

THE PERENNIAL CHALLENGE OF RHETORIC:
THE MEXICAN NUN'S VARIATIONS ON THE THEME OF EFFICTIO

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I am not all sure that my paper really belongs in the section devoted to Sacred Rhetoric. True, the author that I am dealing with is a Catholic nun who spent her entire adult life in a convent, and roughly half of her work was written to be performed in a liturgical context. But, as I think will be obvious upon closer examination, her literary models and her artistic concerns are not in the least religious. She is as far removed from Saint Theresa as she possibly could be and still wear a habit.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, Sor Juana Inés de Cruz, whose secular name was Juana Inés de Asbaje y Ramírez, and who is known in English as the Mexican Nun, was without the slightest doubt the most important poet writing in Spanish on either side of the Atlantic. In Mexico itself, her position was that of a semi-official poet laureate, to whom both the civilian and the ecclesiastical authorities appealed frequently and regularly to compose secular and religious poems, songs, and plays that were lavishly produced on festive occasions of Church and State.

It is precisely because she wrote mainly on command--roughly two-thirds of her entire production was commissioned in order to be recited or sung before an assembly, in a mood of celebration--that such a large segment of Sor Juana's literary production, be it secular or religious, is so unashamedly rhetorical, so openly epideictic. Moreover, it would appear that Sor Juana, who by reason of her sex was denied entry to schools and universities and was entirely self-taught, considered rhetoric as the most important of the Liberal Arts, though she dabbled in all of them.

How, otherwise, would she have written the following villancico, or carol, whose first line is "La Retorica Nueva" ("the New Rhetoric"), and which pictures the Virgin Mary as a professor of rhetoric, surpassing Demosthenes and Cicero? (210, No. 223). This villancico was one of a series, some serious, some humorous, that were performed in the Metropolitan Cathedral of Mexico City on the Feast of the Assumption, 1676. In it Sor Juana interprets, somewhat facetiously, the Motherhood of Mary and her position as an intercessor between mankind and her Divine Son, and in particular her rôle as the Defender of sinners, as an exercise in rhetoric, or ars suasoria.

Thus, the first stanza:

Para quien quisiera oír,
o aprender a bien hablar,
y lo quiere conseguir,
María sabe enseñar,
el arte de bien decir.

Or, in English:

For whoever wants to hear,
or learn how to discourse,
and wants to attain it,
Mary knows how to teach,
the art of speaking well.

As to the structure of the villancico, it views Mary's entire life as a progression through the various tropes of rhetoric, from her Conception to the Assumption.

In another carol from the same festive occasion, the Virgin Mary is depicted as an epic warrior who compares favourably with the heroic

characters of Ariosto's Orlando Furioso. Notwithstanding the fact that in Sor Juana's native Mexico, on the very outskirts of the viceregal capital, the Virgin Mary was venerated since the first half of the 16th century--as she is to this day--in the figure of a native woman (I am referring to the famous effigy of Mary imprinted on an Indian cape and venerated in the Villa de Guadalupe, just outside Mexico City, where she appears with black hair and very dark skin), in this villancico Sor Juana ignores the local hagiographic tradition of Mexico and remains faithful to the rhetorical, courtly, and mythical tradition of Europe, alluding to the Virgin's blonde hair:

La que si desprende al aire
la siempre madeja rubia
tantos Roldanes la cercan
cuantos cabellos la inundan (209; No. 222, st. 5)

which I have rendered in English thus:

the one who, if she unclasps and lets flow in the air
her forever blonde mane,
gets surrounded by as many Rolands
as the strands of hair cascading down her body.

As we can see, this image is above all literary. Actually, at first glance it would appear that the image contained in the quatrain here quoted is somewhat ambiguous and refers not to Mary, but to Ariosto's heroine, Angelica, or simultaneously to both Mary and Angelica, thus placing both, the Virgin Mother of God and the sexually frivolous female protagonist of Ariosto's poem, on the same plane. Upon closer examination, however, it seems that Sor Juana does indeed intend it to refer to Mary: it is one of a series of stanzas, each of them characterizing the Virgin and beginning

with la que (the one who). The comparison with Angelica, possibly sacrilegious even at that, is limited to collating the physical perfection of both women. It also would seem that the public for whose benefit these villancicos were written must have been very select and quite erudite, or else they would have missed all the learned allusions.

A more complete description of the Virgin is contained in another villancico, one of a series composed for the Cathedral of Mexico City for the Feast of the Assumption of 1679. This villancico has the form and the style of a jacara, a folksy ballad. First, the Virgin's dress is described as surpassing the glory of the starry sky. Her detailed physical portraiture, itemized in the usual rhetorical order, from the head down to the feet, begins in stanza 9:

9. ¡No es nada! De sus mejillas
están, de miedo temblando,
tamañitos los Abriles,
descoloridos los Mayos.

10. ¡Los ojos! Ahí quiero verte.
¡Solecito arrebolado!
Por la menor de sus luces
dieras caballos y carro.

11. Pues a la boca, no hay símil
que venga con quince palmos:
que es un pobrete el Oriente
y el Occidente un menguado.

12. ¿Qué más quisiera el jazmín
que andarse, paso a paso,
apropiándose en su rostro

entre lo rojo y lo blanco?

13. De las demás perfecciones
al inmenso Mare Magnum,
cññalas la admiración,
si hay ceñidor para tanto. (239: No.256)

Or, in English:

9. This is nothing! Trembling with fear before
her colourful cheeks,
the Aprils are shrunken to nothingness.
The Mays have lost all their hues.
10. And the eyes! I want you to stand next to Her,
my little ruddy Sun!
For the least one of Her lights,
you would gladly give up chariot and horses.
11. As far as the mouth goes, there is no simile
that may come near it within fifteen measured spans:
by comparison the Orient is in a terrible pinch,
and the Occident a real starveling.
12. What else could jasmine wish for
than to go and, step by step,
steal from Her face
the reds and the whites?
13. And, as far as the other perfections are concerned,
let us measure them by the immense Mare magnum,
if such a measuring tape
will ever reach far enough.

As we can see, this portrait of the Virgin is not just another effictio. It also is a commentary on the art of rhetoric and its shortcomings. Sor Juana is writing for an audience familiar with rhetorical theory and practice and alludes to the limitations of this art form. In each of the stanzas here cited, she points out that the traditional rhetorical trope associated with the particular physical feature to be characterized does not go far enough to do justice to the Virgin's beauty. Already here, we have the first manifestation of the attitude that will be fully developed in the ovillejos to Lisarda (which we shall examine further on). The difference between the two consists in the fact that in the villancico to the Virgin, the art of rhetoric is inadequate to the subject, whereas in the case of the ovillejos, where Lisarda is a beautiful but ordinary girl, rhetoric is no longer fit to describe her. It is a worn-out art form. It is also worth noticing that here and elsewhere Sor Juana takes delight in displaying the stitches that hold her artwork together.

Baby Jesus, too, is portrayed according to the rhetorical precepts of effictio, in a carol Sor Juana wrote for the Christmas celebration of 1689 (267; No. 288). The entire villancico is nothing but a rhetorical portrait of the Divine Child, with commonplace terms of comparison: His hair is a skein of gold forming rings, His eyes are two emeralds or two sapphires, His mouth is a ruby split in two, with the interspace filled with tiny pearls, and so on. In still another villancico the entire Holy Family is portrayed according to rhetorical tenets.

One of Sor Juana's most ambitious works is the auto sacramental or mystery play titled El Divino Narciso (The Divine Narcissus), which combines Christian and classical mythological elements, and whose central

character is Narcissus--Christ. In the following scene Narcissus is looking into a spring and admiring the reflection of his own beauty, or--to explain the allegory--Jesus is looking into the spring and falling in love with the Human Nature that he sees reflected there:

Recién abierta granada
sus mejillas sonrosea;
sus dos labios hermosea
partida cinta rosada,
por quien la voz delicada,
haciendo al coral agravio,
despide el aliento sabio
que así a sus claveles toca;
leche y miel vierte la boca,
panales destila el labio.

Las perlas que en concha breve
guarda, se han asimilado
al rebaño, que apiñado
desciende en copos de nieve;
el cuerpo, que gentil mueve,
el aire a la palma toma;
los ojos, por quien asoma
el alma, entre su arrebol
muestran, con luces del Sol,
benignidad de paloma.

Terso el bulto delicado,
en lo que a la vista ofrece,
parva de trigo parece,
con azucenas vallado:
de marfil es torneado
el cuello, gentil coluna.
No puede igualar ninguna
hermosura a su arrebol:
escogida como el Sol
y hermosa como la Luna. (409; IV, ix)

Or, in a literal translation into English:

A freshly split pomegranate blushes the cheeks. The two lips are beautified by a parted rose-coloured ribbon, through which a delicate voice, in an affront to coral, sends forth a wise breath skimming over carnations. The mouth distills milk and honey, flowing from the lips as from a honeycomb.

The pearls that are contained in a compact shell resemble a herd of sheep coming down like snowflakes; the body, gently swaying in the breeze, looks like a palm tree; the eyes, through which the soul is looking out, show, in the midst of pink surroundings, both the brilliance of the Sun and the gentleness of a dove.

Smooth and polished the delicate face, as it shows itself to the eyes. It seems a heap of freshly mowed grain, surrounded by a hedge of white lilies; the neck is a gentle pillar sculpted in ivory. No

splendour may ever equate with the rosy cheek: as unique as the Sun and as beautiful as the Moon.

The Mexican priest and scholar Alfonso Méndez Plancarte has shown in detail how the delicate similes of this portrait are derived from the Song of Songs and its descriptions of the Bride (3: 538-539). There is another portrait of Narcissus in the play, this one proffered by Human Nature, who is looking for her beloved and asks the nymphs of the woods to help her in the search (402; III, vi). This portrait also is inspired by the Song of Songs (Méndez Plancarte 3: 529-530). These portrayals of Narcissus depart considerably from the other rhetorical portraits in Sor Juana's writings. First of all, their inspiration is mostly Biblical: the order in which the various features are enumerated is much freer than the usual head-to-foot sequence, and the similes employed also are quite different from those of the traditional effictio. Rather than purely visual, these descriptions are lyrical, mystical and erotic at the same time, as in the Song of Songs. It also is striking that Narcissus, looking at himself in the spring, sees a female face, or rather an androgynous one, that of Human Nature. Nowhere does Sor Juana pen a portrait, rhetorical or otherwise, of grown men. With the exception of Baby Jesus, and the hermaphroditic Narcissus, all her detailed portraits are of females. As Octavio Paz points out (299), the description of a male body was indecent, and would have been scandalous if it were depicted by a woman, and much more so by a nun.

One of the religious plays written by Sor Juana is El cetro de José (Joseph's Sceptre). In the Biblical story which gave the inspiration to Sor Juana's auto, Joseph is portrayed as an extremely handsome young man (Genesis 39:7), and one would expect that in Sor Juana's play there would be a description of his physical beauty, which drives Potiphar's wife to

declare her adulterous intentions to him. Instead, what we have in the play is a self-portrayal by Potiphar's wife. She is calling out to Joseph and describing herself to him, trying to entice him into her arms with words of rhetorical self-praise:

¡Espera, galán Hebreo;
si a obligarte no bastan
las prendas de mi belleza,
los adornos de mi gracia;

si en los rizos de mi pelo,
los tesoros de la Arabia
no te aprisionan, porque
son, en fin, cadenas blandas;

si de mis ojos los rayos,
si de mi frente la plata,
si de mi boca los rubíes,
si en mis mejillas el nácar,

no te mueven ni te incitan,
ni a que te enamores bastan,
porque son prendas caducas,
que pagan al tiempo parías,

muévate un alma rendida:
que los tesoros del alma
no pagan pensión al tiempo,
ni tributo a las mudanzas! (479-480; II, vii)

Here is my English version of the romance:

Wait, handsome Hebrew! For, if you cannot be swayed
by the ornaments of my beauty, the graceful parts
of my comeliness,

if the ringlets of my hair, the treasures of
Arabia do not ensnare you, that must be because
they are after all, such soft chains.

If the sparkle of my eyes, the silver of my brow,
the rubies of my mouth, my cheeks' mother-of-pearl,

do not move or incite you, or suffice
to make you fall in love,
that is because they are but perishable gems,
and pay their dues to time.

But then, you must be moved by my enslaved soul:
since the treasures of the soul do not pay rent
to time, nor tribute to mutation.

What is striking about this effictio is, first of all, the enumeration of precious stones and metals traditionally used as similes in rhetorical portraits, so that the appeal seems to be directed more at one's sense of greed than that of lasciviousness. Secondly, the portrait conforms in every detail to the traditional tenets of beauty, so that Potiphar's wife is as crystal-white and as golden-haired as any Northern-European beauty, which, of course, would be unusual in an Egyptian. Father Méndez Plancarte, bent on proving that Sor Juana does not steer too far from realism, documents two cases of historical Egyptian princesses who were blond (3: 617). But it must be obvious that Sor Juana did not care in the

least whether she was being realistic or not, especially in an allegorical auto, where human characters appear on stage together with such others as Intelligence, Envy, Prophecy, Conjecture, the Morning Star, etc. The tenets of rhetoric were the only norm that she felt had to apply when describing a person.

Sor Juana's inventiveness, within the narrow confines of rhetorical effictio, is even more spectacular in her secular poetry. The following excerpt is a portrait of María Luisa Manrique de Lara y Gonzaga, Countess of Paredes, Marchioness of La Laguna, and Vicereine of New Spain from 1680 to 1686. She became Sor Juana's intimate friend during her stay in Mexico City, and remained her patronness after her return to Spain. It is she who collected the Mexican Nun's manuscripts and had them published in Madrid in 1689. Other editions were to follow almost immediately. The second volume of Sor Juana's works appeared in Seville (María Luisa's home town) in 1692, with two more editions in the following year. The Countess of Paredes was the moving force behind all these editions, but in each case the actual editorial responsibility befell to someone else (Paz 557-562). The poem's unusual, though not entirely original, verse form is that of a romance decasílabo, a ballad with ten syllables per line, with the first word of every line, a palabra esdrújula, here a three-syllable word stressed on the first syllable. The over-all effect of reading such a poem aloud is reminiscent of classical quantitative poetry, with each line beginning with a dactyl and ending in a trochee. Even more than by its metric virtuosity, the romance stands out by virtue of its elaborately stylized similes and metaphors, and a choice of vocabulary which carefully avoids everyday words. In this Sor Juana closely emulates Góngora and his school. The portrait of María Luisa, consisting of seventeen four-line stanzas, is too

long to be quoted here in its entirety, but it is worthwhile to examine its general structure, as well as that of its individual quatrains. Except for the first and the last quatrain, which constitute the "frame" of the portrait, each of the remaining fifteen is devoted to depicting, by means of superlative comparisons, just one feature of the Countess's appearance. In the conventional descending order, the second quatrain describes María Luisa's hair, the third her forehead, the fourth the eyebrows, the fifth the eyes, and so on to the fifteenth, extolling the minuteness of María's feet, that shun solid ground and intoxicate the winds that they tread with magic philters of love. The sixteenth stanza views the entire figure of the Vicereine, comparing its graceful suppleness to that of a banana tree, or a flame fluttering in the wind, as it spreads perfume all around.

Let us examine some of the stanzas of this, probably the most ambitious of Sor Juana's exercises in rhetorical portraiture. Here is the second quatrain of the romance decasílabo (79, No. 61):

Cárceles tu madeja fabrica:
 dédalo que sutilmente forma
 vínculos de dorados Ofires,
 Tíbares de prisiones gustosas.

Or, in a literal translation:

Your mane constructs prisons,
 a labyrinth subtly forming
 bonds of golden Ophirs,
 pleasurable dungeons of Tíbar.

This actually is a complicated way of saying that the Countess's hair is golden and curly, most appealing to the beholder, whose eyes get lost--imprisoned--in its ringlets (Ophir and Tíbar, mentioned in the Bible

as the faraway sources of gold, in Sor Juana's time had become poetic clichés signifying "gold").

Now, stanza three:

Hécate, no triforme, mas llena,
pródiga de candores asoma;
trémula no en tu frente se oculta,
fúlgida su esplendor desemboza.

Or, in English:

Hekate, not three-shaped but full,
a prodigy of whiteness, shows her face;
she does not timorously hide in your forehead,
but uncovers her refulgent splendour.

In simple language, María Luisa's forehead is ample, white and shiny, like the full moon (Hekate, who in Greek mythology is usually identified with Artemis or Diana, the moon-goddess, was often figured by a three-faced statue).

And stanza four:

Círculo dividido en dos arcos,
Pérsica forman lid belicosa
áspides que por flechas disparan,
víboras de halagüeña ponzoña.

Or, in translation:

A circle divided in two arcs
makes up a Persian battle line:
two asps shooting arrows,
vipers of alluring venom.

Again here, the basic idea is quite simple: María Luisa has arched eyebrows. They are in turn compared to geometrical arcs, to the classical battle line of ancient Persia, to bows shooting arrows, and to poisonous snakes. The allusions are classical throughout, and the metaphors easily flow one into the next. Not content to say that the Countess has arched eyebrows, Sor Juana makes them out to be geometrically perfect: half circles or arcs. But in Spanish arco almost means "bow." Hence the image of archery, which naturally alludes to Cupid: here María Luisa shoots deadly arrows from her eyes (the shooting imagery is continued in the next stanza, where the eyes discharge incendiary missiles that set souls on fire). But the eyebrows are also snakes--asps, naturally--with the inevitable hint at Cleopatra's classical beauty and her domination of powerful men.

The warlike imagery of this and the following stanza might be an echo of Ovid's dictum, militiae species amor est. One would not expect this kind of erotic imagery from the pen of a cloistered nun writing in her cell. The reader receives the impression that this effictio is not just another exercise in rhetoric, but that it does convey feeling, stylized to be sure, but nevertheless strong. The nature of Sor Juana's relationship with her friend and patroness, the Countess of Paredes, is, and always has been, an enigma. The great Mexican poet, Octavio Paz, devotes a whole chapter of his book on Sor Juana to the analysis of that relationship, and, despite his great erudition and intimate knowledge of Mexican history, his literary sensibility and psychological acumen, he declares himself incapable of solving this enigma entirely to his satisfaction (260-303). He is probably correct in referring throughout his book to the very complex

relationship between the two women as an amistad amorosa, or loving friendship.

According to Paz, of all the poems that Sor Juana wrote to celebrate the face and the body of the Countess of Paredes, the romance decasílabo is the most brilliant and the most imaginative (298). We must not believe, however, that the romance necessarily offers an accurate description of María Luisa's physical appearance. The portrait conforms in its entirety to the traditional canons of feminine beauty from the blonde hair and the straight nose, to the thin waist, slender fingers and tiny feet. In actuality, the Vicereine may, or may not, have come close to the ideal. None of the features mentioned in the portrait is individualized in the sense that it could set María Luisa apart from other women. That precisely is the idea of the epideictic portrait: not only is each feature described in a traditionally consecrated manner, but also it is made to conform in every detail to what is generally perceived as the commonly held ideal of physical beauty. That is why all those beautiful damsels, be their names Lysi, Galatea, Angelica, or Phyllis, always look like exact replicas of one another.

María Luisa Gonzaga, even though she is the only subject of a portrait by Sor Juana that can be readily identified as a living model, is no exception to that rule. As we shall see further on, Sor Juana protests against the constraints of effictio, but nowhere does she attempt to throw away those constraints and paint a portrait that would be truly individualized, if not true to life. Her variations on the theme of effictio, as we can see, display an unbelievable range of virtuosity, considering the limitations of the topos, but they never stray outside the accepted boundaries of rhetoric.

The romance decasílabo, with its unusual verse form, its erudite classical and Biblical allusions, and euphuistic metaphors and similes, is a masterpiece of baroque style, unsurpassed by any other of Sor Juana's poetic compositions. It has its counterpart in another rhetorical portrait, a brief décima (a poem of ten octosyllabic lines with a rigid rhyme scheme), whose subject apparently also is the Countess of Paredes (Paz 294 and 298):

Tersa frente, oro el cabello,
cejas arcos, zafir ojos,
bruñida tez, labios rojos,
nariz recta, ebúrneo cuello;
talle airoso, cuerpo bello,
cándidas manos en que
el cetro de amor se ve,
tiene Fili; en oro engasta
pie tan breve, que no gasta
ni un pie. (125; No. 132)

I have translated it thus:

A polished forehead, hair of gold,
arched eyebrows, sapphire eyes,
smooth complexion, the lips red,
a straight nose, ivory neck,
graceful figure, the body beautiful,
pure white hands, in which
the sceptre of love is seen,
Fili has; in gold encased,
her foot is so brief that,

it does not even take

a foot (of verse).

It would appear that the contrast between this décima and the romance decasflabo that we have seen is indeed intentional. In the décima, each physical feature is characterized by only one adjective, or adjectival noun, for the most part drawn from everyday vocabulary (the exceptions are cándido, instead of blanco, to mean "white," and ebúrneo, rather than de marfil, to mean "ivory-like"). Terseness and brevity, of the entire poem, of each line, of each idea, are de rigueur. This décima is the most concise rhetorical portrait in Sor Juana's repertory. Its first word is terso, which applied to the forehead is most appropriate, as it means "smooth," "shiny," "without wrinkles." But applied to literary style, terso means "smooth," "simple," "facile." Quite obviously, Sor Juana, in this little gem of a poem, not only is trying to execute an effictio that would stand out by its conciseness, but simultaneously she is commenting on her own artistry. This is particularly evident at the end of the poem, with its conceit based on the double meaning of the word foot, in anatomy and prosody. Thus the smallness of Fili's foot is illustrated by the brevity of the last line, which has only two syllables, as against the eight which are the rule for a décima. Thus, in a most ingenious manner, the décima not only is a rhetorical portrait remarkable for its conciseness, but it also is a portrait of a portrait, a commentary upon itself.

In a further development of the topos of the rhetorical portrait, Sor Juana adopts a theme and adapts it to the frame of the portrait. We thus have an effictio whose symmetrical construction is compared to that of a musical composition, and where the similes, metaphors, and other points of

comparison are drawn, from beginning to end, from the vocabulary of music (105; No. 87). In a somewhat similar vein, two of the effictiones are folk dances: they are romancillos exasílabos, or hexasyllabic ballads, written to the beat of a regional folk dance, and undoubtedly intended to be sung at a festival, such as the one organized by Sor Juana's convent in honour of the Viceroy and the Vicereine, the Count and Countess of Paredes (84-89; Nos. 64-69). Of the two romancillos, the one numbered 71 (91) is to be sung to the music of a regional dance, the cardador, i.e., a wool carder. All the similes in the itemized portrait are drawn from the care of sheep, their wool, and their milk. Number 72 (92), likewise, is built around the name of the dance to the beat of which it is written, the San Juan de Lima. Lima, naturally, is a city, the then capital of the viceroyalty encompassing all of Spanish South America. But lima also is a lime, the green-coloured and sour-tasting fruit, whose juice is an essential element in Mexican salad dressings. All the similes in this rhetorical portrait thus point to citrus and to a bittersour taste in the mouth, beginning with the first word, Agrísima, meaning very sour, very sharp. Octavio Paz states that this little poem is a caricature (298). It obviously is, that of a girl of a sour mien. But in my opinion, the main purpose of this composition, as well as of numbers 87 and 92, is to serve as exercises in rhetoric, as variations on the theme of effictio, a search for new and fresh similes to describe the features of face and body.

This search for fresh images is the theme of Sor Juana's poem number 214 (172-179), the longest (396 lines) rhetorical portrait that she, and probably anyone else, ever wrote. The poem, a portrait of a certain Lisarda, follows the usual head-to-toe sequence, but with a difference: each feature being considered in its turn provides a platform for the

reiteration of the statement that all the possibilities of rhetoric are exhausted. Let us see just the first part of stanza 3 of the ovillejos in question:

¡Oh siglo desdichado y desvalido
en que todo lo hallamas ya servido,
pues no hay voz, equívoco ni frase
que por común no pase
y digan los censores:
¡Eso? ¡Ya lo pensaron los mayores!
Dichosos los antiguos que tuvieron
pañó de que cortar, y así vistieron
sus conceptos de albores,
de luces, de reflejos y de flores!
Que entonces era el Sol nuevo, flamante,
y andaba tan valido lo brillante,
que el decir que el cabello era un tesoro,
valía otro tanto oro.
Pues las Estrellas, con sus rayos rojos,
que aun no estaban cansadas de ser ojos (173)

Or, in English:

Oh, unhappy and desolate age, when everything
we come upon has already been said, when there
is no voice, no pun, no phrase that is not a
a commonplace, and critics will decry: This?
But our forefathers said that already!
Happy were the ancients who had ample cloth
to cut, and so were able to dress up their

tropes with dawns, with lights, with reflections, with flowers. Then the Sun was brand-new and smashing, and anything shiny was truly appreciated, so that to say that the hair was a treasure was worth its weight in gold. And the Stars with their reddish twinkle were not yet tired of being also eyes

I have to disagree with Georgina Sabat de Rivers (34-35), who says that the intention of the ovillejos is to satirize bad poets. Neither do I entirely agree with Octavio Paz (402-403), who states that the purpose of the poem is to poke fun at the excesses of the culterano poets, while remaining within the limits of culterano style. While the style of the poem is obviously humorous, its intent is not. Throughout her life as a writer, Sor Juana has been concerned with rhetoric, its power, and its limitations. Evidently, in the ovillejos to Lisarda, Sor Juana fully states what she had been hinting at throughout her work, that traditional rhetoric is worn out as an art form. In a way, the ovillejos to Lisarda are an ars poetica in reverse: instead of looking forward, pointing the way to a new sensibility, a new way of saying things, its nostalgic gaze is directed at the rhetorical past, a past that has lost its virginity forever, and she deplores the fact.

Who knows? Perhaps the amazing "conversion" of Sor Juana in 1694, when she gave up literature forever, divesting herself of the largest private library in the New World and of her collection of musical and scientific instruments, sold to give alms to the poor, and devoting the last years of her life to penance, prayer, and works of charity, was due less to a new spiritual awakening, as her hagiographers, such as Méndez

Plancarte (l: xxxi-xxxii) would have it, or to the persecution by religious authorities, as proposed by Paz (566-608), than to a feeling of mental fatigue, the realization of having reached the end of the road, a sort of a rhetorical surfeit. In the absence of an outburst of mystical or devotional poetry following Sor Juana's "conversion," which would point to a spontaneous religious rebirth, and with no external evidence that she was being "brainwashed" by her ecclesiastical superiors, in order to force her to abandon all intellectual activity, her total withdrawal into her cell, and the equally total silence that followed, might point in that direction.

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