

Chapter II

Sor Juana and her idea of freedom

Sor Juana's Humanism and its Connection with Novohispanic Baroque Art

In recent years, I have developed an interpretation that specialists in Sor Juana know little about.¹⁵⁹ It relates to the theological influence of a group of Pueblan Jesuits who were contemporary to the nun. Shortly after my article was published, an in-depth study by Dr. Ramón Kuri Camacho was published by the Universidad Autónoma de Veracruz.¹⁶⁰ After translating a number of 17th-century philosophical texts in Puebla, he was able to show that philosophers Francisco Suárez and Luis de Molina once had an influence on Sor Juana, in particular, regarding the issue of freedom. Kuri Camacho has shown that certain *Criollo* philosophers put these proposals to work—especially that of Suárez—in order to develop a new project for a nation in America. This group of Pueblan Jesuits included Fr. Miguel Sánchez, who spoke of the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Lasso de la Vega, Becerra Tanco, Nuñez de Miranda, who was Sor Juana's confessor, and others. As a group, they extended certain theological theses of Luis de Molina and Francisco Suárez regarding middle science or conditioned science. The theological problem they were working on was the relationship between grace and freedom. In their writings, Suárez and Molina had begun with the question of whether free acts were meritorious in themselves or whether they necessarily required the cooperation of divine grace. They wondered whether virtuous acts are meritorious when the person was in mortal sin, or whether such acts lacked merit because of the sin. These questions augured a greater autonomy for the acting person because of his or her freedom, a possibility that opened the doors to fictionalism and probabilism, together with the theory of possible worlds, which is where the Jesuits parted ways from traditional Aristotelian-Thomistic realism. Suárez's and Molina's proposal conceded a greater autonomy to human beings, something decisive for their political project. If good human acts are meritorious despite the fact that the person is in grave sin, this would mean that freedom participates more than grace in the divine project—even putting certain limitations on God. Traditional Catholic theology argued that if the human being sins, none of his or her

actions have merit. In contrast, the proposals of Suárez and Luis de Molina threw new light on the understanding of moral autonomy. This movement was called “Jesuit humanism,” and, on the political plane, offered an alternative national project, challenging the theory of the liberal state that Luther’s Reformation had promoted. The theological axiom on which these authors relied was the dual nature of Christ, fully human and fully divine. Because the human being is similar to God, even being called an image of Him, the topic of human freedom had to be studied from two points of view: one of theology and one of political humanism.

The Theological Assimilation of the Jesuit Tradition in Colonial Times

The Jesuit proposal fit hand in glove within the Novohispanic context: the 17th century was one of great climatic calamities in America. These included harsh winters, floods and droughts that ruined crops, famines, a decrease in population because of the conquest itself and because of plagues, epidemics and pestilence, all of which reminded New Spain of the brevity of life. At the same time, it was a century of economic reforms and of a vice regal policy of expansion to the North. This gave rise to a thriving *Criollo* aristocracy. In the religious terrain the Jesuits were celebrating the canonization of Francisco de Borja, the third general of the Society of Jesus, with festivals featuring political competitions, works of theater, carnivals and other activities. Basing themselves on the theological proposal of a double manner or mode of dealing with the incarnation of Christ, the Jesuits developed a new project for society and a new manner of interpreting the infidelity of the natives and their actions. In this context, the Jesuit *Ratio studiorum* contributed greatly to the formulation of a language with precise aesthetic expressions, uniting images and rhetoric with speculative theologies and expressing in art the theological consequences of the reform that was underway. Thus, the Baroque art of their time evolved from a mere repetition of styles brought from abroad, to a consciously adopted way of life that expressed the moral and political autonomy that *Criollos* were slowly beginning to affirm. Probabilism solidified in the Novohispanic Baroque, promoting a capricious art, affective and with little connection to classical canons. It began with the typical features of the European Baroque: counterpoints, chiaroscuros, twisted columns reminding the viewer of Solomon’s columns: this new Baroque tears down the barriers between culture and architecture, bringing together literature, science and myth, silence, and voice. In New Spain, the Baroque slowly began to adopt its own rules: this new style was syncretic and exalted the new lands, asserting not just that the Earthly Paradise was in America, but also that God had been understood better by the natives. This process went hand

in hand with the formulation of myths and legends, such as the identification of Quetzalcóatl with St. Thomas the Apostle. These stories and assertions demonstrate the incorporation of the new theories into art.

The Novohispanic Baroque is the first artistic expression in Mexico that has its own identity, and Sor Juana will occupy the apex of its literary variant. The reader might think that there is no connection whatsoever between the literary Baroque of the nun and the theological thesis mentioned above, but a close examination of three Sorjuanian texts—*La Carta Atenagórica*, *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz*¹⁶¹ and *Primero Sueño*—demonstrates the connection between her theological posture and the literary Baroque style she used to construct her poems. Sor Juana states, in the dedication of *Primero Sueño*, that she *is writing in the style of Góngora*, and one might think—as others have done—this means her poem merely copies models from the Spanish Baroque. However, if we read her prose work carefully, we will uncover the criteria that influenced her in her artistic itinerary. In the *Carta Atenagórica*¹⁶² we have an invaluable prose text: Sor Juana is commenting on a sermon by Fr. Vieira, a contemporary Portuguese theologian, who in that era was recognized as an authority. In his sermon, Vieira spoke about the greatest or best benefit of love (*fineza*¹⁶³) Christ had left for human beings. Classical theologians of the stature of Augustine of Hippo, John Chrysostom and Thomas Aquinas had all written on the topic. In his analysis, Vieira stated that for St. Augustine the greatest *fineza* offered by Christ had been to give his life for his friends, while for Thomas Aquinas—on the opposite side—the greatest benefit of Christ’s love was that he remains for us in the sacramental species of wine and bread, not leaving the human being alone. Finally, for John Chrysostom, the greatest benefit of Christ’s love was his washing the feet of his disciples, proving his subordination to the human race and thus saving it. Sor Juana sought to comment on Vieira’s sermon in order to participate in the theological commentaries of the fathers and doctors of the Church. She presented her own interpretation of the greatest *fineza* and legacy that Christ had conferred on the human race. But she frames her commentary in a peculiar manner: she is not just adding one more theological opinion to those proffered by two fathers of the Church, Augustine of Hippo and Chrysostom, a Doctor of the Church, Thomas Aquinas, and a renowned bishop and theologian of her time, Vieira the Portuguese. Rather, she was interested in demonstrating there were various valid theological interpretations of a single problem. Sor Juana introduces her interpretation by noting that Vieira’s sermon cast light on divergences within the Catholic tradition itself. Hence, she is enabled to offer her own interpretation against the backdrop of tradition, showing that, in the first place, the tradition is not monolithic. In the second place, in the *Carta Atenagórica* she comes out against these diverse traditions, claiming one shouldn’t necessarily affiliate oneself with a particular tradition, but instead one should think for oneself, with one’s eye on the life of Christ and his

teachings. In assuming this posture, not only does she place herself at the same level as Vieira, a major theologian, but she also states that as a Christian believer she can contribute to the Magisterium of the Church and the tradition of the holy Fathers. This insulting claim can only be understood in the context of the flourishing humanism of her time, which was peculiar the group of Pueblan Jesuits that, following Suárez and Molina, developed certain theological-political theories relating to freedom. Next, Sor Juana presents her theological proposal: the greatest *fineza* of Christ had not left us any *finezas* whatsoever. The argumentation is rigged, for while Vieira and the theologians spoke of the “legacy or inheritance of Christ,” Sor Juana began astutely by distinguishing in her letter between a “legacy” and a “benefit of love” [*fineza*]. In this way she proposes an interpretation that differs from those of the men, all while attempting to avoid any direct contradiction. She begins her reflections by saying that a “*fineza*” is not the same as a “legacy,” and that she is writing about the greatest *fineza* Christ left the human race. In her opinion, the great legacy of the second person of the Verbum was to leave human beings in freedom, that is, in not imposing any *finezas* upon them.

In *Carta Atenagórica* Sor Juana’s participation in the debate involves three interventions, and in all of these moments the nun maintains the definition of the human intellect as free agency. In the first moment, she discusses the diversity of interpretations regarding the greatest legacy of Christ, while in the second she places herself at the same level as the great Portuguese theologian instead of subordinating herself to his judgment. Finally, in the third moment she presents a new way of understanding the issue, one which also has an explicit modern content: that *imitatio Dei* is not the supreme operation of the intelligence, even when one is discussing the Faith. For if the greatest *fineza* of Christ consisted of not giving any *fineza* at all to humans, free will acquires a crucial importance in their concrete convictions and actions. It is noteworthy to remember that in his Introduction to the *Discourse on the Method* René Descartes proposed a role for the will, even in the context of scientific knowledge. Descartes broke with arguments based on tradition and authority, proposing that individuals should think for themselves, and that as grounds for knowledge they should value experience more than authority. In addition to drinking from the Jesuit theory of *scientia media*, which characterized the intellect as a free intellectual power, Sor Juana was also influenced by the philosophy of her time. But the novel—and still poorly explored—point is the Jesuit contribution to the question of freedom, and how the nun assumed the same position. For both Sor Juana and the Jesuits, it is true that from an absolute perspective, human beings are saved by the grace of God, but from the human, temporal perspective human beings are saved because of their concrete merits, obtained by the exercise of freedom. “Nothing enjoys greater freedom than the human understanding; if God does not violate the mind, then why would I even try?” wrote Sor Juana in the Prologue for the Reader from the first edition of her *Complete*

Works. In *Romances filosóficos y amorosos (Philosophical and Amorous Romance)*, she reiterates:

Let us pretend to be happy,
melancholic thought, for a while;
perhaps you can persuade me,
though I know the contrary is true.

For since on mere apprehension
they say all suffering depends,
if you imagine good fortune,
you will not be so downcast.¹⁶⁴

[Finjamos que soy feliz,
triste pensamiento, un rato;
quizas podréis persuadirme,
aunque yo sé lo contrario.

Que pues sólo en la aprehensión
dicen que estriban los daños,
si os imagináis dichoso
no seréis tan desgraciado.]¹⁶⁵

Knowledge is not necessarily tied to reality—it is capable of thinking and feeling what is contrary to evidence, thus obtaining another sense of knowledge. But this is something that stretches the meaning of the lines.

Let my understanding at times
allow me to rest awhile,
and let my wits not always be
opposed to my own advantage.

[Sírname el entendimiento
alguna vez de descanso,
y no siempre esté el ingenio
con el provecho encontrado.]

Freedom allows intelligence to be creative and ingenious, for there is variability and probability in knowledge:

All people have opinions
and judgments so multitudinous,
that when one states this is black,
the other proves it is white.

[Todo el mundo es opiniones
de pareceres tan varios,
que lo que el uno cree es negro,
el otro prueba que es blanco.]

In the *Carta Atenagórica*, she equalizes her own convictions to the tradition of the Church. Also, she debates with the great ecclesiastical authorities, even lifting up her beliefs to the level of the protagonists of the Greco-Roman tradition:

The two philosophers of Greece
offered perfect proofs of this truth;
for what caused laughter in one man
occasioned tears in the other.

[Los dos filósofos griegos
bien esta verdad probaron:
pues lo que en el uno risa,
causaba en el otro llanto.]

The emphasis on freedom has an effect even on judgments:

A proof is found for everything
a reason on which to base it
and nothing has a good reason
since there is reason for so much.

[para todo se halla prueba
y razón en qué fundarlo:
y no hay razón para nada,
de haber razón para tanto.

All people are equal judges,
being both equal and varied
there is no one who can decide
which argument is true and right.

Todos son iguales jueces;
y siendo iguales y varios,
no hay quien pueda decidir,
cuál es el más acertado.]

Furthermore, she deems divine creation responsible for having created human beings with moral autonomy:

Since nobody can adjudicate,
why do you think, mistakenly,
that God entrusted you alone
with the decision in this case?

[¿Pues, si no hay quien lo sentencie,
por qué pensais, vos, errado,
que os cometió Dios a vos
la decisión de los casos?]

Sor Juana's lines gradually adjust their content to the formal literary structure of the Baroque. Thus, in Redondilla 85, one sees both the use of counterpoints and contrasts in their phonetics and structure, as well as in the content of the lines.

I have two doubts to choose among,
and I don't know which I prefer:
for you feel I don't want to,
and I feel that I do.

[Dos dudas en qué escoger
tengo, y no sé cuál prefiera:
pues vos sentís que no quiera,
y yo sintiera querer.

So that, if to either side
I desire to incline myself,
it will be forced, with one happy,
while the other is unhappy.¹⁶⁶

Conque, si a cualquier lado
quiero inclinarme, es forzoso,
quedando el uno gustoso,
que otro quede disgustado.]¹⁶⁷

In the *Décimas* of love and discretion she demonstrates how the force of reason resists the tyranny of a violent love:

[T]ell me, predatory victor,
conquered by my constancy,
what has your arrogance achieved
in threatening my firm peace?
That while the door of your harpoon
can conquer the hardest heart,
what worth has the violent shot
if despite being defeated
reason remains alive?¹⁶⁸

[(D)ime vencedor rapaz,
vencido de mi constancia,
¿qué ha sacado tu arrogancia
de atentar mi firme paz?
Que aunque de vencer capaz es la puerta
de tu arpón el más duro corazón,
¿qué importa el tiro violento
si a pesar del vencimiento
queda viva la razón?]¹⁶⁹

The Merging of Baroque Style and Philosophical Content in Sor Juana's Work

As has been said in previous sections, Sor Juana composes what is the apex of Mexican Baroque in a poem written in *silva* or *free movement*. Written all at once in 975 verses, the poem synthesizes literary form and philosophical content, in addition to combining mythic and Hermetic ideas taken from the scientific discoveries of her time, such as the Englishman Harvey's discovery of the circulatory movement of the blood.

The maximum expression of a Sorjuanian union between body and spirit, rational life and supernatural life, intuition and deduction is found in the unceasing dialectic apparent in the formal and material structure of *Primero Sueño*. In the poem, Sor Juana describes the unceasing journey of the soul towards the first intuition, together with the impossibility of attaining it all at once. The content of the poem revolves around the ascension of knowledge, revealing pride, even arrogance, as the soul seeks to achieve complete wisdom. In the ascending journey the poem describes the vertiginous fall of intellect and the need to follow the footsteps and slow processes required for abstraction. Here the organic faculties are suspended and one proceeds with a rational method, where what is achieved is intensely penetrated. The teaching of the double face of the Incarnation of the Word permits the nun to hold a dual theory of knowledge, deriving both from the Platonic navigation of the myth of the cave, and from the Aristotelian interpretation of science in *Posterior Analytics* II-14 and I.1. Sor Juana sees the ascent of intellect towards the light in both; however, in the first case, the ascent occurs only suddenly and by faith, while in the second, it occurs without such faith. Furthermore, the poem interprets knowledge from the Thomist viewpoint, as proceeding by induction and deduction.¹⁷⁰ The nun also employs here Descartes' gnoseological perspective from the *Discourse on Method*.¹⁷¹ However, because a description of *Primero Sueño* is not the goal here, I will not dwell on the dialectics implied by knowledge. Instead, I will move on to the inclusive synthesis proposed in the very process of attaining full wisdom. Light, acquisition, and completeness in truth is the form and ground, just as the Incarnation of the God is open to two readings, that Christ is both true God and true man. As a result of this, her teachings are both an *ethos*¹⁷² and a *paideia*¹⁷³ for non-believers, as well as a revelation and theology for those who are believers. The constant assimilation to a divine life explodes in history in order that we might imitate it; others, in contrast, can seek the light through rational effort.

In Sor Juana, the Baroque is the conscious assimilation of this theology of the Incarnate God, a theology that has an impact on the condition of humanity. Salvation is of a person as a whole, not just his or her soul, since it is in freedom that each individual affirms his or her moral actions, and eternal life is at play. Thus, it is through con-

crete moral acts that human beings can access Heaven, whether they are believers or not. If there is an adequate name in New Spain to reflect this inclusive vision of the Incarnation, it is Emmanuel: God with us. The connection between theology and art in the Novohispanic Baroque lies in that it expresses itself in form, both being inseparable. God—who is absolutely other and totally immaterial—becomes incarnate, yet the Incarnation does not cancel out his divinity at all. If the human being is like God in his freedom, the anthropological conception that emanates from the theology of the Incarnation will be different. This is a new point of view on human beings, who are treated on the basis of the intrinsic compound that comprises them. Their passions are affirmed, as well as their appetites and desires, their inclination to pleasure and to their faith, their struggle for salvation, and their attainment of eternal life.

In Novohispanic Baroque, form and content are indiscernible. One does theology with images and figures that are in movement, no longer via the medieval syllogisms that extended Aristotelian argumentation to the theological realm. Nothing is static in Baroque art, because the barriers between the spatial and the temporal are broken. In the Baroque, heaven is on earth, and vice versa: the earth is ruled by a celestial rhythm. An example that demonstrates this inclusion is the cooking recipes of the Pueblan nuns of the 17th century. They measured the cooking time of a sauce by the number of rosaries they could pray—depending on whether a sauce thickens early or late. Something so primitive and normal as kitchen labor was carried out while contemplating the life of Jesus, including amorous expressions or “winks” (litanies or short prayers). In the Baroque mentality, the time for cooking was connected to the time for contemplation. Even though the Gospel passage about Martha and Mary prefigured the separation between active life and contemplative life, what is characteristic of the Novohispanic Baroque is the synthesis of the two.

In the literary realm, Sor Juana’s intent is precisely to overcome the contrasts inherent in the Baroque itself—she expresses and structures her poems within the Gongorean categories of the Spanish Baroque, while always maintaining an inclusive synthesis. Such synthesis may occur via the fusion of sounds and words, either by a cathartic liberation in the dialectics of her lines on love and hate, on sleep and awakening at first light, or else in those lines where sentiment and duty confront each other.

In *Primero Sueño*, a Baroque structure is clear. The counterpoints are between intellect and reason, both of which strive to arrive at the light or truth. It is here that the first journey is an ascent that ultimately fails. There is, however, a solution—albeit much more modest—which the poem proposes after the fall: a method or path for achieving the truth.

Let’s carefully observe the *mythos* or drama that develops over the course of *Primero Sueño*. We know from Sor Juana herself that this *silva* was the only poem she composed in complete freedom. The poem, undoubtedly written after the *Carta At-*

enagórica and *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, deals not just with the tragedy of the human intellect that arises, arrogant and ambitious, to capture everything via primary intuition, thus resulting in a vertiginous fall.¹⁷⁴

Pyramidal, doleful, mournful shadow
born of the earth, the haughty confirmation
of vain obelisks thrust towards the Heavens,
attempting to ascend and touch the stars;
if very well, beauty it reflects
forever exempt, forever iridescent-
the tenebrous war
which with black fumes intimated
the dreadful fugitive shadow
teased from afar,
that his swarthy brow
no yet arrived to a superior convex
of the orb of the Goddess...

[Piramidal, funesta, de la tierra
nacida sombra, al Cielo encaminaba
de vanos obeliscos punta altiva,
escalar pretendiendo las Estrellas;
si bien las luces bellas
-exentas siempre, siempre rutilantes-
la tenebrosa Guerra
que con negros vapores le intimaba
la pavorosa sombra fugitiva
burlaban tan distantes,
que su atezado ceño
al superior convexo aún no llegaba
del orbe de la Diosa...]¹⁷⁵

The lines at the middle part of the poem relate to a turning point as reason fails frightened by the possible vision of the complete light:

In which an immense elevation,
joyous more so suspended,
suspended yet proud,
and astonished while proud, the supreme,
of the sublunar and sovereign queen,
the perspicacious vision, free of glasses,
of the beautifully intellectual eyes
(without fear of distance
nor obstacle so opaque it distrusts,
of that some object interposes jealousy),
freedom tended by everything menial:
which immense aggregate,
incomprehensible cluster,
even though in sight manifest
gives signal of the possible,
to comprehension no, what -hindered
with the surplus of objects, and extended
of their grandiose potency-
cowardly retreated.

[En cuya casi elevación inmensa,
gozosa mas suspensa,
suspensa pero ufana,
y atónita aunque ufana, la suprema,
de lo sublunar y reina soberana,
la vista perspica, libre de anteojos,
de sus intelectuales bellos ojos
(sin que distancia tema
ni de obstáculo opaco se recele,
de que interpuesto algún objeto cele),
libre tendió por todo lo criado:
cuyo inmenso agregado,
cúmulo incomprehensible,
aunque a la vista quiso manifiesto
dar señas de posible,
a la comprensión no, que -entorpecida
con la sobra de objetos, y excedida
de la grandeza de ellos su potencia-
retrocedió cobarde.]¹⁷⁶

After its fall, reason starts climbing again toward the light, but this second time, in a methodic way:

that, in its operation itself reported
 though conveniently judged
 a singularly reduced affair,
 or separately
 one for one reason things
 that come to cling to the artificials
 five categories twice
 metaphysics reduction that teaches
 (the entities conceiving generals
 in only some mental fantasies
 where the matter is disdained
 the abstracted discourse)
 science of forming of the universal
 repairing, warned,
 with the art the defect
 of not being able to with intuitive
 to know act all raised,
 although, making scale, of a concept
 another goes ascending degree by degree,
 and of comprehending relative order
 continues, in need
 of understanding
 limited vigour, that a successive
 discourse trusts its exploitation...

[que, en su operación misma reportado
 más juzgó conveniente
 a singular asunto reducirse,
 o separadamente
 una por una discurrir las cosas
 que vienen a ceñirse artificiosas
 dos veces cinco categorías:
 reducción metafísica que enseña
 (los entes concibiendo generals
 en solo unas mentales fantasias
 donde la materia se desdeña
 el discurso abstraído)
 ciencia de formar de los universales,
 reparando, advertido,
 con el arte el defecto
 de no poder con un intuitivo
 conocer acto todo lo criado,
 sino que, haciendo escala, de un concepto
 en otro va ascendiendo grado a grado,
 y el de comprender orden relativo
 sigue, necesitado
 del entendimiento
 limitado vigor, que a sucesivo
 discurso fía su aprovechamiento...]¹⁷⁷

Sor Juana justifies the methodic steps of reason after its fall purports the need for logic, the transition from induction to deduction, as a method required for partial knowledge or enlightenment. But the poem underlines the various paths in which knowledge can search its light; however, it also proves it is impossible for reason to acquire immediate knowledge.

Primero Sueño is, in part, autobiographical: it is a poem about the silence the nun experiences when she was ordered not to speak, an instruction she received from her confessor Nuñez de Miranda and the bishop of Mexico City. Her poem, thus, seeks to communicate or express *the saying of silence*. This particular dialectic is drawn with images in counterpoint: shadow versus light, night and sleep versus light and waking. Her recourse to the *hybris* of Greek tragedy reinforces the drama of keeping silence

with the phrase *I say* ["digo"], which appears in various verses.¹⁷⁸ The intensity is greater when she says that reason strives to see, but in fact she sees nothing.

Sorjuanian humanism has come down to us via two paths: by embracing the freedom-affirming Pueblan Jesuit theology, and by the *Discourse on Method*, which proposes an intervention of freedom in knowledge. In both cases, the key is in the fact that literary *imitatio* gives way to a creative elaboration and interpretation, free from the rules of production. *Imitatio* does not disappear in Sor Juana's poems, but rather serves a variety of purposes. Through it, Sor Juana provokes new alterities: Hermetism and the new science, natural mechanicism against individual freedom, and the possibility of knowledge against the impossibility of a complete intuition. Sorjuanian humanism expresses itself in a Baroque literary structure because it reveals the variability in knowledge and the unsustainability of unilateral and dogmatic philosophies. In Sor Juana, the Baroque overcomes contrarities by the affirmation of human freedom in the processes of knowledge and of the truths of the Gospel.

The many censures applied during the 17th century in New Spain hit close to home for Sor Juana. José Pascual Buxó tells of how her confessor, Núñez de Miranda, was involved in the censures of the Holy Office:

[T]here were many brilliant Novohispanics that—throughout the 17th century—occupied themselves with composing almanacs, lunar calendars and predictions of weather, including Juan Antonio Mendoza y González, José Antonio Villaseñor y Sánchez, Antonio de León y Gama and Mariano José Zúñiga y Ontiveros [...] but few were as constant as Don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, who by 1690 had already published some twenty works of the genre. In them—adapting himself to the inquisitorial auto of 1642—he says that he just wanted to promote the health of his countrymen. The inspectors of the Holy Office, however, were not always willing to approve his prognoses without censure. The priests Antonio Núñez de Miranda—confessor of viceroys and of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz—and Agustín Dorantes singled him out as being as reckless and presumptuous, since Don Carlos allowed himself, with a certain regularity, to mock that supposed science that he himself had created in 1667 [...].¹⁷⁹

Sigüenza was able to get away with the same mockery and irony that imposed an order of silence on Sor Juana after *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz*. In addition, both Sigüenza and Sor Juana wrote about solar prognoses and Galenic doctrines in order to determine the complexion of temperaments and humors, as well as to identify the celestial origin of certain illnesses. Moreover, in the *Astronomical and Philo-*

sophical Libra of 1681, Sigüenza shows how advanced his scientific knowledge is, rejecting the influence of the souls of mortal men in favor of the alterations of the heavens. In *Primero Sueño*, Sor Juana established the laws of mechanic rule the circulatory movement of the blood, just as those that determine breathing. Furthermore, she framed her poem in a sun cycle, which can be followed from sundown to rebirth. Eclectic in their ideas for solar predictions and almanacs, and modern in their scientific notion of the natural world, both Sor Juana and Sigüenza suffered the displeasure of Núñez de Miranda. In response to this, they developed a path to avoid inquisitorial orthodoxy—the artistic Baroque, in particular, its literary variant. In it they included the Hermetic tradition, teeming with myths, images and symbologies. According to Sor Juana, this type of Baroque becomes autonomous from its European progenitor. In *Primero Sueño*,

The literary agreement of topics existing between the two parts (sleeping and waking, rising-falling, getting up) is admirable. The sensation is like that of the contemplation of the concert that holds between the celestial bodies. Think, for example, of the correlation established with the antithetic function of night birds, aberrant creatures of nature. These birds make sounds that are opposed to those of diurnal birds, which have harmonic songs and the natural function of being heralds of the awakening of living beings.¹⁸⁰

There are many more rhetorical correspondences in the poem. At the most general level, she has composed an epic in the form of a *silva*, reflecting both her vast knowledge and the order to keep silent. The *mythos* consists on the elevation to the truth expressed in the Baroque by pyramids, and in the ascension to the light. However, a paradox arises, namely, that this ascension can only be attained by one who is silent, sleeps, and suspends contact with external reality in order to let the soul take flight in its adventure. Dolores Bravo Arriaga tells us that “the evocation of Plato’s myth of the cave links these models of knowing, and once again Sor Juana is the protagonist of the oscillation between appearance and truth.”¹⁸¹ But the poem should not be excessively personalized. The key is how the lines are structured literarily. This Novohispanic Baroque cannot be understood except in urban centers where the Counter Reformation predominated, and with it the inquisitional and censoring operations of ecclesiastic authorities.

The necessity that both spirit and the written word should be perceived through sight originated at the Council of Trent, as a response to the need for making the sacred become sensorial—at times in the form of polychromy, at others via a constant mixing of ideal and real elements. Baroque churches attend to this need, just as the confront the infinite with the eternal in the color of images, the flesh of martyrdom, and the golden immediacy of miracles.¹⁸²

The structural reconsideration that the Baroque imposes lies in granting a new order to time and space, as well as in providing new categories to thinking, which is, thus, able to express itself in unsuspected ways. There is a new world that involves transformation, movement, *metamorphosis*. Art in New Spain acquired a theatrical, artful character, achieving an identification of thought, reality, sound and movements in those who, like the nun, do not fall into the frivolity of fancy words. It is not accidental that for *Primero Sueño* the structure of a *silva* was chosen. In that format, movement and freedom are the formal axis. A poem that shows why this synthesis expresses itself in Sor Juana is Romance 2,¹⁸³ which she dedicates to the Countess of Paredes, excusing herself from sending a book of music. In verse 110 it says:

Teaching music to an angel?
Who won't laugh
at the idea of the intelligences
being ruled by the
coarseness of humanity?

Even more, if I am to speak truth,
it is that I, some days
in order to gladden my sadnesses,
ended up having this mania,
and I began to write a treaty
to see if it reduces
to greater ease
the rules that run around written.

In this treaty, if I remember correctly,
it seems to me that it said
it is a spiral line:
harmony is not a circle.

And because of its form,
curved over upon itself,
I entitled it "Snail,"
because it curves that way.¹⁸⁴

[¿Enseñar Música a un Ángel?
¿Quién habrá que no se ría
de que la rudeza humana
las Inteligencias rija?

Mas si he de hablar con la verdad,
es lo que yo, algunos días,
por divertir mis tristezas
di en tener esa manía,
y empecé a hacer un Tratado
para ver si reducía
a mayor facilidad
las reglas que andan escritas.

En él, si no mal recuerdo,
me parece que decía
que es una línea espiral,
no un círculo, la Armonía;
y por razón de su forma
revuelta sobre sí misma,
lo intitulé el Caracol,
porque esa revuelta hacía.]

The association of music with the Virgin is due to the fact that in Heaven music is the only human activity permitted.¹⁸⁵ Thus, the Virgin serves as a bridge between heaven and earth, just as music and literary phoneticism are able to unite the sublu-
nar with the supralunar world. Sor Juana holds that music is what is best able to express ideas and concepts. However, there are exclusively conceptual interpretations of several Sorjuanian poems; in particular, this is true in *Primero Sueño*: as Octavio Paz

has said, it is a philosophical poem written in black and white. The classification used in the *Complete Works* of Sor Juana, created by Alfonso Méndez Plancarte, divides the sonnets into *philosophical-moral* and the romances into *philosophical* and *amorous*. The type of poem doesn't suffice; its poetic content is required as well. There are eminent scholars that analyze *Primero Sueño* exclusively from the point of view of its philosophical content,¹⁸⁶ and at the same time there are studies dedicated exclusively to the content and literary analysis of the poem.¹⁸⁷ Many others explore a combination of both factors.¹⁸⁸ According to Vasconcelos, who deems architecture as the supreme art, it was in the 17th century that Mexican architecture became consolidated. Similarly, the concept of the Mexican nation solidifies at this point. While in the 16th century there was merely an imitation of the various architectural trends from Spain, in the 17th century buildings adapted to the tastes, sensibility, and functional necessities of America. The residents of New Spain have become aware of the variety of climates, territory, materials, uses and customs that contrast with those of the metropolis. There are many reasons for this change: artistically speaking, Novo-hispanic houses were adapted to the emerging classes of *Criollos* and *Mestizos*, who lived in separate zones fitting their tastes and needs. In the realm of religion, the big project was the construction of the Cathedral of Mexico, as ordered by Philip III. This building passed through the hands of various architects, and its lateral nave doors were only emplaced in 1680. In the judgment of many specialists, "in Mexico this gave rise to a period of Solomonian Baroque in the capital."¹⁸⁹ While the Cathedral was only completed much later, in these years the city saw the completion of the altarpieces in the chapels of Holy Christ of the Relics, of Saint Peter and of Solitude, as well as the paintings in the sacristy by Cristobal de Villalpando and Juan Correa. This display of cathedral art served as a paradigm for the rest of New Spain. In the 17th century, as Rogelio Álvarez Noguera informs us, ten parishes were built in Mexico City, ten hospitals, and many convents for nuns. The aesthetic impact of these buildings was felt throughout the territories of the Viceroyalty.¹⁹⁰ The role of the convents of nuns seems to be of special relevance, since Sor Juana felt at home in them: they were her habitat and were the source of her artistic imagination. While Protestant Europe closed them, in New Spain cloisters and other buildings mushroomed. Their proliferation strengthened uses and customs that were typically Baroque. There are literary testimonies of nuns' lives, such as *Parayso Occidental* by Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, chaplain and confessor for nuns in the convents of Puebla. These works give us knowledge of the use of relics and the fervor they produced. In addition, the text tells us of the many apparitions experienced by the nuns, the constant mystical raptures and a synthesis of piety and aesthetics as well as the sacred and the profane. Sor Juana lived for twenty-seven years in the convent of the Hieronymite nuns. The ecclesiastical regulations of the time required convents of nuns to be separated from the buildings inhabited by

male monks and brothers. Those for women generally lacked inner patios, since there was no space provided for study and academic activities, in contrast to buildings for men. There would be, however, an inner garden, and the nuns' cells generally looked directly onto the streets. This type of architecture produced a specific mentality in female convents. On the one hand, the nuns were separated from the world, and with the large windows with a view to the exterior the experience of isolation was made more explicit¹⁹¹; on the other, the convents turned into microcosms, self-ruling cities supplied with everything the nuns might need. In a convent, heaven and earth were directly united, while at the same time the cell became somewhat prisonlike, since the cloister implied enclosure or separation. Nevertheless, one must take care not to anachronistically exaggerate this aspect: all of Novohispanic society was marked by a powerful religious imagination, and in the female convents the synthesis between *logos* and *pathos* could occur in greater fullness.¹⁹²

Let us return now to *Primero Sueño*: it is a monumental work in the style of the intellectual production of the Novohispanic academic chairs of the 17th century. Since she was forbidden from teaching, Sor Juana built something akin to a great cathedral of knowledge in verse. In her poem the absence of color prevails, so that at the appropriate moment the golden sparkle of the light can be presented, in the manner of the altarpieces of the Hispano-American Baroque. What is golden is pursued, one ascends to it; in addition, the light of wakefulness awaits at the end of the poem. The drama develops over the course of a journey, which can be compared to the transit of the space that stretches from the cathedral entrance to the final altar, with the background full of light from the gold leaf of the *altarpice* and the sculpted upholstery. The accumulation of knowledge, the Sorjuanian outpouring from her knowledge, can be compared with the lateral naves with all their altars and relics, combined with the Baroque expression of Solomonic columns, pedestals, angels, and celestial choirs. However, in the poem, this outpouring consists of symbols and metaphors, of Greco-Latin mythical allusions, the use of Virgil and Cicero. It is an entire epic poem in which the search for truth constitutes the plot. The protagonist, the tragic hero, is reason: it is that reason that knows it is free, and which, through its freedom, is able to stand up proudly. The contents of the poem consist of a description of the events that play a part in the intellect achieving its objective. The fragility of the soul is shown by its advance and transit, in its slow journey through the shadows and caverns of the world beneath the world; the light of this goal animates it, giving it access to a golden place that reason can attain and possess.

If the lines of *Primero Sueño* are counted, it is possible to see Sor Juana divided the poem mathematically at exactly the midpoint of the poem, similarly to an architect who traces the measurements on the ground in order to build a temple. At that midpoint, it shows the haughty reason falls from a precipice, showing its freedom requires a technique and a path for getting up and starting again.

Sor Juana employs logic as a solution in search for wisdom. There is, thus, a fusion between the Baroque and the structure of the second part of the poem. The Baroque is certainly a capricious style, and in order to achieve it the artist must—consciously and in a structured manner—construct those games in movement function by filling the empty spaces. Thus, the vice of the Baroque has been that it is over-blown: it is profoundly rational even while its goal is that its result should not seem rational, all of which the artist conceals so that affectivity can flourish.

In *Primero Sueño*, the first dream of Sor Juana, Novohispanic reason stands haughtily. It is an arrogant type of reason because it has discovered the road to freedom. The road is difficult but its ascension is worth the effort. In this book, I will constantly return to *Primero Sueño* and to Sor Juana's theory of freedom in order to puzzle out that struggle from various perspectives.

But before that, let us learn about Sor Juana's education and context, and let us understand the rules of engagement in a Mexican convent during 17th century.

Women's Education in New Spain

In this chapter, I will explore the education available to women in New Spain. I will focus primarily on the 17th century in order to understand, through the experience of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the contributions and limits presented by the educational model in what is today called Mexico City. The decision to analyze colonial education, beginning with the 17th century, is due to the fact that Novohispanic culture had been consolidated by that time. Furthermore, the stage of cultural appropriation had been consolidated among *Criollo* intellectuals, who reflected on their own condition and on the colonial administration.

The Imaginary of the Novohispanic 17th Century

Politically, New Spain had a Viceroy, a governing board (*Audiencia*) constituted entirely by Peninsular Spaniards, and a City Administration (*Ayuntamiento*) comprising indigenous people, *Mestizos* (mixed race individuals), *Criollos*, and Spaniards. These served as bases for the colonial political structure, whose economy relied on mining and on the cultivation of the lands in the *haciendas*. The Spanish Crown and the Catholic Church had balanced out their functions through a Royal Board, together with the Laws of the Indies and Peninsular Laws, which regulated their relationship. The legitimacy of Spanish rule in New Spain was based on the evangelization of the indigenous peoples; however, the Crown also understood the economic importance of the discovery of the New World, and this issue influenced the goals of the colonial administration.

The fundamental role in the dissemination of Spanish-American culture was performed by women: Josefina Muriel tells us that¹⁹³ women passed on Christian values by integrating the family, society and convent life. From six to twelve years of age, girls were taught how to read, write and learn the catechism; they were also given basic knowledge of arithmetic, and were taught to carry out women's tasks. At the age of 15, women could enter a convent. The cloister was an important form of Novohis-

panic life, reflecting as it did the Spanish Crown's need to evangelize conquered lands in order to justify its domination over them. The other female role was marriage, typically arranged for the benefit of both families. If, on the other hand, the couple chose one another freely, they had to be careful with the differences of race: for instance, a marriage between a peninsular Spaniard and an indigenous person would place the couple in a different caste and would lead to a suspension of their political privileges.

Novohispanic society was one of castes—each caste had its own spaces and specific roles, different manners of life, and different ranks. The same was true in the schools and convents exclusively for the daughters of peninsular Spaniards and *Criollos*. When women joined a convent, they underwent a year of training in the novitiate. It was there that they learned to live under the rules of their religious order. As nuns, their occupation now was to imitate the life of the Virgin Mary and of such exemplar nuns as St. Rose of Lima (1586-1617)—the first American saint, whose image often presided over the hall where the novices made their vows of cloister, chastity, obedience, and poverty.

The practice of poverty varied among the different religious orders; for example, there were convents for shod and barefoot nuns.¹⁹⁴ In the latter, poverty was lived in a rigorous manner, with fasting, and the maintenance of absolute detachment and submission. In contrast, the convents for shod nuns were much more flexible: there, the nuns could bring possessions and servants, while living a less rigorous life, although in both cases certain vices were punished, such as drinking chocolate,¹⁹⁵ being frivolous and prone to giving things away, violating the privacy of the cloister, and not maintaining purity and chastity. Convent life involved a multitude of activities: there were administrators, archive catalogers, bookkeepers, spiritual directors, nuns dedicated to the kitchen, to catechize the children, and to caring for the sick. Some made food products and toiletries for sale, others studied, some worked as teachers. The Novohispanic convent was a microcosm, with all the jobs necessary for community life. There are many chronicles of the lives of nuns from the 17th century. A relevant testimony is that of Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, a chaplain for female convents. In his work *Parayso Occidental (Western Paradise)*,¹⁹⁶ this priest and intellectual relates the heroism certain nuns showed in their quest to gain full union with Christ, whom they considered to be their spouse from the day they took the habit. In his chronicles, he compared the behavior of religious women to the original paradise of Adam and Eve. Sigüenza saw convent life as fostering the clean and pure inclinations that, according to Scripture, the first couple had prior to the fall caused by original sin. The female convent model had as its purpose a life of prayer and submission to the heavenly will, and the nuns carried out their corresponding duties by following the counsel given to the nuns and the spiritual direction given by their confessors.

The lack of a specific curriculum meant the occasional individual nun interested in intellectual growth had to be self-taught. Her education could be strengthened via the direction of her confessor, who in those cases guided the nun not just towards a life of sanctity, but also recommended readings in theology, sacred books, and philosophy. In broad strokes, education in the Colonial era followed the Medieval model brought from Europe to the Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico, and to the convents and colleges. But Renaissance-era contributions and the experience with the American other (the natives discovered in the New World, and the new forms of rationality that expanded European criteria) helped to give a unique character to Novohispanic culture. As a result, a change of mind-frame occurred in the 17th century. The new generations born on the American continent, and the *Criollos* or Spanish-Americans, no longer saw themselves as equal to their peninsular parents, despite sharing a creed and many customs. Being born in the Americas meant a person had different privileges and possibilities.

The Cultural *Habitus* and Sor Juana's Literary Influences

As I have said in previous chapters, the Baroque style is key for understanding the Novohispanic environment in the 17th century, and in particular the literary works of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. The term "Baroque" refers both to an artistic style as well as to a way of life and thought. It comes from the word *berrueco*, meaning an irregular pearl. In painting, the Baroque style employed chiaroscuro, creating those portraits of saints that appear dark but whose faces are illuminated by a light. In architecture, the key to the Baroque is that it is integrated into sculpture, producing a figure that breaks out of the construction, with the viewer unable to distinguish where the architecture stops and the sculpture begins. The typical Baroque column is, thus, the Solomonic column in a twisted form. This is a style that synthesizes differences by explicitly contrasting them. As a result, in literature, the Baroque unites cultural hyper-sophistication with the emotions, thus creating an incessant dialectic between wanting and knowing:

Let us pretend to be happy,
melancholic thought for a while;
perhaps you can persuade me, though I know the
contrary is true,

for since on mere apprehension
they say all suffering depends,
if you imagine good fortune,
you will not be so downcast.¹⁹⁷

[Finjamos que soy feliz,
triste pensamiento, un rato;
quizá podéis persuadirme,
aunque yo sé lo contrario,

Que pues sólo en la apprehensión
dicen que estriban los daños,
si os imagináis dichoso
no seréis tan desgraciado.]¹⁹⁸

In poetry, the structure of the Baroque expresses unceasing movements:

He who ungratefully leaves me, I lovingly long for
 he who lovingly pursues me, I ungratefully leave;
 steadfastly I adore him who abuses my love;
 abusing him who steadfastly seeks my love.¹⁹⁹

[Al que ingrato me deja, busco amante
 al que amante me sigue, dejo ingrata;
 constante adoro a quien mi amor maltrata;
 maltrato a quien mi amor busca constante.]

And as we saw in the previous chapter, Sor Juana wrote long poems such as the *silvas*²⁰⁰ with distant punctuation and the combination of contraries through sophistication, hermetism, and *pathos*²⁰¹:

Pyramidal, doleful, mournful shadow
 born of the earth, the haughty confirmation
 of vain obelisks thrust towards the Heavens,
 attempting to ascend and touch the stars
 whose resplendent glow
 (unobscured, eternal scintillation)
 mocked from afar
 the tenebrous war
 blackly intimated in the vapors
 of the awesome, fleeting adumbration
 this glowering shadow
 touched the edge but did not wholly absorb
 the Goddess's orb
 (three, Diana's faces
 that show her beauteous being in three phases),
 but conquered only air
 misted the atmosphere
 that darkened densely with each exhalation
 and in the quietude
 of this silent kingdom
 only muted voices could be heard
 from nocturnal birds,
 so solemn and subdued
 the muffled sound did not disturb the silence.²⁰²

[Piramidal, funesta de la tierra
 nacida sombra, al Cielo encaminaba
 de vanos obeliscos punta altiva,
 escalar pretendiendo las Estrellas;
 si bien sus luces bellas
 –exentas siempre, siempre rutilantes–
 la tenebrosa guerra
 que con negros vapores le intimaba
 la pavorosa sombra fugitiva
 burlaban tan distantes,
 que su atezado ceño
 al superior convexo aún no llegaba
 del orbe de la Diosa
 que tres veces hermosa
 con tres hermosos rostros ser ostenta,
 quedando sólo dueño
 del aire que empañaba
 con el aliento denso que exhalaba;
 en la quietud contenta
 de imperio silencioso,
 sumisas sólo voces consentía
 de las nocturnas aves,
 tan obscuras, tan graves,
 que aún el silencio no se interrumpía.]²⁰³

In Alfonso Méndez Plancarte's edition,²⁰⁴ the initial part of *Primero Sueño* is entitled "The Invasion of Night" ("La invasión de la noche"). Sor Juana speaks here of a "pyramidal shadow" that ascends to the stars, in an analogy of reason's quest for wisdom. The

pyramid is a symbol for ancient Egyptian wisdom, in a typically Hermetic allusion. The “superior convex” is the Moon, which presents three phases. Under its light the sublunary world, so named by Aristotle, remains a world of shadows—nighttime birds—as in Plato’s Myth of the Cave. These birds are in flight, rising at night towards the light. This is why everything is in silence: the speaker takes the reader on a journey—it is a poem in motion, without color, in black and white, as it reveals that while its own structure is decidedly poetic, its contents are essentially philosophical or conceptual. The sophistication of the expression is rooted in the fact that to unravel the meaning one must have broad knowledge about various disciplines; here Sor Juana meshes astrology with mythology and the Baroque.

The literary asymmetry of the Baroque is attained through the complex figure of the syllogism: in opting for argumentative abundance, she produces complicated poetic syllogisms. It is the case of a style that expresses exuberance, and which fits America like a glove because of what the *Criollos* were living through.

The Jesuits who arrived in America towards the end of the 16th century were in charge of the education of the *Criollos*; they were sent by the pope with the mission to fight against Martin Luther’s reform and prevent Protestant ideas from gaining entry into New Spain. Luther’s reform preached three key points: 1) the *sola fidei* or the position that faith is sufficient to attain salvation, 2) the free interpretation of the Bible, *i.e.* the rejection of the intervention of the magisterium of the Church in the reading of the sacred books, and 3) non-subordination to Rome and the pope. The Jesuits developed a counter-reformist doctrinal program that affirmed the necessity of the participation of personal freedom in salvation. They emphasized that faith was insufficient for being saved, and they also reinforced the role of the tradition and the magisterium of the Church in the interpretation of the Bible, responding to their mandate to strengthen papal power.

With these objectives, they turned to art as a vehicle for expression so the people would assimilate Catholic, counter-reformist doctrines. Thus, in 17th-century New Spain, architecture, sculpture, painting and all other forms of artistic expression, especially literature and poetry—whose style descended from the Spanish Baroque—strengthened Catholic principles. If Luther had eliminated mediations from the churches, the Jesuits had brought saints into these houses of worship together with Marian iconography, patron saints for every possible trade, angels and other characters from the celestial court. The underlying theological aim of this was to humanize the divine project by emphasizing the incarnation of the God and the defense of freedom, linking the contingency of the world to the transcendence of life in Christ. For Luther, the salvific plan was carried out by God, and it was sufficient for the person to have faith, since God knows how human fragility affects the search for salvation. In contrast, Nohispanic art was integrated into a vigorous expression of Catholic values, affirming

human responsibility for our capacities and individual subordination to the corporatist project, the Catholic, Jesuit alternative to the national projects of the Protestant countries in the north of Europe.²⁰⁵ In order to understand Sor Juana's thought, the cultural environment in New Spain should be considered as being appropriate for a new national consciousness, which the *Criollos* were slowly acquiring.

The *Criollo* perception that they were different from Peninsular Spaniards gave rise to an exaggeration of the goodness of the new lands, which they described with flowery exuberance, as having an abundance of fruits, and characterized by a Catholic religiousness superior to the European. Novohispanic Catholicism was represented by *Guadalupe*, the dark-skinned virgin who appeared to the native Juan Diego, according to a legend popularized by the Jesuits. In addition, the *Criollos* sought to gain back the mythic past of the ancient Mexicans, Quetzalcóatl, Netzahualcóyotl, and the first Moctezuma, which would legitimate their past by an appropriation of the former lords of the lands where they had been born. This provoked a fusion between the Catholic counter-reformist spirituality, Nahuatl mythology, an exaggeration of the good aspects of America and the Baroque in the formulation of ideas and feelings. All of this is expressed in Sor Juana's poem *Primero Sueño*, which recounts the journey of reason itself to the heights, to full Wisdom.

But there was another key occurrence, which specialists on Sor Juana have avoided, but which seems to be decisive for the understanding of her work. During the 17th century, the Spanish Crown promoted the reading of books by Stoic authors, both in peninsular Spain as well as in its overseas territories. This was in order to educate the Spanish bureaucracy according to ethical values and thus resolve the issues of corruption and partiality towards persons, vices that were ever-present among high churchmen and in the viceroy's court.²⁰⁶

In New Spain, the Spanish authorities promoted the reading of Roman classics from a Renaissance perspective. These readings were meant to foster eloquence, ethics, and the civic values of a colonial society. This had an important impact on the Latin American idea of homeland, since the emphasis on the common good made the various groups and castes become aware of the place they belonged, both in terms of territory and of geography. Such readings impacted *Criollo* literary and poetic culture, as is demonstrated in Sor Juana's writings. In her *Neptuno alegórico* (*Allegorical Neptune*), she establishes an analogy between the recently-arrived Viceroy of La Laguna and the Roman god of water, Neptune:

As on the crystalline royal beach
the Great Lord of wet trident
is loyally accompanied, obediently served
the cerulean deity by marine pomp.²⁰⁷

[Como en la regia playa cristalina
al Gran Señor del húmedo tridente,
acompaña leal, sirve obediente
a cerúlea deidad pompa marina].

The Neo-Stoic influence was due to its humanistic and scientific perspective on reality, something foreign to the traditional, Scholastic view. Still, this assimilation was not the only philosophical path available, since a robust renovation of Thomist thought was underway.²⁰⁸

These reforms did only reach an elite. Overall, the Church continued to monopolize education on all levels: the towns and farmlands, the life of the university, as well as in both colleges and convents. However, the Viceroy's court and the bureaucracy were nourished by these new literary currents, which would later have an influence on Nohispanic society and on the intellectual and cultural education of the *Criollos*. Sor Juana pours into her poems a type of Renaissance-flavored Roman wisdom. In her *loa* (praise-song) for the liturgical drama entitled *El Divino Narciso* (*The Divine Narcissus*), she chose *human nature*, the synagogue, and the pagan world as her main characters. Choice is essential to her message, since nature relates either to the synagogue (the Church, the Faith) or to the gentiles (human wisdom, or that of those who disbelieve).

Nature

[O]ne of you applauds God
the other celebrates a man.
Listen to what I tell you
pay heed to my reasons
Since I'm mother to you both
and by virtue of nature's law
it is good for you both to hear me. ²⁰⁹

Naturaleza

[A Dios aplaude la una
y la otra celebra a un hombre:
escuchadme lo que os digo,
atended a mis razones,
que pues soy la madre de entrambas,
a entrambas es bien que toque
por ley natural oírme.]²¹⁰

The Synagogue is subordinated to nature when she says:

Long has my love recognized you
O nature, common
mother of all humanity.²¹¹

[ya mi amor te reconoce,
¡Oh naturaleza!,
madre común de todos los hombres.]²¹²

and she also recognizes the *Gentiles* as the epitome of truth and goodness when they say to nature: "instead my love venerates you" (line 35).

A relevant case of that cultural transformation is that of Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, the most famous intellectual of his era, whose works incorporate Baroque nuances. His retrieval of the indigenous past was achieved by a classicalization of the ancient Mexican monarchs, whom he describes as wearing the clothes of the great Roman emperors.²¹³

Sigüenza attended the school of Tepozotlan, run by the Jesuits. He later attained the rank of Chair Professor in Astronomy and Mathematics at the Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico. He achieved international fame as a cosmographer, and participated in a debate with the recently-arrived Jesuit Eusebio Kino,²¹⁴ from which he emerged triumphant, demonstrating the level of scientific sophistication that had been achieved in New Spain. His fame grew due to the publication of the debate and his mathematical demonstration of the path of a comet, as well as a de-mystification of the bad omens it portended. In 1680, the City Council of Mexico City asked Sigüenza to build a triumphal arch²¹⁵ for the welcoming of the new viceroy, Tomás Antonio de la Cerda y Aragón, Count of Paredes and Marquis de la Laguna. Sigüenza wrote a piece entitled *Teatro de las virtudes políticas que construyen a un príncipe* (*Theater of the Political Virtues that Make a Prince*), where the new viceroy exemplifies the ancient Mexican monarchs' gift for governance. All of this was reflective of a certain patriotism that characterized the Criollos, as well as the relationship they had established with the indigenous past. For this viceregal reception the cathedral authorities requested that Sor Juana produce a second triumphal arch, in response to which she wrote the famous *Allegorical Neptune*. This is a work with clear Stoic features in which the use of Roman myths confirms the influence of Stoic texts over the course of the 17th century²¹⁶.

But Sigüenza was a male and had a better education than Sor Juana; as a result of this, his possibilities of making his way into Novohispanic society were greater. He studied with the Jesuits, the Renaissance religious order that boasted the best academic level of the time. Even though he never completed his initiation into the Company, he was educated by that Catholic elite. After his years in the school at Tepozotlán, he was ordained a priest of the secular clergy, and later achieved the rank of Chair professor of Astronomy and Mathematics in the Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico. His impact and fame were strengthened by his wealth, and Sigüenza knew how to find his way in the spheres of royal and ecclesiastical power. As a priest of the secular clergy, he obtained the position of chaplain to female convents, in addition to being an advisor to the Viceroy himself. Sigüenza's fame and his economic means meant he was able to buy codices and libraries from the families of noble natives, such as those of the De Alva Iztlixochitl family. In addition, he was able to obtain scientific instruments and recent works on science from Europe, none of which were available to a woman in Sor Juana's time.

Despite this fact, and even though the feminine education described above was the only one possible for the majority of women of New Spain, there was nonetheless a better education available to the elite women of the vice regal court. The opportunities for education were larger for the spouses of functionaries, ladies in waiting and women close to people of the court. At the court one needed a sense of humor in

order to deal with the fast-paced courtly life: courtly innuendoes, dances, and theatrical representations, lectures on Latinity and debates on political and scientific topics.

The education available to men in monasteries and at the university was more in-depth than that which was available to women in the court. Indeed, it was in male institutions of learning the true peninsular and *Criollo* intelligence was rooted. These places were where scientific and theological debates were held; they were institutions and organizations reserved for men of the upper class, some of whom were unable to occupy the most powerful posts in government. The *Criollos*, as children of Spaniards born in America, could not occupy high royal or ecclesiastical posts, which were reserved to peninsular Spaniards in order to place limits on the power of the Spanish-Americans. Separate from this privileged space, female education was also available in convents, but not to married women. The family life of a woman in this era, restricted to being a spouse and mother, was defined by the limits that the female gender had to observe, in accordance with a well-established mindframe concerning any type of manual or spiritual labor.

In conclusion, female education in New Spain was fundamentally available at the court and in the convent. The hypothesis I am proposing in this investigation is that this type of education strengthened female capacities, which waned when women were deprived of a kind of prominence almost entirely restricted to men.

Sor Juana, Her Production and Fame

Sor Juana herself reveals why she professed as a Hieronymite nun; in her autobiographical letter *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz* she tells us: "And so I entered the religious order, knowing that life there entailed certain conditions [...] most repugnant to my nature, but given the total antipathy I felt for marriage, I deemed convent life the least unsuitable and the most honorable I could elect [...] [there] was the matter of all the trivial aspects of my nature that nourished my pride, such as wishing to live alone, and wishing not to have any obligatory occupation that would inhibit the freedom of my studies, nor the sounds of a community that would intrude on the peaceful silence of my books."²¹⁷

We have many first-rank works available for tracing the life and works of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.²¹⁸ To aid the reader in entering into the bio-bibliography of the nun I will refer fundamentally to three relevant works: the one by Octavio Paz, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, o las trampas de la fé (Sor Juana, or the Traps of Faith)*,²¹⁹ a compulsory work for those wanting to become acquainted with the life and deeds of the nun; there are also the *Obras Completas de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (Complete Works of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz)*,²²⁰ the canonical text for studying her and understanding her

teachings. Finally, as an introductory text to her life and works, I should mention a little book by Ramón Xirau entitled *Genio y Figura de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (*Genius and Figure of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*),²²¹ an excellent work for those coming to the study of Sor Juana for the first time. It is brief in its exposition and clear in its contents, and provides the reader with the fundamental chronology of her life and works. The text claims that Juana Ramírez de Asbaje was born in 1651, the daughter of Captain Pedro Manuel de Asbaje y Vargas Machuca, a Basque, and of Isabel Ramírez de Santillana, a *Criollo*. Juana herself was born in San Miguel Nepantla, near Mexico City, and she began to educate herself at the hacienda of Panoayan, where her maternal grandfather lived. This man had an important influence on her, caring for her as would a foster father, since although her father recognized her as a legitimate daughter, he never returned to take care of the family. There she accompanied her sister to the school in Amecameca, where she learned to read starting at the age of three. Between 1657 and 1658, she wrote her first work, a *Loa eucarística* (*Laud to the Eucharist*) which is not extant.

As a child, she wanted to go to university, and begged her mother to dress her as a man so she could get in. In 1659, she moved to the capital of Mexico, living with her uncle Juan de Mata and his spouse, an educated woman with relations in the court. It is said that by 1660 she had learned Latin in twenty lessons. In 1664 the viceroy Sebastián de Toledo, Marquis of Mancera arrived in Mexico City with his spouse, a fact that would constitute a turning point in Juana's life. Having heard about her genius, the Marquises brought her to live with them in the capital. It was Viceroy Mancera himself who arranged for Juana to be examined by forty professors of the Royal and Pontifical University of Mexico, which increased her fame even more.


Juana lived three years at the vice-regal court. As Octavio Paz has noted, she would certainly have had experiences of love and heartbreak, of literary learning, and of learning about the political and academic problems of the world and New Spain. During that time, she had a confessor and spiritual director, the Jesuit priest Antonio Núñez de Miranda, a powerful man and confessor of viceroys, who would be decisively important in her life. In 1667 Juana entered the order of Barefoot Carmelites as a nun, but later changed to the Hieronymite convent of St. Jerome, an order with a more relaxed rule. She herself, in her autobiographical work *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz*,²²² explains the reason that she entered the convent of the Order of St. Jerome:

*reading and more reading, [...] study and more study, with no teacher but my books [...] I learned how difficult it is to study those soulless letters, lacking a human voice or the explanation of a teacher. But I suffered this labor happily for my love of learning.*²²³

Sor Juana stayed in the convent until her death on 17th April, 1695. The greater part of her production was written during those twenty-seven years. Outside the convent, she wrote poems on her own initiative, as well as by request, in particular during her stay at the court. However, the greater part of her production dates from her time in the convent—praises, Christmas carols, exercises of the Incarnation, Triumphal Arches like *Neptuno alegórico* (*Allegorical Neptune*), her great intellectual poem *Primero Sueño*, the *Auto del divino Narciso* (*Auto of the Divine Narcissus*) together with her entire work in prose. In fact, during her life in the convent, Sor Juana knew not only fame but also the publication in 1689 of her *Obras completas* (*Complete Works*), entitled *Inundación Castálida* (*Castalid Inundation*). We also have documentation that the ex-viceyoy Mancera, and in particular his spouse, promoted this new book in Spain. In 1690 a second volume was printed: it was entitled *Complete Works* and was reissued several times over the following years. In 1700, after her death, the third volume of her *Complete Works* was published under the title *Fama póstuma de la Fénix de México* (*Posthumous Fame of the Phoenix of Mexico*).

At this point one might wonder, what moved Sor Juana to develop her talent and capacities if the intellectual environment of the 17th century was so limited for women? The question prompts us to explore in greater depth the relations the Sor Juana cultivated within her convent.

The Education and Knowledge of Sor Juana

 In a stupendous article,²²⁴ Antonio Rubial describes the spaces of communication that those who entered monasteries and convents had available: the nuns informed themselves about the exterior world through visits, letters, interactions with other nuns, relationships with family, interactions with their religious teacher, sermons at Mass, confession with the priest and chats in the *locutorium*. The *locutorium* was a space delimited by the bars that separated the convent from the street or the exterior world; at the same time the locutorium was seen from the inside as the space between the bars and the cloister. This intermediate zone was the forum for social gatherings, family visits, instructive chats, exchange of medicines and products made by the nuns. The sale of products permitted the nuns to socialize, and they took advantage of these exchanges to give spiritual direction to laypeople, chat about recent events, receive visits from friends and, in particular, allow their conventual experiences to pass out through the bars: apparitions of saints, miracles, their communication with the souls now in Purgatory, etc. In addition to her relations via the *locutorium*, Sor Juana received special visits in a hall of the convent unattached to the cloister. We know that she welcomed important visitors there, such as Viceroy

Mancera, who strengthened her intellectual life. In addition to these forms of communication, there was an epistolary relationship: Sor Juana used letters to communicate with the bishop of Puebla, who read her writings and kept her briefed on academic talks given by the Pueblan Jesuits. It was also through letters that she maintained communication with the Countess of Aveiro, an intellectual woman of the Portuguese aristocracy who informed her about literary and scientific matters. In addition, she communicated by letter with Portuguese nuns of a high intellectual level, as well as with marchioness Mancera when she returned to Spain, where she supported the publication of Sor Juana's *Complete Works*.

Another contact with the exterior world was her spiritual director and confessor, who most eagerly provided the nuns with knowledge on the two worlds: that outside the cloister, and that in Heaven. For example, Antonio Núñez de Miranda encouraged the nun to develop her capacities and intellectual talent, but he demanded that she write poetry related to the sacred scriptures rather than erotic poetry. Nevertheless, all these means of communication pale in comparison with the communication with the world Sor Juana enjoyed by way of the books she devoured in her cell at night. When she died, 400 books were found in her personal library. This is where the true intellectual formation of the nun took place: she had works by Descartes and many other modern thinkers. Her knowledge was attested to by *Primero Sueño* (here *P.S.*); she would later claim in the *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz* that it was the only poem she had written out of pleasure. *Primero Sueño* is perhaps the most relevant testimony about her knowledge: it is through this work that we know she was up to date on Descartes's mechanistic conception of nature, (*P.S.*: 165; 200-216; 570ff; 580ff; 701) and she had read the *Discourse on Method* (*P.S.*: 435-454), that she knew the theory of knowledge of Aristotle,²²⁵ the myth of the cave in Plato,²²⁶ Greco-Latin mythology,²²⁷ the Hermetism of Atanasio Kircher and the influence of neo-Platonic philosophy,²²⁸ Thomist philosophy,²²⁹ the theme of solitude in Góngora,²³⁰ Sor Juana herself employs Góngora's simile at the beginning of her poem), the Culteranism of Quevedo and Góngora²³¹ the idea of space in Gracián,²³² Stoic thought,²³³ the Latin rhetoric of Ovid,²³⁴ the works of Macrobius, etc.²³⁵ In addition, the poem constantly intertwines the cycles of the heavens in its verses, e.g. the phases of the Moon and the eclipsing of the sun. For instance, this is the case with the final awakening announced at the end of the poem, which is paired in the final verse with the rising of the sun; it reads "the World illuminated and I awoke".²³⁶ This last approach to the poem is of special relevance, since the poem describes an eclipse of the moon, which was later demonstrated to coincide with a real eclipse.

Sor Juana herself explained the diversity of all these topics and authors she knew: "I continued to study ceaselessly divers subjects, having for none any particular inclination, but for all in general; and having studied some more than others was not owing

to preference, but to the chance that more books on certain subjects had fallen into my hands, causing the election of them through no discretion of my own."²³⁷

In her account of her own readings she provides an educational itinerary for minorities who were not members of an educational institution. For instance, she cites Portuguese editions of theology, works by Atanasio Kircher—on whom Atanasio Quirqueiro draws attention in his work *De Magnete*—the Fathers of the Church, scientific treatises, etc. She argues that being unable to select works in accordance with their subject matter need not be an unsurmountable challenge, since “[the books’ subjects] conform and are joined together with admirable unity and harmony”²³⁸ and hence one can mitigate the problem of not having a large library available. However, she writes about the great difficulty she confronted in her pursuit to educate herself: “I undertook this great task, without benefit of teacher or fellow students with whom to confer and discuss, having for a master nothing other than a mute book, and for colleagues an insentient inkwell”²³⁹; with this phrase Sor Juana shows she considers dialogue to be essential in the educational task, a novel issue if we take into account the educational system of her time placed the argument of authority in the books of the tradition. Furthermore, she complains about accidental difficulties in finding time to study: “and in the stead of explication and exercise, many obstructions, not merely those of my religious obligations [...] rather, all the attendant details of living in community,”²⁴⁰ such as reading in her cell with the nuns in the next cell singing and playing the guitar, or to be studying and have two quarreling handmaids show up, begging her to be the referee in their argument, or to be writing and to receive in her cell the visit of a well-intentioned, but clumsy, nun friend. In her autobiographical description, which extended to the interests which moved her to study, it can be seen that she opts for a naturalistic interpretation of human capacities, such as when she recounts her initial steps in reading the great works of the Western tradition. She says: “from the moment I was first illuminated by the light of reason, my inclination towards letters has been so vehement, so overpowering [...] [due to a] natural impulse that God placed in me.”²⁴¹ For Sor Juana “letters” are a “black inclination.”

Specialists in the thought of Sor Juana have interpreted this way of seeing her inclination as a consequence of the repression she was suffering at the hands of the ecclesiastical authorities due to her taste for profane letters. We are fortunate to have documentation that shows this repression slowed her down, for she had to somehow to get around the prohibition of the authorities. However, I do not want to focus now on those restrictions but rather on the explanation she gives for her inclination. For Sor Juana, the human capacities, tendencies and preferences that present-day pedagogy labels as vocational are derived from the temperament, that is, from an impulse that freedom would not be able to restrain.

The educational itinerary that underlies her account proposes a structure in accordance with the neo-Stoicism to which I have referred, *i.e.* a structuring of the potencies together with organic, psychological, mental and rational faculties, in order to channel that impulse. In this way, Sor Juana promoted the free, self-taught practice of appropriation and relation between the distinct types of knowledge, lessening the importance of authority. On the other hand, she notes the strength of the impulses on the inclinations, thereby absolving herself of guilt. She tells of a significant occurrence in the convent: "they have asked that I be prohibited from study [...] at one time they did this through a saintly and ingenuous Abbess [...] who commanded me not to study. I obeyed her (for the three some months her power to command endured)." Sor Juana claims that during those months she continued to read the "book of nature," *i.e.* the universal machine.²⁴²

She narrates next how she was able to study the geometric forms and their relations by observing a storage room, and how the prohibition was in fact a stimulus for perfecting her study: "I looked on nothing without reflection, I heard nothing without meditation."²⁴³

Respuesta is Sor Juana's ideological testament. It is here that we can see her struggle, her inspiration and her educational proposal for women. She demonstrated women have participated in the making of history: "I find a Deborah administering laws, both military and political, and governing a people among whom there were many learned men, and governing the city where there were so many wise men. I find a most wise queen of Sheba, so learned that she dares to challenge with hard questions the wisdom of all wise men."²⁴⁴ She also proposes a female educational itinerary for New Spain: "Oh! how much injury might have been avoided in our land if our aged women had been learned, as was Leta [...] and failing this, and because of the considerable idleness to which our poor women have been relegated..."²⁴⁵ Sor Juana explains the state of things: "the force of necessity, and the absence of wise elder women."²⁴⁶ She goes further and shows that it is possible to educate women: "because through the immediacy of contact and the intimacy born from the passage of time, what one may never have thought possible is easily accomplished."²⁴⁷

Sor Juana's prose illustrates what she had already been stating in her poetry. As I have said, in the poem *Primero Sueño* Sor Juana describes her intellectual journey towards full wisdom, an outlook that coincides with *Carta Atenagórica*. It was in this mis- sive that she refutes the teaching of the Jesuit Antonio Vieira, the great Portuguese theologian of the era, in response to his *Sermon of the Mandate*.²⁴⁸

In both, the debate and the written text, Sor Juana says:

*we need to recall that God gave human beings free will, with which they can want or not want to do good or evil, without therefore suffering violence, since it is an homage that God pays them and an authentic letter that he granted them.*²⁴⁹

For Sor Juana, the greatest benefit of love (*fineza*) that God has bestowed on man is freedom. The text of Vieira deals with the greatest *fineza* Jesus has given humanity and cites the opinions of St. Augustine, of Aquinas and of Chrysostom. Sor Juana, however, astutely points the conversation towards the legacy of Christ, which some interpret as having given his life for men, others as having washed the feet of his disciples, and finally, as having made himself Sacrament in the Eucharist. We are on an absolutely different level when she says she shall not speak of the greatest *fineza* of Christ but rather of the greatest gift God has given to human beings: retiring from the world of humans in order that perfect liberty might exist among them. And the consequence of this act of giving is that now, "at the root of this freedom, it is not sufficient that God wants to be of the human race, if humans don't want God to be theirs."²⁵⁰

Here we have both Sor Juana's humanism and her cosmopolitan proposal, each stemming from the Jesuit tradition. Freedom is the first distinguishing feature of man; it is what makes people into siblings and diversifies them. Sor Juana has a freedom-based conception of human understanding; for her, the human being is perfected to the degree in which he or she makes free decisions. God does not grant over-protective benefits because his greatest legacy is giving freedom to humankind. This point marks a difference from both the *sola fidei* of Luther and the traditional individual subordination to authority in Catholicism. We are in the presence of an alternative proposal for understanding the human being, a new educational project where faith has a place, but within a humanist framework in which personal freedom and the intellectual capacities of every individual are the limit for personal autonomy.

The argument concerns whether divine authority (even higher than the ecclesiastic one) can connect with people if they don't want him to participate in their lives. In contrast to Luther, Sor Juana envisions a more active participation of the subject in regards to faith. It is individual people, with the active participation of their freedom, that act out their lives in the world and their transcendence beyond this world. Against the Catholicism of her time, the nun held that the rectitude of human action emanates from the subject *qua* efficient and final cause of his or her actions. As a result, neither beliefs nor moral or rational interpretations can be imposed. Sor Juana was undoubtedly influenced by the philosophical arguments of members of the Society of Jesus²⁵¹ and by the Portuguese positive theology of her times. Sor Juana sets out an integral education that she puts at the apex of theological knowledge. Still, what type of theology does she conceive of in *Carta Atenagórica*? She herself responds:

One needs much knowledge of history, customs, ceremonies, proverbs and idioms of the times in which they were written in order to know the nature of the references and allusions in many passages of the Holy Scripture.²⁵²

Scholastic speculative theology did not include these scientific disciplines, which had been developed by Renaissance scholars. By demanding such knowledge, Sor Juana commits herself to the so-called positive theology. This influence comes from Portugal, where the Jesuits of the University of Coimbra were translating the works of Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. They had adopted the new methods and approaches that Suárez and Molina had created for reforming Scholasticism, submitting the medieval Latin texts to a philological, grammatical and rhetorical scrutiny, as taught by the Renaissance. Sor Juana says in *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz* and in other recent discovered texts that she aspired to study theology but in order to attain that she had to begin by studying natural sciences, logic, rhetoric, physics, arithmetic and all the auxiliary sciences: history, geography, law, learning the customs of the gentiles, [together with] music and astrology.²⁵³ In a word, Sor Juana aspired to an intertwined knowledge that includes the various particular disciplines and the scientific advances of her time. This knowledge is not subordinated to any imposed tradition, and is able to fly of its own accord. Just as reason is elevated in the poem *Primero Sueño*, this is a rational knowledge that is the same in men and women, and that has as its foundation a dialogue between distinct persons and personal observation.

Closing this topic, we may question the following: Why is the work of Sor Juana still alive today? I claim that, as with no other poet or intellectual in colonial Mexico, Sor Juana's thought represents the discourse of minorities in the face of the authorities of their time. The life of Sor Juana incarnates this exclusion: she was an out-of-wedlock daughter in a society in which Christian marriage was a requirement, and not being the child of a Spanish mother she did not form a part of the peninsular elite. Moreover, she was a woman in a society in which privileges were for men, and she stood out as an intellectual and poet in a world in which the activity of reason was also for men only. She was a critic and analyst of theologians who were recognized in Europe, and she refused to obey religious authority when its mandates went against her convictions. She achieved public fame when she was cloistered in her convent, and from there she criticized the backwardness of the education available for women in New Spain. Moreover, she made use of irony in referring to the academic authorities. But Sor Juana also made constructive proposals, and thus she cannot be classified as merely a dissident whose merit derived from her protests. In fact, she was able to develop her intellectual and poetic capacities, overcoming the obstacles she faced. This is her great legacy to women: in the realm of science she proved to have advanced knowledge concern-

ing the movement of the stars, and was up to date with the debates and advances in Renaissance science that were opposed, at times, to Scholastic science. In literature, she demonstrated her knowledge of the Latin tradition, and in science she also knew of the advances in the physics and anatomy of her time. In the terrain of theology, she showed she knew the teachings of the Fathers of the Church, together with those advances of the Jesuits of her time that related to the controversy about freedom and its relationship with grace and divine providence. In the *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz* she proposes a project for feminine education.

In her poetry, Sor Juana takes the psychology of the human being into account, expressing both its contradictions and the arising of a Latin-American *Criollo* identity, even in the face of Spanish colonialism. This is why the so-called *Phoenix of Mexico* remains a paradigm for the Americas, for all the minorities that are struggling against the establishment. Her work represents the formulation of a counter-power discourse that shows the path to freedom.