

The Theology of *The Divine Narcissus*

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Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648/51–1695) is Mexico's most famous poet and playwright. A brilliant auto-didact born into a rural creole family, she was sent to Mexico City because of her great desire for an education, and became protégée of the viceroys of New Spain before entering the convent of Santa Paula in 1669. She ran what was virtually a salon from the *locutorio* (visitors room), where all colonial society and visiting Old World notables paid court. Her poems, plays and prose (secular and religious) were published in Spain, thanks to the patronage of a vice-reine, the Countess Paredes. In her lifetime, Sor Juana was famous throughout Europe and the New World; she was known as 'The Tenth Muse'. Eventually, in 1694, the bishops of Mexico forced her to give up writing and focus on her vocation. She continued to write in private, and died of a fever a year later, in her early forties. Latin America's first great poet, she has more recently has been claimed as the New World's first proto-feminist: she published the first defence of women's rights to education in the Spanish language, called *La Respuesta* (The Response).

The *auto sacramental* (or, Eucharistic play), *El Divino Narciso* is the culmination of Sor Juana's theological works. It is the finest example of the genre written in Latin America, and the only piece written by a woman in the Spanish-speaking world. The full significance of its theological innovation has until recently been overlooked. In her allegorical use of the figure of the Virgin Mary and female protagonists in both the *loa* (prologue) that precedes the play and in its main acts, Sor Juana arrives at a dynamic, original explanation of the Eucharist which offers possibilities explored here in their historical context, and for their contemporary value.

First, *The Divine Narcissus* is uplifting. The sense of injustice or injury all too often the chief focus of feminist scholarship has led to recent comments such as Stephanie Merrim's: 'one perceives in Sor Juana's works what has been described as a certain "melancholy": the melancholy of a woman who "soared above the rest" but never fully

forgave herself her own daring, cognizant as she may have been of the “mistaken rules” that rendered her daring presumptuous.¹ Octavio Paz concluded in his brilliant but erratic biography: ‘one notes the melancholy of a spirit that never managed to forgive its own daring and position as a woman.’² Different motives lead to the same judgment: in the first, the feminist standpoint emphasizes Sor Juana’s maltreatment by a patriarchal society and her frustration, while in the second, a male poet/critic foregrounds her gender limitations over her intellectual and creative brilliance. Concluding her argument, Stephanie Merrim asserts:

The final triangle—the last words in the convent’s *Libro de profesiones* [Book of Professions] by and regarding Sor Juana—speaks compellingly if formulaically to such a perception: ‘*A todas pido perdón por amor de Dios y Su Madre Yo la peor del mundo. Juana Inés de la Cruz*’. (I beg forgiveness of all [my sisters], for the love of God and his Mother I the worst in the world. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.)³

A statement known to be ‘formulaic’ cannot be used as evidence of the essential cast of Sor Juana’s mind. Even without the benefit of recent discoveries about the events surrounding the end of Sor Juana’s life, which show that she was not silenced by the Church but merely forced to give up her public role as writer, ‘melancholy’ is certainly not the defining tone of Sor Juana’s prose or poetry or her religious thought. Even the strong expressions of conflict in her early secular love lyrics owe as much to literary convention as to her (undocumented) personal experience. In this article I will demonstrate how carefully Sor Juana used her wide-ranging intellectual and spiritual resources to produce a view of the Eucharist that was highly personal and went far beyond her brief as servant of an evangelical Church. Sor Juana’s religious works are not, as has been suggested, theologically unadventurous.⁴

A summary of her literary sources and creative achievement is taken from the French expert, Father Robert Ricard:

1. Stephanie Merrim, ‘“Mores Geometricae”, the Womanscript of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’, in S. Merrim, *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (Wayne University Press, 1991), pp. 94-123 (119).

2. Octavio Paz, *El Laberinto de Soledad* (Mexico City: Fondo Cultura y Económica 1959), p. 91.

3. As n. 1, p. 123.

4. Octavio Paz, *Sor Juana, or The Traps of Faith* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press; Harvard University Press, 1988) pp. 354-56.

So the foregoing shows that the fundamental originality of Sor Juana, over and above her imitations and reminiscences, lies in the remarkable skill with which she manages to unify pagan myth and Christian dogma, and so to combine them as to create a perfectly constructed whole where everything is merged without disparities or dissonances, the borrowings she makes either from scriptural and liturgical texts, or from classical tradition and Greco-Latin pastorals, or finally from Calderon himself Eco y Narciso, the Prophets, hymns and biblical songs, the Gospels, Ovid and Virgil, all these are so combined as to arrive at a complete and supreme harmony⁵

Negative views attached to *The Divine Narcissus* focus on a perceived vein of narcissism in Sor Juana, which prompted her poor choice of theme and weak dialectic in the play. The work is seen as no more than a veiled expression of her own emotional distortion and rebellion against orthodoxy:

.. the whole of the *auto sacramental* *The Divine Narcissus* provides another daring and irreverent instance [of her narcissism] In greco-roman mythology Narcissus was such a yardstick for vanity and egotism that contemporary psychology continues to consider him as the emblem for a complex, on a level with an Oedipus, an Othello, or other mythic types ..the development of the *auto sacramental* concealed its irreverence quite satisfactorily thanks to another device of the poetess. her imitation of Song of Songs⁶

The accusation of narcissism is a misreading of Sor Juana's self-consciousness, which is central to all her creative work. Her study of her own emotions and her exploration of 'Self' or '*mi misma*' spring from her belief in the rights of women to be educated, and to hold a place in the world. For narcissism I would substitute protagonism, i.e. being

5 'Tout ce qui précède montre ainsi que l'originalité foncière de Sor Juana, au-delà de ses imitations et de ses reminiscences, consiste dans l'étonnante habileté avec laquelle elle est parvenue à unir le mythe païen et le dogme chrétien, et à combiner pour en faire un ensemble parfaitement agencé, où tout est fondue sans disparités et sans dissonances, les emprunts qu'elle fait soit aux textes scripturaires et liturgiques, soit à la tradition classique et à la pastorale gréco-latine, soit enfin à Calderón lui-même Eco y Narciso [of Calderón], les Prophètes, les hymnes et chants bibliques, les Evangiles, Ovide et Virgile, tout cela vient s'allier pour aboutir à une construction d'une harmonie complète et souveraine.' (Robert Ricard, 'Sur El Divino Narciso de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz', *Mélanges de la Casa de Velasquez* [1969], V, pp. 309-329 [319-20])

6. María Elvira Bermúdez, 'Juana de Asbaje, poetisa barroca mejicana', *XVII Congreso del Instituto Internacional de Literatura Hispanoamericana* (Madrid Ediciones Cultura Hispanica del Centro Hispanoamericano de Cooperación, 1978), pp. 173-86 (182-83)

a protagonist: Sor Juana's voice echoes in the language of Hélène Cixous:

In a way feminine writing never stops reverberating from the wrench that the acquisition of speech, speaking out loud, is for her—'acquisition' that is experienced more as tearing away, dizzying flight and flinging oneself, diving... We are not culturally accustomed to speaking, throwing signs out toward a scene, employing the suitable rhetoric. Also, it is not where we find our pleasure: indeed, one pays a certain price for the use of discourse. The logic of communication requires an economy both of signs—of signifiers—and of subjectivity. The orator is asked to unwind a thin thread, dry and taut. We like uneasiness, questioning... It is in writing, from woman and toward woman, and in accepting the challenge of the discourse controlled by the phallus that woman will affirm woman somewhere other than in silence. May she get out of booby-trapped silence! And not have the margin or the harm foisted on her as her domain!⁷

Sor Juana and the Baroque

Aside from the sin of narcissism, negative appraisals of Sor Juana's work are due to a critical antipathy to the baroque, both in concept and in expression. The excesses of the colonial period were viewed as a dark age after Mexico's independence and its literature was not re-evaluated until the turn of the twentieth century. In a more positive, if conventional critical mode, Octavio Paz has written extensively on the nature of the baroque:

The words 'wit' (cleverness, ingenuity) and 'conceit' define baroque poetry, 'sensibility' and 'inspiration' the romantic. Wit; inspiration reveals. The inventions of wit are conceits—metaphors and paradoxes—that discover the secret correspondences that unite beings and things among and with themselves. Inspiration is condemned to dissipate its revelations—unless a form can be found to contain them. That is, romanticism is condemned to rediscover the baroque.⁸

Why romanticism must rediscover the baroque as opposed to other forms of classicism is not made clear here. More than literary explication is required. In so far as it affects a feminist theological reading of Sor Juana, it is no coincidence that postmodern critiques of language per se and feminist theory of women's use of language should add other dimensions to the baroque, and particularly that style as

7. Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties', in Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément (eds.), *The Newly Born Woman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 63-132 (92-93).

8. Paz, *Sor Juana*, p. 54.

employed by Sor Juana. Lacan's proposition that language and the unconscious possess similar structures, with latent and manifest content mirrored in the distinction between the signified and the signifier, can be applied to the baroque reflections of mirrors in words. Layers of appearances formerly labelled meretricious word-play can be read as a critique (either consciously or unconsciously present), of oppressive societal roles, or as protest at imposed limitations on male/female identities—in short, a manipulation of language as a reflection of the manipulation of wo/men's reality. Cixous' suggestive view of women's writing, exemplified above, gives a new resonance to baroque ambiguities. Severo Sarduy has also referred to the 'decentralizing' tendency of baroque language and the disappearance of the single centre in any image or construct of reality. All this fits the 'New World order' that had decentralized the Catholic Church, its teleology and history. The exterior word had to be searched for meaning in itself:

With authority and exact balance, the Word defines the two epistemic axes of the baroque century [in Spanish America] God—the Word of infinite/Jesuitic power, and its earthly metaphor, the King⁹

As Electa Arenal's study, *Untold Sisters* makes clear, the humanistic, reformist writings of the early sixteenth century were banned by the end of the century, and a revival of the hagiographic tradition characterized the Counter-Reformation:

But strict censorship accompanied the proliferation of books. Any word, phrase, possibly implied meaning, or intention that smacked of heterodoxy was suspect. Writers lived in fear of being hauled before ecclesiastical judges to explain themselves. Every written expression that was to be published had to pass under inquisitorial eyes. Trepidation, self-censorship, avoidance, and encoding were thus commonplace. Undoubtedly the astounding formal and conceptual complexity that characterizes the writings of Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Quevedo, Góngora, Calderón de la Barca and other Renaissance and Baroque Spanish authors derives partly from the need to mask ideas that might be considered questionable. With that necessity came the invention of and the taste for verbal camouflage, which is the reason why an interpretation of the writing of the period requires a kind of decoding.¹⁰

9 Severo Sarduy, 'El Barroco y el neo barroco', in Cesar Fernández (ed.), *América Latina en su literatura* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1972), pp. 167-81; quoted in Margarita Rojas, Flora Ovaes and Sonia Mora (eds.), *Estudios: Las Poetas del buen Amor* (Caracas: Monte Avila Editores, 1991), p. 71.

10 Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau, *Untold Sisters* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), pp. 7-8.

Sor Juana's *barroquismo* yields insights into this new order. Where Sor Juana has been judged a mere eclectic, even dilettante, a feminist critique finds intellectual commitment and personally-defined faith. Feminist theory needs to keep a balance between the personal and the public. An examination of Sor Juana's *Divine Narcissus* offers a fine example of a woman's contribution to theology, encoded but available: commissioned and written as a public act, expressing radical thought. Many writers use the word *bisagra* (hinge) to describe Sor Juana's oeuvre in its space between the private and the public. She was of course, not alone. In *Untold Sisters* Electa Arenal discusses how other Mexican nuns' use of erotic language in their 'biographies' or 'written confessions' (i.e. stories extracted by and dictated to priests, sometimes for edifying publication) contains the desire for autonomy and acknowledgment:

Sublimating sexuality in the real world but giving it free rein in the spiritualized erotic imagination, they submitted to external control by the Church but paradoxically won for themselves a self-knowledge, pleasure, independence and recognition that secular women never achieved

Virginitly allowed women to rise to a 'virility' as Rosemary Ruether calls it, that 'conquers the fickle mind and the feeble flesh' which the Church Fathers saw as intrinsic to the female sex. The soul, after all, had been judged genderless.¹¹

Interestingly this same 'fulcrum' has been alluded to in Jean Franco's description of the political activities of women in Latin America. She refers to numerous efforts, chiefly in French and Anglo-American work:

.. to ground feminism both as a politics working for change and an enabling theory. It is precisely the contradictory claims between life practices and textuality, political power and the virtues of marginality that mark this present and as yet uncrystallized stage in feminist theory. Yet the specificity of Latin American feminism still remains outside this debate. This specificity surely consists in the entirely original concept of feminist 'intellectuals' – that is, of women who become the organic intellectuals of the emergent movements. Among these one would count the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and of the Chilean women's movement, and the Guatemalan Rigoberta Menchu. What distinguishes these women from either Anglo-American or French critics is that they have found ways of aligning gender politics with other forms of struggle without subordinating gender issues and without sacrificing politics.¹²

11. Arenal and Schlau, *Untold Sisters*, p. 12

12. Jean Franco, *Plotting Women: Gender and Representation in Mexico* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. xxiii

Analogy can be made with female mystics, judged to be remote from the world in their ecstasies, when in fact their inspiration caused them to have a radical engagement with the fate of mankind, exemplified by the life of Teresa of Avila or by the writings of Julian of Norwich. Alison Weber demonstrates that the language of the mystic may include all manner of devices to avoid trouble with the Inquisition.¹³ Sor Juana faced the same danger.

In *The Divine Narcissus*, Sor Juana uses her gift of poetry and power of authorship much less to define unease or conflict with her status as a writer than to create an overt political experience as well as a powerful religious one. The language of paradox is an essential characteristic of mystical writing, transcending all conflict, besides being a favourite literary device of the baroque: two traditions are drawn on here.

To be faithful to the spirit of Sor Juana's time is not in opposition to finding a contemporary lesson in her work. Theology was the substance of seventeenth-century Spanish discourse; nuns were less divorced from debate than once was thought, although unable to participate in written form. Abbesses worked with artists to commission altarpieces, discussing imagery; statuary abounded in the convents; sermons were heard daily, pamphlets circulated informally, learned works recited regularly. Episcopal and priestly differences were the subject of gossip throughout the city. Sor Juana was known to hold discussions with learned visitors that left them deeply impressed by her theological disputations—of which her *Carta Atenagórica* (Letter Worthy of the Goddess Athena) (1691) is the finest example. So Sor Juana's politics and feminine consciousness may be seen through her theology, not in spite of it: nothing she wrote was 'formulaic' apart from those final signed depositions which we now know to have been forced from her.

The Origins of the Auto Sacramental

The inspirations and innovations of the *Divino Narciso* require some contextualization with the tradition of the *auto sacramental*. The focus here will fall on the religious and social aspects of that tradition, in order to foreground Sor Juana's theological contribution.

The *auto sacramental* is a unique Spanish/Spanish American form of religious drama, with origins in the morality and mystery plays of

¹³ Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990).

mediaeval Europe. Morality plays were allegories and satires on moral themes; the Mysteries depicted events in the life of Christ. These religious dramas transferred over time from the chancels of gothic/romantic cathedrals and churches to their exterior steps, and from there to a neighbouring square or street. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the *autos sacramentales* of Spain reached a development unique in Europe. While their form drew on the morality play, (staged in one act with several tableaux or scenes), their subject matter generally focused on the Eucharist, and the mobility required by the Holy Week festivities led to the construction of the special *carros* or floats. Mediterranean sunshine at Easter contributed to the colourful staging and costuming, while the outdoor setting and mobile staging generated energy and emotional effect on the audience. The plays were simultaneously outdoor religious services and popular spectacles; it is hard to say exactly what they were like. To translate Sor Juana's editor, Alfonso Méndez Plancarte, in his *estudio liminar* on her *autos*:

Whoever looks for a strict definition of the Auto Sacramental will not find a better one than that provided by Valbuena Prat: 'a dramatic composition, staged in a day, in the form of an allegory, and with the Eucharist as its subject'. .but to conform to this, one would need to deny the term to numberless plays with Marian, Sainly, Biblical or Moral themes, substantially remote from the subject of the Eucharist, or to many others that are sufficiently eucharistic but in no way allegorical. To adjust ourselves to reality we would have to add the adverb 'generally'. But that is not generally true either, unless we limit the field to the Calderonian phase, nor a strict definition if it includes such approximations and excuses.¹⁴

The peninsular *auto sacramental* defined Sor Juana's use of the form, and her choice of subject. Her editor Méndez Plancarte suggests that in *The Divine Narcissus*, Sor Juana combines the sweetness and delicacy of poetry found in Lope de Vega with the allegorical power, dramatic and theological brilliance of Calderón—in other words, the perfect fusion of Spain's two greatest Golden Age playwrights.¹⁵

The Loa to the Divine Narcissus

Autos sacramentales were first used in the New World by Franciscan monks in the company of Hernán Cortés. The missionaries realized

14. Alfonso Méndez Plancarte, *Obras Completas de Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz* (Mexico City: Fondo Económica de Cultura, 1995), III, p. xliii.

15. Méndez Plancarte, *Obras Completas*, III, p. xxvii

that dramas would be ideal vehicles for Christian dogma when they discovered that discrete Indian nations had their own festival dramas, including recitation, dialogue, dance and music. Indian peoples also passed down their own history through dramas. The use of this second, didactic form of the *auto sacramental* conforms exactly to the portrayal of 'persuasion rather than force' depicted by Sor Juana in the *loa* (the introductory short play) to her *Divine Narcissus* where the subject of the main *auto* is introduced by a series of allegorical figures. Zeal, a Captain-General of the Spanish army of conquest, interrupts a group of ceremoniously dressed, noble Indians in their celebration of the Festival of the 'God of Seeds'. Appalled at their pagan rites, Zeal 'offers' them the true faith, which they reject, so Zeal's soldiers attack them. Religion, described as 'a Spanish lady' (the Catholic mission), begs for the life of their leader Occidente (West World/Mexico) to be spared. In political terms, Sor Juana confronts her audience with a sympathetic portrayal of the indigenous people of New Spain and a critical analysis of the actions of the Spanish military and Church. Her point of view is 'New World', not 'peninsula'—already a daring pose for a woman and a court favourite.

Just as the missionaries had found traces of dramatic representations in the culture of the Nahua peoples, so too Sor Juana alludes to the traces of Christianity in the customs of her Indian figures. In the words of Religion:

So help me God, what rough outlines
or simple hints, or even clues
our most holy sacred truths
purport to hide in these designs?
Oh crafty serpent of all cunning,
Oh venomous asp, oh monstrous being,
Oh Hydra spewing forth
from seven [*sic*] mouths a poisoned stream
that harms all men upon this earth!
Are there no limits to your evil schemes
that you would imitate what seems
to be His sacred, holy themes?
By God's good grace, may He inspire
my words to conquer your deceit:
so shall your evil cause your own defeat (*loa* ll. 260-75)

Sor Juana telescopes historical phases of mission work. The first phase, the work of Franciscan and Dominican orders, was to destroy all trace of paganism and impose the Catholic faith. (Early missionaries were shocked, not encouraged, to find similarities between Christian rites and pagan ritual.) The second was to build on such

'simple hints' and 'clues' in a syncretistic process. Ironically, the Jesuits developed the second approach, while the Franciscans, who had introduced the *auto sacramental* to New Spain, aligned themselves with the Dominicans in maintained opposition to this sophisticated policy. Sor Juana mitigates the first, suspicious response—that these seeming truths are merely the work of the devil—by alluding to the example of St Paul preaching to the Athenians, taken from Acts 17.22-23:

I must argue just like Paul,
 who, when he preached to Athen's men,
 took note they had a rule by Law
 to put to death whoever dared
 to offer them another god:
 but knowing that they also had
 a 'God unknown' to whom they gave
 an altar place, explained himself:
 'This Divinity's not new,
 for until now you never knew
 the very one you worship here
 is God on lugh, through me made clear (*loa* II. 280-320).

More significant in terms of the unfolding of Sor Juana's allegory and her theological innovation, is the political value of local writers' use of the topos of Edenic Mexico. At first in the early 1600s, the introduction of local flora and fauna in the writing led to the use of live animals, exotic birds and/or backdrops decorated with extraordinarily rich floral displays in the *autos*. At times these were made of gold and bright-coloured feathers. All this reflected an optimism and pride in the rareness of Mexico. To a certain degree, the Utopian ideals of Erasmus inspired early missionary work, evidenced by the number of occasions his works appear on the banned list, the *Libros y Libreros* in the *Archivo General de la Nación*. The New World was seen as correctible, not like the Old, weighted with history. By the later seventeenth century the Jesuits realized that the task of conversion was not so simple, and began a more syncretistic approach to building a new faith, working alongside the political aim of building a new empire stronger than that of the Peninsula. But their efforts brought disillusion, and the Indians' purity became their shame—their limitation. The timelessness of Sor Juana's *auto* has the effect of compressing these arguments into a dramatized analysis of their situation from 1530 to her present time.

Indigenous Elements in The Divine Narcissus

The rite that the Indian brave, West World and his consort America are celebrating in the *loa* is called the *Teocualo* (Nahuatl for 'God is eaten'). A model of the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli (not mentioned by name) is made of cereals ground with the blood of sacrificial victims. It is significant that Sor Juana compresses numerous elements in the *Teocualo* rite for her own purposes. Armando Partida has suggested at least three different Aztec rituals that included the making of flour paste figures, as possible sources for Sor Juana's innovation: *Xocotl Huetzi* (the falling of the fruits); *Tepeilhuitl* (the festival of the mountains) or *Atemoztli* (the falling of the rains).¹⁶ These are all fertility rites, whereas Huitzilopochtli was celebrated as the God of War, God of the Sun and the supreme god of the Aztec pantheon—a more terrifying deity Centeotl, the God of Maize, Xiuhteuctli, God of Grass/herbs, and Tlaloc the God of Earthly Fertility are all more fitting models for a 'God of Seeds'. The historian of Indian Mexico, Juan de Torquemada, described the use of infants' blood for the moulding of paste figures.¹⁷ Other early sixteenth-century accounts suggest that honey or amaranth was used in *Teocualo* rites. Human sacrifice was certainly part of Aztec ritual but more in the sense of ingestion of the virtue of the god—in Huizilopochtli's case, his power and invulnerability. (*Teocalli* can also be taken to mean 'House of Energy'). Sor Juana has moved from that to making the link with ingestion of another kind of perpetual life in the spirit, by referring to the use of blood. Marie-Cécile Bénassy-Berling considers that Sor Juana 'se trompait, mais de bonne foi' ('was mistaken, but in good faith'),¹⁸ but Sor Juana surely reconfigured this group of symbols in a Christianized form deliberately. Juan de Torquemada had equated the Aztec gods to Greek counterparts in his history, but only in order to show their essential pagan nature, and to characterize them negatively. Sor Juana searches for the roots of a nation's 'Christian spirit' in their former rites, more positively—through their creation myths, not through their sacrifices. Sor Juana gives dignity to

16 Armando Partida, 'El Tocatín en La Loa para El Auto *El Divino Narciso* ¿Criollismo Sor Juanino?', in Margarita Peña (ed.), *Cuadernos de Sor Juana* (Mexico: Difusión Cultural Cultural: Serie El Estudio, 1995), pp 243-71 (249-50)

17 Juan de Torquemada, *Monarquía Indiana* (1615) (ed. M. León Portilla; Mexico: Porrúa, 1969) VI, ch 44, pp 503-504

18. Marie-Cécile Bénassy-Berling, *Humanisme et religion chez Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (Paris. Editions Hspaniques/Publications de la Sorbonne, 1982), p 332.

indigenous belief in a gentle, quite humorous exchange between America, West World and Religion.

America: May I not see this God of yours so I may be more reassured?

West World: So I may now on this occasion leave aside my old persuasion?

Religion: Yes, you will see him, that I vow, when you bathe in the crystal flow of his baptismal water

West World: This too I know, for before I come to a god's rich table I must wash myself impeccable, for that is my tradition too

Zeal: That is not the washing clean of all your stains that we quite mean .. (ll. 378-388)

In the *loa*, Sor Juana is chiefly concerned with issues of spirituality and conversion more than with any esoteric pursuit of hermetic truth. Marie-Cécile Bénassy-Berling has also pointed out the originality of Sor Juana's application of Pauline doctrine to another nation beyond Greece and Rome.¹⁹ So at the outset of the *loa*, Sor Juana is embarking on a theological experiment, all the more unusual in that the drama was commissioned for presentation in Madrid. Sor Juana takes her theology to the court of the converters/conquerors, as well as providing a drama where the author's point of view is alongside her New World audience. All this is implied by the play-framing-the-play construction of the *loa*, so that the Indians form part of the audience of the main *auto* alongside the courtiers in Madrid: a daringly egalitarian structure only permissible because it is couched in dramatic poetry, not in theology from a pulpit, denied to women. Only just permissible: Sor Juana's plays were public commissions, not private works of art, and as such had to be approved by censors, and were consciously written for a public airing. It is in pushing the boundaries of conventional forms that Sor Juana can be said to have prefigured *criollo* sensibility, and at the same time, to have become a model for feminist thinking. Her work may not be a manifesto, but it enters the psyche, the imagination.

Politics of *The Divine Narcissus*

Whether such activity can be regarded as truly 'political' seems a redundant question; it was as close to current political discourse as Sor Juana could get. In feminist terms, the fact that Sor Juana not only

19. Benassy-Berling, *Humanisme et Religion*, p. 334

depicted events of import in both the political and ecclesiastical arenas, but commented on them and tried to educate her public, constituted an enormous step for a woman of her time. The writing of an *auto* was, by the nature of the piece, a public act. To use Jean Franco's phrase, Sor Juana 'explored space'—the spaces of discourse, and made her presence known in them. However, I do not think that the relationship between mysticism and the feminine, as discussed in Franco's book, *Plotting Women*, adequately deals with Sor Juana's situation or achievement:

It should be stressed, however, that mysticism is essentially outside writing, and even outside the spoken word. If I dwell at length on mysticism, it is because it has been considered the space of the feminine in some contemporary theory, particularly in the French theories that hold that the place of the woman is that which cannot be present in discourse. The problem is, as the example of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Mexican mystics clearly reveals, that in accepting silence and self-obliteration, the mystics legitimized the institutions' separation of male rationality from female feeling and the exclusion of women from the public domain of discourse.²⁰

Mysticism is not outside writing: The work of the mystic has always included the attempt to communicate, to share his or her experience. As will be discussed shortly, there are elements of the mystical in *The Divine Narcissus* such as Sor Juana's use of affective linguistic techniques and dramatic actions, which she uses within what might be called a feminine construction.

Synopsis of the Main Play

Human Nature is presented as a Shepherdess, and also in the figure of Echo, her malignant or fallen Self. Separated from her Lover by her sinfulness, Human Nature wanders an Arcadian landscape looking for a pure spring so that she can be cleansed, made beautiful and thus reunited with her Lover. Echo wishes to prevent this, and with the help of her allegorical acolytes, Pride and Self-Love, pursues the Shepherdess. Echo encounters the Shepherd/Lover/Narcissus, who is also searching for his lost love. She tempts him with visions of Arcadian/Mexican/Edenic splendours that will be given him to rule if he gives up Human Nature and swears himself to Echo. Narcissus rejects her, and eventually reaches the pure spring, where, thanks to Grace, Human Nature has hidden herself in the branches of an over-

20 Franco, *Plotting Women*, p. xv

hanging tree so that her face is reflected in the water. Narcissus instantly falls in love with his/her image/reflection, plunges into the water, is revived briefly, to swear his eternal love. He ascends to Heaven, leaving the Eucharist behind as his pledge—and leaving a mourning Shepherdess, once more made beautiful by his sacrifice, in the tender care of Grace. Grace repeats the purpose of the Eucharist in a beautiful poem that closes the play.

The Christian Symbolism of The Divine Narcissus

The image of a fountain is at the heart of Sor Juana's *Divine Narcissus*, both in its poetry and in its staging, for it is towards a 'pure spring' that both Human Nature and Narcissus/Christ move searchingly throughout the action; the 'spring' where Narcissus/Christ sacrifices himself for love; and the same 'fount' or fountain appears in the final scene, where Grace recapitulates the lesson of the play and 'enacts' the Eucharist. A stream of Christian love runs through the *auto*.

The fountain image links the *loa* and the opening of the play, for the former refers to propitiating the God of Seeds for all the benefits of water and fertility in order to have a good harvest:

America: since it is He and He alone
who sustains our entire Kingdom,
and to whom these fruits we owe;
and as this is the greatest blessing
of all the rest the sum and sign,
that this our life is self-sustaining,
we worship Him as lord of all.
for what's the point if all America
abound in gold from all its mines,
if fields die back from their pollution
and cannot yield their fruitful vines?
(*Divine Narcissus*, ll. 42-55).

This reference negates the critique that Sor Juana's poetic style consisted of a baroque landscape remote from the reality of conquered Mexico.²¹ Rather, she adds a realistic critique to the virgin or Edenic vision mentioned before, and embarks with a *criollo* consciousness firmly rooted in an Indian past.

There is a significant alteration of character in the First Tableau. Human Nature appears in Scene One, in 'magnificent costume' to ask

21 Jesusa Alfau de Solalinde, 'El Barroco en la Vida de Sor Juana', in Anita Arroyo (ed.), *Razón y Pasión de Sor Juana* (Mexico City: Ediciones Porrúa Number 195, 1980), pp 197-206

her daughters, the nymphs, Gentility and Synagogue to help her create the allegory that will show the heterogenous audience the truth of God. Then Human Nature reappears as a Shepherdess in Scene Two, lamenting the loss of her lover, Narcissus. At first it seems odd to represent Human Nature as a wise mother, then transform her into a lovelorn rustic, though within the bounds of Sor Juana's allegory that Human Nature is supposed to retain traces of her former knowledge, 'as a nymph beneath the form of metaphorical idea' (l. 324) since she refers to a history of intercessors (Abel, Enoch, Abraham and Moses), who have pleaded on her behalf to God for forgiveness of her sins (l. 210) and she also knows of the existence of the fountainhead that will purify her (l. 270). Is Sor Juana merely using literary convention, the Arcadian topos, or is it within the woman-centred shaping of this *auto* that 'mankind' should be characterized as a female Human Nature—and a broadly-defined female nature at that?

Female-centred casting continues with the Ovidian source offering of a female character for the Devil in Echo, or (fallen) Human Nature. In Scene Three (ll. 295-525) Echo explains her history as the Fallen Angel in an octosyllabic *romance* which suggests a demonic 'running at the mouth', even to breaks of quartets of hexasyllabic lines that suggest sudden gasps for breath. The curse of Babel (Gen. 10) is turned into an entertaining authorial display, culminating in a vivid Psalmic description of humanity's turning from God to idolatry, and at the same time swiping at those men who think that information (i.e. authority) is the same as knowledge. Sor Juana is attacking the 'diabolic' male power or control of language through this parody:

*for it is just reproof
to any fool in learning
who thinks he has all truth
that none can fathom him*
Having thus all men divided
He forced them into countless sects,
so whether they adored the Sun
or worshipped aspects of the Stars
or venerated all the beasts
or made the rocks subjects of praise
or fountains, or the rivers wide,
or forests or the woody ways,
till hardly any living thing
was deemed unfit for this impulse,
however foul, however gross.
nothing was ignored in blindness
nothing failed to feed their folly
spellbound, lost in adoration

of even their own inclinations,
 Man forgot his obligations
 to render all to mighty God,
 Thus, loving idols made of stone
 in all their blind stupidity
 men almost came to be transformed
 as vacuous as their statuary (ll 505-525, my emphasis)

The strength of this speech contradicts Merrim's suggestion that Echo's is a subversive counter-discourse expressing Sor Juana's 'anxiety of authorship. . . built from complex and often only barely conscious fears of that authority which seems to the female artist to be by definition inappropriate to her sex'.²² If anything Echo is a vehicle for Sor Juana to excel in her supposedly 'masculine' talent for words, while criticizing *man's* curse of prideful verbosity. There is no anxiety but sharp irony in her tone

Augustinian theory on language is deeply embedded in Sor Juana's verse.²³ He suggested that the sequentiality of language is the necessity of man's status but he also conceded that rationality in language is a sign of the order of material things, and thus transcends the material to become pleasing to the soul. Such is the case of poetic language. Augustine's distinction between 'sign' presented to the senses, and 'thought' of something distinct that follows on, the literal and the figurative, is surely analogous to the signifier and signified of modern linguistics. What is an *auto sacramental* at its affective best but the use of signs and symbols leading the devout onlooker towards the apprehension of the One Truth? Surely, too, such an analysis would strengthen Sor Juana's belief in her own right to use reason in language?

I also think the rationality to which Augustine refers is the kind of thinking that appealed to Sor Juana and made her shy away from the enforced 'spiritual' excesses encouraged amongst her sister nuns. Sor Juana was not only a lover of knowledge but a searcher after truth. She had a distaste for the illogical, not the transcendent. This is the search, or 'flight', to which her intellectual fascination with the esoteric is harnessed, to serve her spiritual aims: permitting her to express her longing to attain, and possibly her actual (if momentary) knowledge of divine mystery.

Here we arrive at the way the theology is expressed in the language

22. Merrim, 'Mores Geometricae', p. 100.

23. For a longer discussion see Jorge Checa, 'El Divino Narciso y la Redención del Lenguaje', *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* 38.1 (1990), pp. 197-217.

of the play: just as language is recuperated in beauty (a thoroughly Renaissance theological/poetic idea) so too in the action, Human Nature is redeemed in the yearning or contemplation of the Beauty of the Divine. The Word has origin and destiny in God, just as Human Nature does. This constant yearning for beauty and divine similitude is repeated in numerous dualities seeking resolution in the allegory; paganism versus true faith; babel versus harmonious speech; Idolatry versus Religion; Aztec human sacrifice versus Eucharist; Echo/Satan versus Human Nature (the former once beautiful, the latter with her beauty sin-stained); Human Nature and Narcissus as reflections of the Divine, one imperfect, the other perfect; the reflection of God in Narcissus versus the Echo of the Devil/Satan who with her two cohorts Pride and Self-Love, ends up in a black hole of self-focus (the real narcissism of the play). Ultimately, Nature/Creation itself is a sign or reflection of the Divine, a theme culminating in the symbol of mirror of the fountain's surface that reflects the perfection of Heaven. One of the most beautiful images of nature's response to Christ's/Narcissus' beauty is spoken by Grace:

All fishes in their wombs of dark
made offer of their deepest praise,
while all the loving Sea rose up
in glassy altars of adoring waves (ll. 1998-2001).

Grace continues:

He manifested in his grace
a plethora of perfect things
that infinite in beauty streamed
like rivers from his own fairness
Thus everything inanimate
the rational and the sensitive
came into being from his care
and would be lost without this thought.
This is beauty's miracle,
amidst the meadow's blossoming
to take delight in every rose
and feed upon the creamy lilies,
seeing all the splendour rare
of His Beauty made a mirror,
seeing in his image, man,
beloved of His own nature (ll. 2010-2025)

(Note the image of 'feeding on lilies', which returns in sacrificial form at the end of the play.) The horizontal, even *inward* movement presented physically in the drama and alluded to in Sor Juana's *acota-*

ciones (stage notes) is significant and original. Both Human Nature and Narcissus/Christ wander across the Arcadian landscape in search of each other (using language drawn from St John of the Cross as well as from Canticles). The female figure of Grace leads Human Nature to the right place, once the latter has begun to show signs of repentance. Louise Salstad has described this as the ‘ontological movement’ of the piece: each step towards the pool is a step nearer God/Grace/Beauty/Purity.²⁴ Salstad emphasizes the polysemous nature of Sor Juana’s poetry in the service of the divine.

In a key scene at the very centre of the play, Grace encourages Human Nature, singing in words reminiscent of Teresa of Avila’s inward journey to the dwelling places (*moradas*):

Let all the World sing praise'
 All praise to Human Nature
 For by taking these first steps,
 You come closer to all Grace
 Blessed be the Soul so pure
 who merits my abiding in her dwelling-place' (ll 1045-1050)

When Human Nature half-recognizes the figure of Grace (as if in a recollection caused by a God-given spark) Grace responds :

Do you remember a gentlewoman
 in that exquisite garden where
 you were raised from infancy
 according to your Father’s law;
 with pleasure I watched over you,
 each faltering step supported too,
 till you behaved disgracefully
 and made your Father so outraged
 with exile and abandonment
 he punished you for such great sin
 and forced the two of us apart
 until this very moment—(ll 1082-1095)

Human Nature remembers at once, and wishes to fall into Grace’s motherly embrace, but in a parallel with Christ’s *noli me tangere* which is glossed later (ll. 1962–1965), Grace refuses physical contact. When Human Nature asks eagerly what she must do, Sor Juana becomes overtly didactic in Grace’s Thomist response: the only course of action is to return to the ‘Fountain sealed, the Spring of which the Canticles give praise’ to be cleansed—which might at first reading appear to be

24. Louise Salstad, ‘El Símbolo de la Fuente en *El Divino Narciso* de Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz’, in *Explicación de Textos Literarios* 9 (1980–81), pp 41-46

the Baptism recommended in the *loa* (ll. 299-301). But it also has a deeper significance. The missing element is Christ's sacrifice.

Human Nature's reply is at the crux of the theology of the play. She recognizes the Old Testament allusions to Mordecai's stream:

I know from this that you refer
to Esther, who was foremother
in image of that divine face,
the lady who is Full of Grace,
Oh Spring Divine, oh Deepest Source,
of all refreshing vital force
since from the moment of your birth
you were preserved from evil's trace,
that original, transcendental sun,
that flows in every river's stream
but *Yours*—return to us the image
of Narcissus' most lovely face,
for only in your own likeness
His beauty's portrayed to perfection,
without a blemish, *His* resemblance!
(ll. 1135-1145, my emphasis)

The upper-case *Su* (His) creates through language the indivisibility of God/Narcissus/Christ: the first point of identification of Narcissus with God as opposed to Christ. But we also have 'Yours', that is, Mary's—the 'resemblance' in the Spring. In this baroque image, her innovation is revealed. Mary, the Virgin Mother, is simultaneously a figure of Wisdom/Grace/Holy Spirit, a co-creator, a facilitator, an empowering force.

To look back to Genesis and the Edenic vision again, I find an interesting 'mirroring' in the words of the Catholic theologian André Feuillet:

She [Eve] is another 'face' of his [Adam's] own being, but one he can experience only under the form of a 'thou' What seems to be suggested by this is that he will not be able to express to himself what he is and thus realise himself without entering into relation with another person and thus without renouncing his being purely himself²⁵

Moving away from the implied Corinthian 'glory of man' role for woman, Feuillet is suggesting a fundamental aspect of love—loss of self, and that is reciprocal, between man and woman, between humanity and God, through Christ. It is not too extreme to recall the origin of the Word is in Wisdom, a theme much explored by contem-

25. André Feuillet, *Jesus and his Mother* (Still River, MA. St Bede's Publications, 1984), p. 193

porary feminist theologians. Sor Juana's Mary, in her making and bearing of Narcissus/Christ, engages in more than a passive carrying of a foetus; she forms him perfectly, and she has the power, in the symbol of the fountain, to cleanse Human Nature, to make the human bond between Narcissus/Christ and Human Nature, and to return Narcissus/Christ to Human Nature in reviving the bond between the human and the divine. The 'sealed fount' is at the same time an energizing, flowing source, just as the Virgin's womb was 'sealed'; but available to be covered by the shadow of the Holy Spirit to produce a divine life: a life that is redemptive water for thirsting souls who choose baptism.

This is Mary as more than mediator: she is water to the air, earth to the sky, moon to the sun. Mary's purity is the cause of the miracle, not a means to curse all female sexuality—just as Eve was meant to 'complete' Adam, not be his 'Other'. Christ's own willingness to return to the waters is portrayed as a knowing act, not blind obedience: he too recognizes the 'Wisdom' of his return. Sor Juana was a bride of Christ and that always meant for her, being wedded to Wisdom.

Octavio Paz and Aida Beaupied (discussed later) have both focused on the New World fascination with Hermeticism and Egyptianism (a fashion that arose out of the Counter-Reformation's rejection of new scientific developments, but which also took hold in Mexico because of the extraordinary similarities seen in the pyramids of the Aztecs and those of Ancient Egypt). However, given Sor Juana's creole consciousness, it is equally plausible to look for *vises* or 'signs' of Indian spirituality, honoured in their recognition, but transformed, to add depth to this Christian message. The old gods and goddesses are transcended. The Aztec panoply included a God of the Smoking Mirror, Tezcatlipoca, a force for both good and evil. Surely his presence lurks behind the glassy surface of the life-giving pool? The plumed serpent/sun-god Quetzalcoatl was tricked into drinking *maguery* by Tezcatlipoca, and slept with his own sister. When he looked in the mirror after this sin, he saw himself as old. Mirrors, death and incest themes are present in the Aztec and Egyptian myths, and linger in biblical language.

Later, I shall refer to the extraordinarily powerful supplanting of the bread of the Eucharist, at the close of the play, by the Narcissian 'flor' (white flower)—an image known directly from those Aztec rites previously mentioned. Here the offering of bread or figures of maize paste occurred within ceremonies with flowers held aloft and formed part of the circle of prayer for renewal, the sacred life-link between

earth and heaven. All this is to restore a female-centred sense of the holy nature of the life–death cycle. Still to this day, on Mexico’s Day of the Dead, it is the smell of the flowers that draws the dead back to this life.

The white flower, of course, is also a classic symbol for Mary: the lily of the Song of Songs. This is echoed in the language of the lovers, Human Nature and Narcissus/Christ, as they approach each other, and forms part of the proto-feminist thesis that I suggest here. Sor Juana was well aware of the Church’s doubtful view of the Canticle, for she refers to St Jerome’s wariness on the subject in the *Respuesta* (ll. 136-147) where she notes that ‘learned men were forbidden to read the Song of Songs, and indeed Genesis, before they reached the age of thirty’ (a reference I take to be highly ironic in tone, since she, a woman and nun knows exactly why such a prohibition existed—and knows that her readership will know too). In using the erotic language of the lovers in her *auto*, Sor Juana moves from the excesses of physical torture that oppressed her sister nuns to a more valid Christian representation of an ‘agony’ in the spiritual search. The yearning and the suffering are active—as they are in a truly spiritual journey—being potentially transformative through faith, which is precisely what the suffering figure of Narcissus/Christ reveals in his beautiful description of his search for Human Nature in scene 8 (ll. 1221-1325). These lines act as a counterpoint to Human Nature’s previous yearning speech, in scene 6 (ll. 820-1046)—perfectly balanced either side of the scene of Grace’s momentous return in scene 7.

If ever a passage of poetry urged a Christian response to Christ’s love and suffering for humanity, this central section succeeds par excellence. More interestingly, Sor Juana does not limit the relationship to one of lover-for-beloved, but includes all aspects of Divine love: Christ may be the shepherd, but in his Godliness he is mother, vengeful patriarch, jealous husband, and concludes with an expression of helpless, infantile ‘thirsting love’ that only the Spring/Fount can quench. The change of tone from jealousy and anger to adoration, when Narcissus looks into the water in scene 9, is wonderfully dramatic.

The act of redemption is not made for Human Nature, but by a momentous combination of the action of (feminine, motherly) Grace, literally ‘disposing’ Human Nature above the pool, to be visible to Narcissus/Christ, and his entering, in all humility, into the waters of the feminine (earth/womb/Perfect Creation). This reading perhaps clarifies discussion as to the strain of Scotism in Sor Juana: her giving dignity to woman in humanity and the female in the Divine to have

ascendancy over any undue glorification of Christ's sacrifice or assertion of too great autonomy in the nature of human will.

Louise Salstad sums up the theological structure of this scene:

Sor Juana has established a parallel between Incarnation-Passion on the one hand, and Baptism-Eucharist on the other. The fount is the pure womb of Mary and the tomb of Christ, it is the baptismal font and the Eucharist itself, the source of all Grace. In all these meanings the Spring lies between life and death—a death that leads to eternal life.²⁶

Patriarchy's creation of a non-sexual, pure, passive Mother of God has contributed powerfully to the oppression of women. I am not suggesting a complete or simplistic answer is to be found in *The Divine Narcissus*. But the mere fact that Sor Juana, supervised so closely by her confessors and scrutinized by her Bishops, could have the courage to reinvent a type for Mary is impressive. First, as I have shown, Mary's purity is portrayed as active, not passive. For Sor Juana there was a spiritual fecundity to be found in chastity—a creative mental fecundity that is her birthright. Secondly, Sor Juana also draws in a line of foremothers for Mary, such as Esther, which is a brave and creative theological idea for her era. Likewise, she presents Human Nature in all her womanliness: not only is she a mother who has taken on the role of Shepherdess in allegory; she gazes upon Narcissus/Christ with sexual longing, and mourns for his body in the language of that other Mary. Narcissus/Christ's thirsting can be connected to the motif of life-giving water in the Fountain, and with the mystic's language for the Hypostatic Union of the Soul with its Maker, particularly as rendered through Luis de León and St John of the Cross.

The cult of the Virgin Mary was prevalent in her time (her Father Confessor Nuñez de Miranda was head of a fervent Brotherhood of Mary) but her own intelligence and creativity led her to fashion something more suggestive, more positive out of the Marian revival of the Counter-Reformation. Confessions of faith in the Immaculate Conception, such as the one that Sor Juana was forced to sign in blood (in 1694 after being reprimanded by the Church for activity beyond the bounds of her role as a nun—i.e. writing) were common expressions of faith in the seventeenth century.²⁷ They were encouraged by confessors such as Nuñez de Miranda, and promoted by the leading seventeenth-century Spanish theologian, Francisco de Suarez, whom

26. Salstad, 'El Simbolo', p 46

27. Bénassy-Berling, *Humanisme et Religion*, pp 256-58

Sor Juana may have studied if not directly, through Nuñez de Miranda's teachings. Marina Warner responds to Suarez' mariolatry:

Catholic prejudice naturally rules out that Mary's role on Calvary should be considered priestly. Such an interpretation would give powerful ammunition to the lobby for the female priesthood... But the Virgin as Mater Dolorosa belongs in the tradition of the all-devouring and savage goddess of myth who, like Inanna, sacrifices a substitute to the powers of darkness to save herself and then weeps for him. The Virgin's title is not *sacerdotissa*, though that is the function she fills, but *diacona sacrifici*, the deacon of the sacrifice, and *socia redemptori*, the colleague of the Redeemer. She thus takes part, but in a suitably passive way...²⁸

The Babylonian equivalent of Inanna is Ishtar; that for Dumuzi is Tammuz. In the equivalent Egyptian cult of Isis, the cult is centred on the death of her spouse and son Osiris. It is easy to see that in her musings on Anathasius Kircher's renderings of Egyptian Hermetics—the most popular source of information in New Spain—and that other unholy trinity of Isis, Osiris and Horus, Sor Juana would arrive at certain parallels that could surface in a theological argument. Hermeticism for example offers the possibility of a unity between male and female, the sun and the moon, in the alchemical process, represented iconographically by the 'flower of Wisdom'.

In *The Divine Narcissus*, Mary's symbolic presence in the fountain goes further than mere echoes of cultic, vogueish goddesses. Sor Juana gives Mary a role in the Trinity, which has nothing to do with importing priestess functions inappropriately. It is interesting to compare Sor Juana's use of Marian imagery here with the wording found in Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Appeal, 'The Worship of Mary' (2 February 1974):

the contemporary woman, wishing to participate with decision-making power in the choices of her community will dwell with intimate pleasure on a Mary who, placed in dialogue with God gives her active and responsible consent . . . She was a woman who had no doubts about proclaiming God as Redeemer of the humble and oppressed . . .

This document has been particularly relevant to the Catholic Church in Latin America in recent decades where Mary, 'Star of the New Evangelisation' is a bastion against sectarianism, and whose active image forms part of a new debate about the role of women in machistic societies. She has become a figure of 'solidarity', a protector of women's rights, not merely their sufferings. This Virgin is also

28 Marina Warner, *Alone of all her Sex* (London. Picador, 1976), p. 220

linked to her fierce ancestress Tonantzin by the idea of her power to pacify the floodwaters (of Mexico City's once-menacing lakes)—she is here, the indigenized, dark-skinned Mary, *la Guadalupe*, not the imported 'Virgen de los Remedios' introduced by the *Conquistadores*. These themes are explored more fully in my continuing work on Sor Juana's cycles of carols, called *Villancicos*.

Sor Juana has left behind the Ovidian notion that Narcissus's body was lost, leaving only the eponymous flower as memento. (Octavio Paz quite erroneously sticks to this reading in his critique of Sor Juana's *auto*, completely missing the significance of the fountain.)²⁹ Narcissus/Christ revives, and the flower becomes the Host. The 'rending of the Veil of the Temple' has also the new significance of the soul's entering of the Tabernacle, through Communion, and also of Mary as the Tabernacle of God.

Narcissus/Christ's death is followed by an earthquake and eclipse, as in the New Testament accounts (ll. 1692-1705), and Sor Juana focuses on the feature of the eclipse, which in an original stroke of poetic imagination she took from Calderón's *Eco y Narciso*. In that play, Narcissus falls into the fountain, and an earthquake occurs: Calderón, like Shakespeare, enjoyed the use of Nature as a moral symbol of order/disorder. In the Spaniard's comedy, all nature revolts at Narcissus's vanity; but in Sor Juana's *auto*, all nature trembles at Christ's sacrifice, and an eclipse, in all its baroque conceit (*conceptismo*), is depicted at length. The water, moon, earth-Mother symbols are matched by the solar anger of the paternal God.

That Sor Juana intended this reading has been made clear if only from her known close study of Augustinian theory of language. It is a reading that is inspirational, and theology must seek to inspire. Many critics aver that Sor Juana was not a mystic,³⁰ but it is also true that poets can reach truths similar to the perceptions of mystics. Inevitably T.S. Eliot's words are apt:³¹

It seems to me that beyond the namable, classifiable emotions and motives of our conscious life when directed towards action—the part of life which prose drama is wholly adequate to express—there is a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out

29 Paz, *Sor Juana*, p 355

30 Gerald Flynn, 'The Alleged Mysticism of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz', *Hispanic Review* (1960), pp. 223-44

31 T.S. Eliot, 'Poetry and Drama', in *Collected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1946) quoted in Elizabeth Jennings, *Every Changing Shape: Mystical Experience and the Making of Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1961), p 167.

of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus: of feeling of which we are only aware in a kind of temporary detachment from action. This peculiar range of sensibility can be expressed by dramatic poetry, at its moments of greatest intensity

As a variation on the theme of Mary in the redemptive process, we have to look no further than Sor Juana's *villancicos* for language very close to that used for Narcissus/Christ in the Divine Narcissus:

That Shepherdess
with the serene gaze,
enchantment in the grove,
envy of the skies,
captured with one hair,
wounded with one eye,
the Sublime Shepherd
who dwells on high ³²

That lovely phrase, '*Hechizo del soto*' (enchantment/charm of the grove) evokes the Orphic theme running through the *Divine Narcissus*, another classical type brought closely into the type of Narcissus himself: an enchanter of creatures, a descender into the underworld. But where Orpheus lost Eurydice with a backward look, Narcissus/Christ saves Human Nature with his steadfast gaze of love. However, the Orphic strain strengthens the Marian theme, for it is another creation myth, enabling Sor Juana's syncretistic scheme to spiral round again.

In the reappearance of Christ in the Eucharist staged at the finale of the *auto*, the bread of the Host is changed into a white flower, a lily, the flower of Mary—and also the *azucena*, white lily, a traditional native flower of Mexico. At one level this may be read as a hermetic symbol: 'Orpheus returns from Hades with only a flower as a proof that he has visited the source of creativity...' ³³ as Beaupied describes. (In her later work Beaupied expands this theme by drawing on the Dantesque vision of the Mystic Rose of Catholic litany, the Virgin as vehicle for Divine Revelation.) ³⁴ There is a Mexican parallel for this doubling of Marian imagery around the lily and the rose: it was a cloak full of roses that the Indian catechumen Juan Diego brought back from the hillside at Tepeyac as proof of his vision of the Virgin of

32 Paz, *Sor Juana*, p. 325. (Spanish original from the *Villancicos a la Asunción*, 1976, in Méndez Plancarte, *Obras Completas*, III, p. 221)

33. Aida Beaupied, 'The Myth of Narcissus and the Poet's Quest for Knowledge in Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz and José Lezama Lima', *Romance Notes* 35 (1994), pp. 111-24

34. Aida Beaupied, *Narciso Hermético* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997)

Guadalupe—whose shrine is built on the ancient Aztec site of the goddess Tonantzin (i.e. Wisdom goddess), on the outskirts of Mexico City.

Sor Juana is also alluding to the fertility rituals in the *loa* around her God of Seeds. The links between the yearly round and the Christian message were clearly seen during Holy Week. Traditionally, in earlier *autos sacramentales*, the crucifixion was emphasized. The Franciscans saw this is a celebration of masculine power, well in line with their own ideas of the sanctity of priestly sacrifice in mission work in the New World. But actually the summer solstice was the season to celebrate the fertility of Mother Earth, and brought back memories of the corn goddesses of old.³⁵ To cope with the Indian's desire for a feminine aspect at this time, the Catholic Church promulgated the month of May as dedicated to Mary. There is no space here to develop the vision and myth that the Virgin of Guadalupe was herself originally 'developed' by the Catholic Church to create a suitably passive indigenized Mary. Even though the cult was being actively promulgated during her lifetime, Sor Juana ignores the Guadalupe phenomenon in her own writings, in preference for the magnificent Wisdom figure we see here.

While being conscious of Sor Juana's layered meanings as pure poetry, the generative mystery would seem to me to be more fittingly applied to the theological syncretism at work—that the *auto* closes, as it opened, with a symbol that encompasses the indigenous religious practice of worshipping the God of Seeds, with that of the sacrament of Christ risen, not merely as the seed of Jacob, but the fruit of the virgin's womb. Human Nature suggests this outcome in her speech of penitence, when she divines the possibility of a Saviour born out of Mary's fertility:

At last the rod from Jesse's stem has burst,
mysterious seed from *when a flower will issue*
on whose fair crown will rest
the Holy Spirit, who will with strength renew
all Wisdom, Counsel and Intelligence,
all Strength and Pity, Fear and Knowing Science
At last we see the sign that Acaz declined
to beg of God, though it was granted without asking;
For God has now inclined
To make a stunning marvel, quite exceeding

35. Ramón Gutiérrez, *Cuando Jesús Llegó, las madres del maíz se fueron Matrimonio, sexualidad y poder en Nuevo México, 1500–1846* (Mexico City Fondo Cultural y Económica, 1993), p. 136

Nature's own abilities, in such a way
 that a Virgin may give birth, yet virgin stay
 (ll 895-902, my emphasis)

Grace is given the task of recapitulating the theology of the piece and the mystery of the Eucharist. Grace's lines are full of poetic beauty and clarity of faith and culminate in her embrace of Human Nature. Sor Juana maintains her female-centred representation of the faith to the conclusion of the *auto*. The gloss on Aquinas' *Pange, lingua* concludes the play with these lines:

Oh let me lift my voice to sing His Glory,
 The Mystery Supreme of His great ransom,
 that to redeem us He gave up His Body,
 generous Royal Fruit of the purest Womb!

May we revere this finest Sacrament,
May Ancient Mysteries yield duly to the New,
supplying through our Faith what is deficient
raising the senses to all feeling virtue.

All glory, honour, blessings and acclaim,
 nobility and power to the Father and the Son,
 let them both be rendered here, and Love that comes
 from Both, may we in equal praise to them return!
 (ll 2227-2238. Note not only my italics but the
 capitalization as in the original typography)

Once again Sor Juana has equated the Old with the New faiths, but she also makes a significant distinction between evidence taken through the senses, which are weak (*defectos*) and perception through the feelings (*los afectos*) when supplemented by Faith (*supliendo de la Fe*). The corporeal only serves if the information of its responses is lifted to another level. For all her appreciation of physical beauty, Sor Juana knew the pitfalls of its false adoration. One of her favourite poetic themes is the deceptiveness of beauty and the lies found in portraiture: all pure baroque stuff. Love and wisdom are essential.

To conclude with a quotation from St Augustine reinforces the fertility of the Fount/Spring imagery. In Book 8 of *The Trinity*, Augustine expands on a triadic view of love:

But let us leave the flesh beneath our feet and rise to the soul, where we may drink of a purer and more limpid spring. What does any friend love in his friend but the soul? There too are the three: the lover, the loved, and the love. But here we may pause—not supposed we have found what we seek, but having found (as seekers do) the place in which to look

In the moment of Narcissus's gaze into the Spring, there are two triadic configurations. Grace aids Human Nature and Narcissus to see/unite into the divine truth, from above, while the Spring/Mary/Wisdom provides the means of transformation for the mystic couple at a deeper level. Mexican essayist Sergio Fernández has commented that the use of three times, past, present and future in *The Divine Narcissus*

shows how, as in the mystery of the Trinity, there are three and yet only one mental state/s at any one time Surely the awareness of the poet and of God also merge here, in their omnipotence? Perhaps this is the reason how such writing, deeply connected to the Mysteries and the powers of the infinite, could convert everyday themes into something quite supernatural ³⁶

In the final scene, the symbol of the lily alongside the cup of wine held above the fountain, unites images of the male and female in a procreative triad. Submission by both Christ and Humanity to love produces oneness with the divine. Not only does this suggest harmony and fertility in all Creation, where God's own nature reproduces itself perfectly and holds itself up to his gaze of pleasure, but it also suggests an end to the duality that bedevils man's thinking. In the psyche/imagination, through the power of symbolic truth, and in the soul, through the power of Grace, all dualities, including male and female are resolved into One. In the Trinity, it is the power of love that is the unitive third force. For Sor Juana, love, beauty and wisdom were accessible to all human beings, male and female, of whatever race, and the Godhead manifested indivisibly all three aspects.

³⁶ Sergio Fernandez, *Homenaje a Sor Juana, a López Velarde, a Gorostiza* (Mexico. Sepsetentas, 1972), p 70