non-differentiation of the womb. The

desire to know is presented from the beginning as a transgression, and since the world of books is a masculine one, this interest assumes the disguise of virility. What later became the "neutralization of sex" in the convent finds a symbolic antecedent in the sublimation of sexuality in the world of books.

The years passed in the mundane luster of court society, under the protection of several viceroys, gave rise to Sor Juana's courtly poetry, which—according to Paz—consists mainly of rhetorical exercises, as one would expect from circumstantial verse. However, one finds a handful of lyric poems among her works—among them the sonnets to Laura—where personal intensity makes itself felt despite the rhetorical molds within which they were written. The fourth part of this book includes a well-considered analysis of the dangers involved when one reads, according to subsequent conventions (those of our own day), worldly love poetry that was written in accordance with the conventions of another time and another world. When we read erotic poems written by a nun and dedicated to another woman, our surprise is nuanced—but not erased—if we view them in the framework of the rhetoric of courtly love. Thus, it is a question of inverting traditional roles; or better, of the nun-poetess fulfilling the role of platonic lover. What is extraordinary in this case, argues Paz, is that some compositions succeed in expressing personal passion as something really lived—perhaps in the imagination; something which transcends the impersonal pattern of ingenious and artificial formulae.

The author coincides with several previous critics in seeing Juana's decision to take vows as the result not

of religious fervor but rather of “a rational calculation” (p. 542) with the objective of obtaining a tranquil space, free from domestic obligations, where the writer could follow her desire to study and learn. The passage from court to convent does not signify a break—at least for the nun—because from her cell Sor Juana continued to enjoy the benefit of viceregal protection. Moreover, given that convent rules were rather lax, the vow to cloister oneself did not stand in the way of nuns receiving frequent visits in the convent parlors. From within the convent, Sor Juana continued to participate in worldly life.

Undoubtedly the most brilliant pages in this book are those dedicated to Sor Juana’s poetry. Her mastery in questions of versification and her use of a rich variety of meters and poetic forms—which even include a *tocotín* in Náhuatl—are widely recognized. The extensive analysis of her most ambitious and complex poem, “First Dream,” merits special mention. Paz

emphasizes the profound originality of this intellectual poem, which, while indebted to Góngora’s model, is nevertheless unique. Starting with its subject (the soul’s voyage through the cosmic regions), the poem is a prolongation of prior traditions, but the real “theme” (the failure of the soul’s attempt to intuit the nature of the universe) inaugurates another thoroughly modern tradition: “the soul has been left alone; the supernatural intermediaries and celestial messengers who linked us to worlds beyond have vanished, dissolved by the power of analysis” (p. 482). For Paz, this confrontation between the solitary soul and the impenetrable universe is one of the major themes of modern Western poetry. Thus “First Dream” becomes a direct antecedent of certain long poems by Mallarmé, Valéry, Huidobro and Gorostiza (and here we may rightfully add the name of Paz himself).

The final part of the book deals with the last years of Sor Juana’s life

and the conflicts which would end in her giving up writing. In 1690 the nun wrote the *Carta atenagórica* (Athenagoric Letter), a theological criticism of some ideas expressed by the Portuguese Jesuit Antonio de Vieira, apparently written on behalf of Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz, bishop of Puebla and rival of Mexico City’s redoubtable archbishop Aguiar y Seijas, who was Vieira’s friend. Sor Juana appears as a defenseless pawn drawn into battles between the strongest figures of ecclesiastical power. Theological battles are known to serve, at times, as covers for personal and ideological struggles. Seeing that Aguiar’s power remained unshaken, the bishop of Puebla abandoned Sor Juana, who then wrote her famous *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz* (Response to Sor Filotea de la Cruz), a spiritual autobiography which is at the same time an intellectual self-defense justifying her desire for knowledge and love for literature both sacred and profane.

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Coordinación de Relaciones Internacionales No. 64
Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales-UNAM

Título: La dinámica internacional del fin del siglo XX

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But it is Sor Juana's confessor, the Jesuit Núñez de Miranda, who applied the pressure to obtain this woman's total renunciation and the humiliation which would definitively bury her intellectual pride. The final abjuration, the selling of her considerable library and collection of musical instruments, and above all the wholesale confession that she signed as a prelude to the mortifications of the flesh, are seen by Paz as sad antecedents to 20th-century show trials: a simulacrum of legality used against ideological dissidents who were made to confess to crimes invented by their accusers. The intolerance of orthodoxy—whether religious or political—demands not only punishment, but acts of contrition. The author emphatically rejects the idea of a final "conversion," seeing it as an invention of Christian hagiography, and he reiterates that the episode represents the terrible spectacle of an intellectual conscience forced to humiliate itself before the totalitarian intolerance of ecclesiastical power.

It is in this light that the document discovered in Monterrey in 1980, by Father Aureliano Tapia Méndez, is of particular importance. It is a letter from Sor Juana to her confessor, Núñez de Miranda. An appendix to the third edition (1983) of this book reproduces this *Letter*, preceded by a brief presentation by Paz. If we accept its authenticity—and there are good reasons to do so—the *Letter* seems to be an anticipation of the *Response* of 1691. But its importance lies in that, besides being a defense of her activities—as a poet, intellectual and woman—the document reveals for the first time that it was Sor Juana who broke relations with her confessor and not, as previously believed, the other way

around. This was an act of extraordinary courage and great audacity, considering that Núñez de Miranda was one of the most powerful figures in the religious hierarchy of the day. At the time of writing the *Letter* (either 1681 or '82, according to Paz) the nun enjoyed protection from the court, but this hardly explains the abundance of ironic and even sarcastic comments directed at the Jesuit. Consider these examples of the nun's questions: "Is literature an obstacle instead of an aid to salvation? Were Saint Augustine, Saint Ambrosius and the rest of the Holy Doctors not saved? And Your Reverence, loaded with learning as you are, do you not think you will be saved?" (p. 642 of third edition).

In light of this document, Paz's hypothesis gathers strength and drama, since the persecution and humiliation of Sor Juana seem more than ever to have been acts dictated by envy, vengeance and misogyny, motives joined by the institutionalized intolerance of orthodox religion.

The conclusion of the book is entitled "Essay of Restitution": a restitution of Sor Juana to her world, but also our own restitution to her world and, we may add, a paradoxical restitution of Sor Juana to our world. If the work of the Tenth Muse represents the culmination of Baroque art, the nun's intellectual conscience became the victim of a closed society condemned to paralysis. Throughout his text, Paz stresses the parallels between the viceregal world of the 17th century and the totalitarian bureaucracies of the 20th. Sor Juana attracts us, according to the author, because she is an example of dissidence, a free conscience clashing with the ideological, moral, political and religious norms of her time.

There is still one question, at least for this reader. Is Sor Juana really our contemporary? Were her conflicts with the powers of her time due to her disagreement with the ideological foundations of her society? Would it not be equally valid to say that the nun essentially shared the fundamentals of that universe and that her conflicts with the hierarchy were due mainly to the intolerance of two dominant figures? Is Sor Juana's contemporaneity not due above all to Paz's extraordinary reading, to the empathy and secret identification which the poet-intellectual of the 20th century has for the poet-intellectual of the 17th century? In *The Traps of Faith* the attentive reader may discover—projected onto Sor Juana—the keys to Paz's own intellectual autobiography.

But let us return to the issue which seems to be this multifaceted book's central hypothesis: the influence of the hermetic tradition on Sor Juana's thought. According to the author, this tradition illuminates several of the emblems, images, symbols and mythological figures which appear in "First Dream." It is difficult to evaluate this hypothesis, precisely because of the absence of historical studies in the Hispanic world regarding hermeticism's influence on Baroque literature. There are no books in Spanish comparable to those of Frances Yates regarding the influence of hermeticism on English literature and culture. With regard to Hispanic culture there is a clear need for fuller investigation into the complex relations between hermeticism and heresy. Paz's arguments are powerful, supported as they are by his enviable erudition, but now it is up to Sor Juana scholars to assess these conjectures.

The Traps of Faith is an impeccably written book, as one would expect from one of the greatest stylists of the Spanish language. The text seduces us not only with its accessible and enjoyable style but also with the breadth of perspectives offered and the sensitivity in its reading of Sor Juana's poetry. It is a passionate and exciting book. There are few studies of this magnitude in Hispanic culture written by one poet about the life and work of another. Recreating a world, reconstructing and updating a life, deciphering and critically analyzing a body of work, this book exemplifies two of the essential features which Paz encounters in the life and work of Sor Juana: rigorous passion for knowledge and obstinate intellectual independence.

Anthony Stanton

El Colegio de México.

Essay originally published in *Literatura Mexicana* Vol. 1 (1990).

The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican

Helen Delpar

University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa and London, 1992. 274 pp.

The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations between the United States and Mexico, 1920-1935 reads like a lively biographical dictionary of Mexican and American intellectuals and artists who crossed the U.S.-Mexico border in their endeavors. Helen Delpar has produced a well-structured book that looks at many aspects of cultural relations between Mexico and the United States. She proceeds chronologically, covering the 1920s and picking up some of the same people in a chapter on the '30s. Anthropologists and archaeologists are dealt with in a separate chapter, as are exchanges in literature, music and the performing arts.

Structure and patterns

Delpar begins each chapter with a brief sketch of the cultural and political history of each of the two countries. She sketches major events and trends, providing a framework for individuals and their creative work.

The background is followed with statistics presented in clear tables, which substantiate her hypotheses. We learn about the number of students enrolled in Spanish classes in the United States; those enrolled in summer school in Mexico; the number of Mexicans who emigrate to or return from the United States in a given period; the number of films with Mexican subjects; works of fiction about Mexico, and other facts.

Once the stage is set the author proceeds with a complex narration of people, their work, their friends, their opinions, and often citations from their work. When the material has to do with specific plays, movies and books, Delpar also quotes a selection of critical reviews.

Although she does not include her own opinions, selective quotes allow the reader to glimpse her views on the political positions of people such as Carleton Beals, Ernest Gruening, Frank Tannenbaum, Bertram and Ella Wolfe and others she describes as "left."

Overwhelming wealth of information

It is difficult to describe the amount of information included in this book. Delpar covers a plethora of well-known, lesser-known and downright obscure intellectuals active in the U.S. and Mexico. Yet the section on Mexican muralists' influence in the United States regrettably omits Lucienne Bloch Dimitroff, a woman who worked with Diego Rivera in New York and Detroit and went on to create many of her own fresco murals.

We are treated to anecdotes illuminating relationships among the intellectuals, their activities during a given period of time, their past and

what lay ahead for them. This includes considerable detail on peoples' comings and goings: there are Americans who settle in Mexico, such as William Spratling; others such as John Dos Passos only visit; Ernest Gruening stays for a while to research his book, while others, such as Katherine Anne Porter, go back and forth. Detailed information is given on those who receive Guggenheim grants, among them Hart Crane.

Similar descriptions are given of Mexicans who travel north, among them Salvador Novo, Miguel Covarrubias (who lived in New York for extended periods of time and became a part of that city's intellectual community), José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, Rufino Tamayo and Carlos Chávez.

Then there are those who are simply impossible to classify. One of them is Anita Brenner, who was born in Mexico, left during the Revolution of 1910, subsequently returned to Mexico City and later went to New York to do her doctorate at Columbia University under Franz Boas, before returning to Mexico once more in 1943. She was both a Mexican and an American.

Brenner was a member of the multinational group that the artist Jean Charlot describes as a "family" of intellectuals and artists in Mexico City. Rather than a "link among the various Americans and their Mexican friends" (as Delpar calls her on p. 40), she became a bridge between countries whose writing focused on making Mexico understood in the United States.

Social scientists: anthropologists and archaeologists

Delpar also provides an in-depth chapter on the relationship between Mexican and American anthropologists and archaeologists, presenting a detailed history of excavations and those who led them. She does an excellent job of describing the complex links between