

Funeral oration

*Octavio Paz**

On the 17th of April 1695, at four o'clock in the morning, in one of these very same cells, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz died. She was 46 years and 5 months old. According to Juan Ignacio Castorena y Ursúa, who was her friend and to whom we owe the publication in 1700 of the third and last volume of her works, Don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora wrote a funeral oration in memory of our poetess, which has been lost. Now, Carmen Beatriz López Portillo, director of the Cloister of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, as well as the president of the National Council for Culture and the Arts, have asked me to give a brief speech, not as a substitute for what has been lost, which is irreplaceable, but rather to allow a voice from the 20th century to join those of the 17th century who praised her memory. I accept this assignment with gratitude as well as fear. The funeral oration is a genre in which the Baroque Age excelled, but I am not Bossuet. I will attempt to remedy my lack of eloquence with enthusiasm.

No one has ever seen the funeral oration which Castorena spoke of, but there is no reason to doubt his word: Sigüenza y Góngora knew and admired Sor Juana, although there were some disagreements between them. What seems impossible to me is that he would have read this text publicly. Sor Juana died in an epidemic which decimated her convent. Calleja relates that nine out of ten nuns lost their lives. Even if this were an exaggeration—that century loved hyperbole—what is certain is that the poetess had no public funeral rites to honor her memory. In an epidemic the survivors make haste to bury the dead. The only ceremonies which could be carried out in those cases, according to the spirit of that epoch, were acts of atonement and expiation: divine justice had to be placated. Thus, it is not rash to believe that the lost funeral oration was never pronounced.

This episode corroborates the fact that the figure of Sor Juan Inés de la Cruz always invited controversy and debate. She was a contradictory person: a natural [i.e., illegitimate] daughter, taken in by relatives as a young girl; lady in

waiting to one viceroy's wife and intimate friend of another; a beautiful young woman well-versed in courtly gallantries and a learned nun in perpetual communication with the world, so much so as to convert her convent's parlor into a literary circle; the wonder of New and Old Spain; a spirit avid for knowledge and curious about news and ideas who suddenly renounced science and human letters; a character riven by contradictory impulses, chiaroscuro throughout, sudden illuminations followed by shadows, at one and the same time laughing and melancholy; clear intelligence accompanied by an independent, proud will which, with the same vehemence, humiliated and martyred its flesh with a hair shirt. Which of all these images is the truth? I answer: all of them. We men are double and triple. Gide says it is simple-minded to believe that there are simple feelings.

Our perplexity grows because of the lack of letters, manuscripts and other testimony. In 1929, Dorothy Schons wrote: "The biography of Sor Juana is still to be written." Today, seventy years later, the situation is unchanged. In 1950, almost half a century ago, Alfonso Méndez Plancarte lamented: "Up to the present, no one has searched Madrid for an epistolary or manuscripts of the first two volumes of Sor Juana; much less in Seville and its surroundings..." Sor Juana Inés wrote hundreds of letters, which today are scattered to the four cardinal winds. Doubtless many are now dust, victims of insects and human negligence. A deplorable loss, particularly the correspondence with the Countess of Paredes and Father Diego Calleja. In my 1982 study on the poetess, I asked our institutes of culture and our government to support researchers in their quest to find those papers and manuscripts in El Escorial and Madrid, among the living descendants of the Countess of Paredes, the files of the Society of Jesus and in Seville, instead of building monuments of dubious taste and publishing expensive reprints of her works. Today I renew my request.

The absence of documents has contributed to the extraordinary oscillations the figure of this writer has gone through over the course of these three centuries. Periods of light and periods of darkness, years of glory and years of condemnation, two centuries of oblivion and the

Text read by the poet, on the night of April 17, in the Cloister of Sor Juana, on the 300th anniversary of the poetess's death.

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resurrection of the 20th century, first within a small circle of poets and scholars and later through transformation into a popular symbol, a symbol of feminism and national glory whose effigy is printed on national currency. Throughout those images the real Sor Juana escapes us. The public images are deceiving; they are simplifications which give but a stereotype supplanting the real person, always complex and diverse. The mask immobilizes the living and changing face. How can we rescue a great writer from that eternity of smoke which is fame? The real truth of the poetess and prose writer is in her work. Yes, we need to find out about Sor Juana's correspondence and manuscripts, but above all, we need to read her works with the care they deserve. We must learn to decipher her truth "between the lines of damage."

Although she was above all a poetess, Sor Juana has left us prose writings that are worthy of remembrance. One of these is her letter to the Bishop of Puebla, called *Answer to Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, an important text in the history of Hispanic literature and the annals of women's liberation. An intellectual autobiography, it relates her apprenticeship, disillusionments and discoveries. There is nothing like it in Hispanic literature in her century or those that followed. An account of adventures in solitary thinking, in search of understanding and in dialogue with itself, is a theme little frequented by writers of our language. The interest in this text grows and intensifies as soon as it is noted that a woman wrote it. Neither Louise Labé nor Madame de Sevigné in the past, nor, in the 19th century, George Sand or the Brontë sisters have left us a history of their intellectual life. Neither have those poetesses like Emily Dickinson, Mariene Moore, Gabriela Mistral or Elizabeth Bishop of the modern age and of our hemisphere. In Sor Juana there is an unusual and triple conjunction: the intellectual, the poet and the woman. In our century she would have been a great essayist, because of the fusion of two qualities which are almost always counterposed: reason and feeling.

Poetess abundant and varied, she cultivated the theater both sacred and profane, poetry both lyrical and metaphysical; that is, that poetry whose protagonists are the human spirit and the world that surrounds us. Her mastery of nearly all forms and meters is surprising. If verse is the art of count and proportion, Sor Juana was a great versifier, comparable to Góngora and Lope de Vega in the 17th century and Darío and Lugones in our own. She was outstanding in a theater genre which has now disappeared: the eucharistic play. While her teacher was Calderón, *The Divine Narcissus* is the work not of a disciple but of a rival.

A well designed and crafted piece, *The Divine Narcissus* interweaves echoes of Ovid, neo-Platonist hermeticism and the Bible. A slender tower made of shimmering syllables, thoughtful syllables that invite us to think. Facing the complex aerial architecture of *The Divine Narcissus* is the musical treasure chest of its carols and songs for sacred festivals, which do not disdain popular speech nor the rhythm of castanets and clapping hands. Poems with winged shoes.

Sor Juana is outstanding for the expression of amorous feelings and its critical moments: meetings, farewells, jealousy, tears, laughter, solitude. Poetry not of divine love but of human love, which can be compared only to Lope de Vega and Quevedo. It is not a torrent like that of the former, nor an abyss like that of the latter: it is a pool of water in which the lover is simultaneously mirrored and erased. In the poetry of our tradition, with its tendency to go to extremes, Sor Juana represents lucidity and melancholy, a reflective gaze and nostalgia.

Poetry of love and poetry of thought. She believed her most polished and perfect work was "a small work called *The Dream*," better known by the name given by its publisher: *First Dream*. She was not wrong; within its century that poem stands like a tall and solitary tower. It has been said and repeated that *First Dream* is an imitation of Góngora. I have already demonstrated that the differences between *Solitudes* by the poet from Córdoba and Sor Juana's poem are more pronounced and profound than the similarities. The latter reflect the reigning style of the time, influenced by Góngora; the former result from two different visions of the world. Góngora delights in what he sees, and he recreates it; Sor Juana wants to go beyond that and penetrate the secret mechanism which moves the hinges of the cosmos. Not the poetry of seeing but rather that of knowing. In one case, a world of colored images in which a girl's complexion is "snowy purple"; in the other, one made of shadows and clarity, a geometry of pyramids and obelisks built by thoughts in an abstract landscape. The mind contemplates the nocturnal universe, inhabited by stars which are ideas, but never succeeds in understanding what it sees. The soul, freed from the prison of the body, has a revelation which in the end resolves itself into a non-revelation. Wonder when confronted by the cosmos follows the failure of understanding, which cannot grasp it as a whole or in its diversity.

A truly great poet not only expresses his or her time but goes beyond it. For a vision similar to that of *First Dream* to arise, over two centuries had to go by: in 1897 Mallarmé presented his poem *A Throw of the Dice Will*

Never Abolish Fate, which also relates the pilgrimage of the human spirit in the starry heavens. Its final chords seem to echo and answer the poem by Sor Juana, whom he never read: the constellations sketch a sign in the night, which is neither that of the absolute nor that of fate, but of a Perhaps which absorbs them into a question mark. For her lyrical poetry, Sor Juana is one of the great poets of our language; with *First Dream* she reaches universality.

The last years of her life were dramatic. In late November of 1690, her criticism of a sermon by the famous Portuguese Jesuit Antonio de Vieira was made public. It is a theological piece which would not interest the modern reader if it were not also an intelligent defense of freedom. The greatest favor God can do for us, says Sor Juana, is a negative one: to do us no favors. Thus would our free will grow. The idea scandalized many. The Bishop of Puebla reprimanded her; Sor Juana replied, as I said; and her reply unleashed a bitter debate which she describes for us with passion and irony. A challenge that ended in defeat: in 1693 she gave up

writing. Were her belated acts of contrition and obedience to the misogynist prelates who attacked her genuine apologies? They seem to suggest the contrary: the fears of a isolated and fenced-in woman. She died less than two years after her renunciation.

For her defense of liberty and women's right to knowledge, Sor Juana has bequeathed us something no less precious than her work: her example. Thinking of her end, I remember that of Hipatia, the mathematician, beautiful and wise like her, and whom she cited in her *Answer*. In a poem Palladas of Alexandria compares her to the constellation of Virgo; following his example I have composed these four verses:

*Juana Inés de la Cruz, when I ponder
the pure lights up above,
not words but stars do I spell out:
your works are clauses of fire. ✕*

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