

Eyes Wide Shut: The Paradoxical Hermeneutics of Faith in Sor Juana's Religious Verse

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Religious, occasional verse should celebrate exemplars of the faith, wonder at the mysteries of the Church, and inculcate listeners in the tenets of Christianity. Not surprisingly, however, rather than reproduce orthodox readings of the mysteries of the faith Sor Juana in her religious verse interrogates these mysteries and lingers over their subtleties in troubling ways. She often intertwines the Incarnation and the Eucharist, not simply because Corpus Christi and Christmas are recurring liturgical festivals but because the spiritual apprehension of both the transubstantiated host and the incarnate son present the same hermeneutical problem, one where physical sight competes with faith causing spiritual insight to stumble. Certainly there are times when Sor Juana repeats orthodoxy; times when she casts faith as an obedient blindness that accepts as true the dictates of God, Scripture, and the Church. However, more often than not, she questions the assertion that believers must close their eyes to the materiality of the world. For Sor Juana it is not enough to say that the material world interrupts the movement of faith and so must be forgotten in blindness. As Sor Juana teases out her own hermeneutics, she circles around two problems that arise from the faith is blindness proposition: (1) the violence of this imposed blindness; (2) the paradox that the mysteries of the Church—especially the Eucharist and the Incarnation—depend on the historicity of the events and are thus bound to materiality. Rather than accepting the paradoxes unthinkingly, Sor Juana pushes them. In her writing she moves away from a dogmatic, authoritarian insistence that faith recast vision, and develops an alternative hermeneutics of paradox that insists that the material world cannot be forgotten and that the recognition of materiality is necessary for any and all allegorical reading.

“Letra para cantar en la solemnidad del Nacimiento” (poem 361) only after much vacillation concludes and affirms that God in Christ became human. Along the way it exasperatedly announces that the Eucharist is much friendlier to the believer than the Incarnation. The

first verse asserts that faith and sight are *encontradas*: in opposition, but also strangely encountered in that opposition. Faith must direct sight; however, sight constantly impinges upon faith. Materiality tempts spiritual insight to believe only what it sees. In the Eucharist, the poem suggests, the solution is easy, one should simply believe the opposite of what one sees, “al contrario / de la vista” (316).¹ In the Incarnation, though, one is asked to believe, as the chorus repeats, both what one sees and more—“aunque creo lo que veo / no veo todo lo que creo.” Given the opposition between sight and faith, the speaker wonders why the Incarnation is different, “¿por qué / aquí ha de hacer fe la vista / y no hacer vista la Fe?” When gazing upon the child, the speaker implores of God, “¿qué me mandáis / que crea mi sencillez / lo que veo y que no veo, / lo que es y que no es?” (317).² God in human form looks human, and is indeed human, asserts the speaker; yet, God is still God, and this cannot be seen, she further exclaims. In the end, the poem affirms, “es / Infinito más lo que hay / que lo que se alcanza a ver,” but this affirmation is made in the wake of a series of unanswered questions.

In a moment of frustration, “Letra para cantar” proposes that the Eucharist is a site where faith more easily corrects vision. This affirmation, however, proves to be just as fraught once Sor Juana directly scrutinizes the mystery of transubstantiation in her Eucharistic verse. The *auto sacramental*, *El mártir del Sacramento*, *San Hermenegildo* opens with a soliloquy by *Fe* that proposes blindness as the proper Christian hermeneutic.³ This soliloquy is the most sustained, coherent, and non-contradictory discourse on the transformative power of faith in Sor Juana’s corpus. *Fe* proclaims that she is the “ciega Virtud,” not because she cannot see, but because her vision is so penetrating, so perceptive that she does not need corporeal sight—“ciega Virtud...tiene tanta perspicacia, / que es ceguedad la del cuerpo” (433). In a line that echoes “Letras para cantar,” *Fe* exclaims, “no creo lo que veo, / sino aquello que me mandan” (433). Blindness as a virtue, which here is blindness by obedience, recalls Erasmus’s advice to the Christian soldier in the *Enchiridion*. When reading Scripture, he counsels, “Consider, too, that none of those things you see with your eyes and touch with your hands are as real as the truths you read” (53). The truths of Scripture trump the senses. Though Erasmus does not go so far as to insist on corporeal blindness, his hermeneutics, like that of *Fe*, privileges the spiritual over the material: nothing you see with your eyes is as real as Scripture. An orthodox hermeneutics of faith, then, is obedient blindness.

In her soliloquy from *El mártir del Sacramento*, *Fe* proposes the Eucharist as supreme among the “Misterios de la Fe.” The Eucharist

obtains this categorization over and above other important events, like the Incarnation, because the role played by faith in correcting vision is much greater. *Fe* states that although one must have faith to believe in the Incarnation it is a site where vision, although “torpe y escasa,” advances at least a partial knowledge of the mystery. To the extent that God took on human flesh in the form of Jesus, sight can see a man and understand half of the equation. Faith, in this instance, simply acts as a supplement; it instructs the intellect to believe that this child is the son of God. Not so with the Eucharist, where the eyes see nothing but bread. Here, *Fe* is not a supplement that infuses the human figure with divinity; instead, it fully controls vision, demanding that the believer see what is not there:

...no solo
no ve del Misterio nada
pero lo contrario ve,
pues ve pan y está obligada
a creer que allí no hay pan
sino Cristo, a cuya causa
éste se llama *Misterio*
de *Fe* por antonomasia. (433)

The soul must see the opposite of what it sees; materiality (the bread) must be ignored to read the spiritual truth (Christ) beyond. *Fe*, this “ciega Virtud,” corrects vision to such a degree that bodily sight is considered a kind of blindness—“es ceguedad la del cuerpo.” At the end of *El cetro de José*, another *auto sacramental*, the allegorical figure of *Profecía*, who claims to be a synonym for faith, repeats the theme of obedient blindness:

lo mismo es creer en Dios
que creer que Dios lo dijo
creyendo allá contra el tiempo
y aquí contra los sentidos...(498).

To believe “contra los sentidos” is the necessary condition for spiritual insight. These two Eucharistic verse dramas present faith as that which contradicts sensual perception. They propose a hermeneutics of faith blind to the material, temporal world.

Other Eucharistic verse, however, trouble *Fe*'s rhetoric of blindness and anti-materiality. *Letra XIX* (“Si Dios se contiene,” or poem 341) of the *Letras de San Bernardo*, a cycle of thirty-two poems written for the dedication of a Bernadine nuns' church, exposes the violence of this form of obedience.⁴ The second stanza of the poem in question

announces that, in order to see God in the host, one must look with the eyes of faith. The poem concludes affirming the need to approach God with closed eyes:

Desmiento a los ojos
 sólo al Alma creo,
 y en contradecirles
 con aprieto, aprieto.
 Que allí está contento
 de estar contento. (305)

The problem raised by this final stanza is not just that one must go against one's eyes and believe one's soul, the hermeneutical problem already discussed, but *how* to read the poem's paronomasia. The sonnet turns on a series of puns: the last two verses of each stanza rhyme with the same pair of homonyms (*contento* / *contento*) and every fourth verse of each stanza contains a different pair of homonyms (*acercó* / *a cerco*; *acierto* / *acierto*; *velo* / *velo*; *anhelo* / *anhelo*; *aliento* / *aliento*; *aprieto* / *aprieto*) that evidence the *conceptista* nature of this work. For the most part, the paronomasia reinforces the traditional understanding of the transubstantiated host by constantly repeating: God is happy (*contento*) to reside or be contained in (*contento*) the bread. Likewise, the *acierto* pair makes the strong claim that if faith takes aim at the bull's-eye (*acierto*), the speaker will hit it (*acierto*), namely see God in the host.

Though the *acierto* pair affirms the possibility of knowing God, other puns exploit more fully the variant definitions and complicate the certainty of encountering God. The *velo* stanza, the third of six stanzas, begins to show the problems introduced by the puns:

Aunque velo cubre
 su Poder supremo,
 lo descubro porque
 en su velo, velo
 que allí está contento
 de estar contento. (305)

"Velo" in the first line of the stanza refers to God as being covered by a veil—"aunque velo cubre / su Poder supremo." Reading the *velo* pair in the fourth line is more problematic. The first *velo*, similarly, means veil; the problem relates to its next appearance. One possible interpretation is that *velo* is the contraction of the affirmation: *lo veo*. In this reading the poem strongly affirms that God is in the veil of the host. However, *velo* is also the first person indicative conjugation of *velar* and can mean to either wait, as in a vigil, or to cover up. In the

first alternate sense, God remains eternally hidden in the veil and the faithful are asked to wait for the revelation: *velar* in the *velo*; in the second, despite the *lo descubro* of the stanza's second line, the poem's speaker actively veils God with the words of the poem. The problems of reading the veil, of seeing God in the veil, and of covering God with a veil of words begin to get at the hermeneutical problem of sight, faith, and materiality. That is, God is only visible in the veil, but the veil hides just as much as it reveals.

The difficulty of reading Sor Juana's paronomasia appropriately becomes even more acute in the final stanza: "desmiento a los ojos / solo al alma creo / y en contradecirles / con aprieto, aprieto." The pun revolves around the various meanings of *aprieto* and *apretar*. In the first use of *aprieto*, the word is embedded in an adverbial clause and acts as a noun whose primary meaning, according to the 1726 edition of the *Diccionario de la Real Academia*, is tightness or pressure. The *Diccionario* clarifies that in the most common usage of the word it means risk, grave danger, or generally a predicament, a definition which corresponds to the only meaning offered by Sebastián de Covarrubias' earlier *Tesoro de la lengua castellana*, where *aprieto* is "el riesgo, y contingencia de algún peligro, o necesidad urgente" (56r). Baltasar Gracián's *El héroe* illustrates this meaning in "Primor IV," when he writes, "no hay compañía en el mayor aprieto como la de un gran corazón," where *aprieto* refers back to "las violencias de un riesgo" (15). The *Diccionario* also offers doubt as another definition for *aprieto*. Though the *Tesoro* does not corroborate this definition, "Primor III" of *El héroe* contains a pithy statement that establishes a connection between *aprieto* and doubt. "Es la promptitud oráculo en las mayores dudas, esfinge en los enigmas, hilo de oro en laberintos; y suele ser de condición de león, que guarda el estremarse para el mayor aprieto" (13)—*dudas*, *enigmas*, and *laberintos* are all presented as types of *aprieto*. The second appearance of *aprieto* in the poem is as a verb: *apretar*. The primary meaning offered by the *Diccionario* for the verb is to restrict or constrain; a secondary definition renders it as to mistreat or oppress. The only definition offered by the *Tesoro* is "restringir" (56r). The *Breve diccionario etimológico de la lengua española* further illuminates *apretar*. It comes from the Latin *appectorare*, "estrechar contra el pecho," from the Latin *ad-* (to) + *pectorare*, from *pector*, *pecho*. That is, "To the chest." The restriction of *apretar* is a holding close to one's self and is itself a very physical act. Gracián's seventh meditation in *El comulgatorio* exemplifies this physicality. "Pondera ahora tú que llegas a comulgar, cuánto mayor es tu dicha, pues no sólo tocas el ruedo de su vestidura, sino a todo el Señor; tú le abrazas, tú le aprietas, en tu pecho le encierras, todo entero te le comes" (785).

According to the primary definitions of *aprieto* and *apretar*, in the phrase “desmiento a los ojos...y en contradecirles con aprieto, aprieto,” the speaker seems to be saying that in order to go against her eyes—“en contradecirles”—she must shut them tight, or constrain them. Presumably, the repetition of *aprieto* reinforces the tightness with which the speaker needs to close her eyes. In fact, she must restrict and place constraints upon her eyes; she must hold them tightly against her chest.

The logic of punning in the poem, though, opens *aprieto* and *apretar* to their various contradictory meanings. Deciding on the meaning of *aprieto* becomes a true predicament—*un aprieto*. The line “y en contradecirles con aprieto, aprieto,” taking into consideration the various meanings of *aprieto*, points to the difficulty, even risk, involved in contradicting one’s physical sight. “I shut (*aprieto*) them with difficulty (*con aprieto*);” even, “I shut them with doubt.” Common usage privileges this second version—the shutting of one’s eyes as a predicament or difficulty—over the first—the squeezing of the eyes tightly. In regards to the second use of *aprieto* (that is, *aprieto* as verb and not noun), the primary meaning highlights the violence of closing one’s eyes. It is a restriction or constraint placed upon the eyes. The secondary definition, which is not disallowed by the grammar, brings out the violence all the more—namely, *aprieto* as oppression or mistreatment of the eyes. When the variant meanings are taken into consideration, the repression of the eyes by faith is itself a difficulty and concludes with the confusing predicament of how to read *aprieto*. Does one ignore the more common, figural use of *aprieto* as predicament, difficulty, or risk in order to read it according to its less used primary, but also more literal, definition (pressure or tightness)? Likewise, in reading *apretar*, how strongly should one repress the secondary definition of the word as oppression or mistreatment? Though the puns do not openly criticize a hermeneutics of faith, they do evidence an unsettledness regarding blind obedience.

Letra XXIX (“En el Sacramento ve,” or poem 351) of this same cycle presents the relationship between faith and vision as one where faith transforms sight so that it can see God. The chorus calls all believers to come to the table to witness for themselves that God is the host:

Vengan a la mesa
 vengan verán
 aunque este es Pan de Substancia,
 pero no es substancia de pan. (311)

The various stanzas of the poem lay out the transformations that eyesight must undergo in order for the faithful to see God in the bread. The first stanza reads:

En el Sacramento ve
a Dios mi Fe sin antojos;
porque no hacen fe los ojos,
pero se hace ojos la Fe. (311)

The speaker asserts that this is a true vision because it is without “antojos.” The first definition offered by the *Tesoro* for *antojos* is eyeglasses. The definition continues, though, and includes a discussion of *antojadizo*—“el que tiene varios apetitos y toma ansia para cumplirlos.” As the definition goes on, it establishes a connection between sight, desire, and *engaño*: the *antojadizo*, enflamed by something he has seen, must be *desengañado*; that is, convinced that his desire was only an *antojo*. The definition for *antojo* in the *Tesoro* is a misogynist discussion of the caprice of pregnant women, the most *antojadizas* of all (51v). The *Diccionario*, for its part, clearly separates *antojo* from *antojos*: the plural is eyeglasses; the singular, “apetito o codicia” (forms of worldly desire, often towards base, material objects), or a judgment “sin fundamento.” The poem plays with the ambiguity of *antojos*. On the one hand, the first stanza highlights the role of the eyes in apprehending the miracle of transubstantiation; on the other, the entire poem explores the function of desire in a hermeneutics of faith.

The third stanza proclaims that the host—“el Sustento del Amor”—guides the speaker’s fervor or desire—“guía mi fervor”—since it is the soul’s only food—“Del alma es sólo Alimento.” The stanza focuses on desire, distinguishing between the host as the Food (*Sustento*) of Love and mere appetite, or the love of food—“amor del sustento.” The fourth and fifth stanzas continue exploring the role of desire in the Eucharist:

Aquí crece la afición
y es, si en posesión la veo,
la posesión del deseo
deseo de posesión:

pues tal deleite a dar viene
que, por más que la posea,
quien tiene lo que desea
desea aquello que tiene. (311)

Desire guides vision and informs faith, which, in turn, creates eyes able to see God in the sacrament. The speaker's fervor serves as guide; her affection for God and for seeing God in the sacrament increases through desire and the desiring of desire. In order to see this "Pan de Substancia" that "no es substancia de pan," one's vision must have been corrected by the process described in the poem of desiring to desire to see the bread as Christ. Ironically, the soul *does* use *antojos* and its vision *is* (in)formed by desire. The desire that drives the faithful might not be worldly desire (*antojo, codicia*), but still one's vision is skewed by an overwhelming desire (*fervor, deseo*) to see Christ in the bread. This skewing forms part of the necessary anti-ocular movement of faith. However, faith and the transformation wrought by the intervention of faith and godly desire on the soul are *antojos*; they are eyeglasses that filter light and allow the soul to see the bread as Christ.

All the poems discussed thus far propose blindness, or a skewing of vision, as the necessary condition for spiritual insight. The sonnet dedicated to Father Juan de Sahagún's 1690 canonization, another Eucharistic poem, also takes up the question of blindness; however, strong claims are made in this work about the impossibility of completely ignoring materiality. The sonnet (poem 210), rather than focusing on the miraculous legends associated with the saint's curative powers, explores the hermeneutical questions surrounding the mystical visions he experienced while holding up the host during mass. One would expect the sonnet to be an uncomplicated praise of the saint's spiritual perspicacity: when he comes to the table, he truly looks with the eyes of faith and sees Christ rather than the bread. Sor Juana, though, chides the saint for looking at and not eating the host. The poem concludes by affirming that only Sahagún, because he is a saint, can "con la vista tocar / a Cristo;" only he can approach the Communion table with eyes wide open.

Marie Cecile Benassy-Berling, largely following Diego Calleja, asserts that Sor Juana had no patience for mysticism, and few critics doubt this ("La religión" 35). The poet's distaste for the mystical underwrites the entire sonnet. In the second quartet, she exclaims exasperatedly:

Oh Juan, come y no mires, que a un sentido
le das celos con otro! ¿Y quién pensarás
que al Fruto de la Vida le quitara
lo hermoso, la razón de apetecido? (166)

The saint is admonished to "eat rather than look," by not eating he strips the host of its sacramental power. At the same time, the reproof

presents a hermeneutical problem. Sahagún makes one sense jealous by privileging the other. In this sonnet, *sentido* is used in both a literal and an allegorical sense. By looking and not eating, Sahagún denies two of his physical *sentidos*: touch and taste. Likewise, by looking and not eating, he denies the bread its materiality and privileges the allegorical *sentido*. In other words, he looks past the bread and sees only Christ. This criticism seems to be incongruous not only with the soliloquies of *Fe* and *Profecía* in the *autos sacramentales*, but especially with the chorus of “En el Sacramento ve” that denies the material, physical bread for the spiritual bread. The saint enacts precisely what the previous poems have advocated. But, in this quatrain, Sor Juana, like Sahagún holding up the host, holds up the real presence of Christ *in* the bread and stresses that the saint has forgotten the material reality of the miracle of transubstantiation.

The first tercet of the sonnet repeats, with a difference, the affirmation: “come y no mires.”

Manjar de niños es el Sacramento,
y Dios, a ojos cerrados, nos provoca
a merecer, comiendo, su alimento. (166)

Again, a hermeneutics of faith depends on closing one's eyes and accepting, like obedient children, the food God offers. Closing one's eyes is an act of obedience to God's provocation—it is the “no creo lo que veo, / sino aquello que me mandan” as expressed by *Fe* in her soliloquy in *El mártir del sacramento*.

Outwardly, it seems that the chastising apostrophe “Juan, eat, don't look!” agrees with the statement that one should approach God with eyes closed. But, *inwardly*, they disagree. Juan, eyes open, already sees God in the sacrament. Closing one's eyes, as seen in the poems leading up to the discussion of this sonnet, is a way of looking beyond the literal and acknowledging the presence of God in the sacrament. If the statement “Dios a ojos cerrados, nos provoca a merecer...” were directed to someone not caught up in a mystical vision of Christ, it would be an admonition to look at the world through the eyes of faith. However, it is directed to a priest so enraptured by his mystical vision he forgets the physical, literal bread. Thus, the reproach actually instructs him to do the opposite. It tells him to open his eyes and pay attention to the bread before him, for the host is just as much the physical bread as the allegorical meaning. At the same time that the Sahagún sonnet affirms the need to go beyond the material, to look with eyes blinded by faith, it boldly chastises a saint for not paying attention to the material. In fact, it seems that his lack of attention to

the material is a denial of faith because it denies the sacrament its true purpose, namely salvation by physical consumption. This poem seems to contradict *Fe's* hermeneutic of blinded faith; rather than blindness, it argues for the need to not forget the material reality of the host. This sonnet is the strongest affirmation of what could be called a hermeneutics of paradox in Sor Juana: a hermeneutics that both denies the material world because of its contradictory nature to faith and at the same time embraces it because God can only be known in and through the material traces of the sacraments.

The poems examined thus far propose blindness or altered vision as constitutive to a hermeneutics of faith. Indeed, even those poems that present blindness as a predicament—"Si Dios se contiene" and the Sahagún sonnet—acknowledge that blind obedience is necessary for faith. All is not blindness, however, in Sor Juana's writings. Other texts, texts that uncomfortably straddle the secular/religious divide that runs through Sor Juana's works, make strong claims about the importance of vision. The philosophical sonnet "Verde embeleso de la vida humana," the *Respuesta a Sor Filotea*, and the *Primero sueño* all take up the problem of vision and hermeneutics. Both the sonnet and the letter propose that the world should be approached with eyes wide open. In fact, "Verde embeleso" casts aside all eyeglasses (*anteojos*) and calls for eyes that focus on material reality itself.

"Verde embeleso de la vida humana" presents *Esperanza* as a mirage, an optical illusion that inhibits the seeing of reality. Those who walk through this world with their sight transformed by *Esperanza* are described as wearing green tinted lenses that color the world according to their desires. The poet, however, states in the concluding tercet that she walks through the world with her eyes in her hands and sees only that which she touches. This concluding image posits a corrective to the distorting power of *Esperanza* and *deseo*.

The poem brings together three commonplaces: the plaint on fortune, *desengaño*, and the *oculata manus* emblem. Jorge Checa asserts that the source for the concluding tercet is Aliciatio's gloss of the seeing hand or eye-in-palm emblem. The translation of the Latin text reads:

Be sober and remember not to be too rashly credulous:
these are the limbs of the mind.

Do not be credulous; do not be incautious, says Epicharmus—
these will be the sinews and the limbs of the human mind.
Behold the hand with the eye, believing what it sees;
behold the pennyroyal, herb of ancient sobriety.
By displaying it Heraclitus calmed the crowd and charmed it,
though it was threatening with swelling sedition.

Checa cites Bernardino Daza's 1548 Spanish translation that renders the line as: "Mira la mano prudente / Mano con ojos, que jamás fue vana / Por creer lo que ve tan solamente" (128). Despite this reference to vision, the emblem itself has little to do with sight and the inherent epistemological and hermeneutical problems posed by sight. Instead, the seeing hand, a disembodied hand no less, is a cautionary, didactic emblem that reminds the reader of the importance of prudence and temperance.

As other possible sources for the poem, Checa proposes passages in Huarte de San Juan, Saavedra Fajardo, and Gracián that develop a critique of vision relying on faculty psychology's understanding of how desire and fantasy interfere with the comprehension of perceptual data. He concludes that the poem's *desengaño* presents a type of vision that is self-aware and conscious of its inherent propensity towards error. His reading notes how sight, because *deseo* distorts vision at the level of interpreting sensual perception, is considered faulty and highly subjective. For Checa, Sor Juana's use of the seeing hand imagery is directly related to the emblem and the sonnet is little more than a cautionary tale about the complicated relationship between desire and vision that advocates prudence acquired through self-directed skepticism—the realization that the eyes can deceive. Checa's very plausible reading, however, does not consider the possibility that Sor Juana may be resignifying worn-out commonplaces. For him the lines "tengo entrambas manos ambos ojos / y solamente lo que toco veo" merely repeat without variation Aliciatio's gloss of the *oculata manus*. It is quite possible, though, that the poem is a call to pay attention to the material—to that which can be touched and seen.

Frederick Luciani, on the other hand, proposes that Sor Juana resignifies the eye-in-palm emblem by playing its meaning off the deceiving-eyeglass emblem from Juan de Borja's *Empresas morales*. In Luciani's estimation the sonnet opens with an allusion to Borja's emblem—the tinted glasses that warn about how desire skews vision—and closes with a reference to Aliciatio's emblem. He further remarks that both emblems are self-subversive; they call vision into question even though they themselves are apprehended through the visual faculty. The way out of this paradoxical bind, Luciani offers, is reading one emblem off the other and reading them both allegorically for their "moral *insight*" (emphasis in original, "Emblems" 162). The sonnet, he believes, combines the self-critical posture of both emblems to bring about a *desengaño* that proposes "moral *insightedness*" as a correction for delusion (the Renaissance meaning of the eyeglass emblem) and skepticism (the Renaissance meaning of the *occulata manus* emblem).

Luciani concludes that the sonnet advances vision as a looking, not with the physical eyes, but “with the lucid eyes of the intellect” (162).

I do not disagree with Checa’s sensitive reading of how faculty psychology informs the poem, or with Luciani’s bringing to bear the interplay between the two emblems on the sonnet. My reading is indeed informed by theirs, but I would argue that Sor Juana’s resignification of the emblem comes about through a Baroque heightening of the image. That is, rather than an allegorical, disembodied hand floating through the world reminding people to act with prudence, it is the poetic speaker who walks through the world eyes in hands, seeing by tact. Sor Juana’s corrective to a naïve vision distorted by *Esperanza* and *deseo* is the admonition to pay attention to the material world instead of an image created by fantasy. Even more, the allegorical emblem has been both literalized and embodied by the poet. By employing the grotesque imagery of eyeballs as feelers, the lines propose a form of vision that brings together sight and touch as curative to the vagaries of sight deformed by *Esperanza*. It is a way of seeing that pays attention to the thing itself—a mode of vision that directly contradicts Erasmus’s anti-corporeal, spiritual hermeneutics. Instead of believing the truths of Scripture more than “those things you see with your eyes and touch with your hands” (53), the poet proposes a way of seeing that relies on the corrective potential of touching things with one’s eyes.

Relying on the archival work of Alejandro Tapia, Luciani resituates the poem and proposes a new reading that pays attention to the sonnet’s material history—the only extant copy of the poem is found in the portrait of Sor Juana that hung in the treasury of the nunnery. Quite possibly the sonnet is a memento written by Sor Juana for the *contaduría* where she kept the books. This new context opens up another, although not unrelated, reading. As Luciani suggests, when the archival history of the poem is considered, it takes on a decidedly economic meaning where *Esperanza* is hope in earthly goods. The sonnet, then, cautions against placing one’s hopes in wealth. He further notes the irony of a poem with an anti-materialistic message treated as a treasure by being stored in a painting. I would argue that its archival history points even more strongly to the poem’s concern with the material world. The concluding lines emphasize touching the world with one’s sight in order to disabuse *Esperanza* and *deseo*. The concluding tercet stresses taking control of one’s *fortuna* (fortune, fate)—“que yo, más cuerda en la fortuna mía, / tengo en entrambas manos ambos ojos.” I suggest that when situated within the economic overtones of its material history “Verde embeleso” instructs its readers, those in the *contaduría*, to count the cost before giving into expensive

wishes—that is, let the money in hand do the seeing. Thus, the sonnet emphasizes shrewd management that comes through knowing the relationship between one's economic power and the world at large.

Sor Juana's *Respuesta a Sor Filotea* also vindicates the senses—especially sight—as a means of knowing the world. This knowledge, however, moves in an opposite direction from that of “Verde embeleso.” If the sonnet calls the reader to attend only to the material world, the letter establishes interconnections between things in the world and texts. In one of the more famous sections, Sor Juana relates the interdiction of reading placed upon her by her Mother Superior. Though banned from books, she recounts how the world transformed itself into a book and everything opened itself up as an avenue into knowledge. As Ernst Robert Curtius notes, the world as book is a well-established *topoi* of European literature. Often, as in Alaine de Lille's famous lines “Omnis mundi creatura / quasi liber et pictura / nobis est in speculum” the trope speaks to the vanity of life (319). Sor Juana, though, employs the commonplace differently. Instead, the world is a text that, if read properly, contains vast quantities of knowledge: the variety of human psychology and physiology as encountered in the nunnery, the geometry of architecture, the physics and symbolic potential of children's games, even cooking as a form of philosophical inquiry. Each of her examples, as Rosa Perelmuter Pérez has noted, begins with the specular verb *ver*, which according to Aristotle is a way to “presentar las cosas ante los ojos” (note, 157). Perelmuter Pérez mainly refers to the catalogue of illustrious women, but Sor Juana uses *ver* throughout her letter in order to vindicate vision as the primary means of knowing the world. Of cooking, the poet writes: “Veo que un huevo se une y fríe en la manteca o aceite y, por contrario, se despedaza en el almíbar.” This example, presumably taken from nature, leads to a quotation and a comment on Aristotle: “¿qué podemos saber las mujeres sino filosofías de cocina? Bien dijo Lupercio Leonardo, que bien se puede filosofar y aderezar la cena. Y yo suelo decir viendo estas cosillas: Si Aristóteles hubiera guisado, mucho más hubiera escrito” (838, 839). In this case, as with others in the letter, viewing the world leads to book-related knowledge.

Luciani observes that this celebration of vision also celebrates reading. He further notes that though Sor Juana's deployment of the book of the world metaphor might seem rather ingenuous, it is anything but the naïve or candid confession of a bookish nun discovering a world beyond her library. He notes that her comment on architecture or perspective (the way lines of sight merge into a triangle) is itself a well-known phenomenon illustrated in an Athanasius Kircher book directly cited by Sor Juana, both here and in

other contexts (*Literary* 113-15). Her reading of nature as a book, it seems, is already haunted by textuality. The same could be said of Sor Juana's reading of the triangles in the game of pick-up sticks and of her comment about Aristotle in the kitchen. In the case of the former, "[se puso] a enlazar uno con otro" and the triangles brought to mind Solomon's ring, which vaguely prefigures the Trinity. Thinking about the miracles wrought by this ring leads Sor Juana to the Biblical story of David playing the harp for Saul. Likewise, in the latter case, cooking makes her think of Lupericio Leonardo, which leads to the question about Aristotle and philosophy. Luciani furthers his discussion of this passage asserting that Sor Juana's cooking anecdote might even be a citing "without citing" of a similar discussion in Aristotle's *De generatione animalium* (120). The book of the world is first and foremost a text, a "divine chain of textual mirroring" to use Stephanie Merrim's suggestive phrase (112). A close reading of this book elicits the various echoes it contains of other books. And, just as one text gives birth to another, a close reading of the *Respuesta* proposes vision as a way of reading the world that establishes analogies between the thing in the world and other texts. This understanding of sight seems to posit vision as a reading beyond the literal. Things mean to the extent that they call up philosophical, scientific, or theological knowledge, largely based on analogical resemblance—the triangles in pick-up sticks are not just triangles but allegories that point both to sacred history and the Christian pantheon, the Trinity.

This movement into knowledge still relies on allegory; however, this hermeneutics radically differs from that which Sor Juana troubles in her religious verse. Reading in the *Respuesta* is much more delimited—texts call up other texts, rather than the spiritual truths behind the religious emblems—and it pursues much more concrete goals. Reading in the *Respuesta* is concerned with knowing and changing the present world—with defending both a life lived in pursuit of knowledge and the rights of women to learn—, not with preparation for the other. If the *Respuesta* presents vision as the means to come into a very useable form of knowledge, one that leads to other/more knowledge, the long poem *Primer sueño* develops a radical critique of hermeneutics, one in which the material world consistently rejects the reader's attempt to know it beyond its brute materiality. In the *Sueño*, as in the *Respuesta*, things point to other things, but in this poem the soul is continually pulled up short by what it sees; it is unable to follow the signifying chain into knowledge. This is especially noteworthy since, as Gerard Flynn notes, the *Sueño* is "the most outstanding example of Sor Juana's attitude toward sense knowledge... in it Sor Juana shows that as far as knowledge is concerned the

dependence of the soul on the body is in an absolute way" (516). At the same time that she asserts the dependence of the soul on the body and spiritual knowledge on the physical senses, she presents a world that rebuffs the soul's attempt to comprehend it.

A rough division of the *Sueño* would separate it into three major sections: the opening and closing frames, where the body falls asleep and awakens, and the soul's dream flight. The dream, in turn, contains two voyages, or attempts to achieve understanding divided by an interlude where the soul attempts to read two pyramids. For the purposes of this essay, we will focus on the pyramid section, not only because it most clearly evidences the problems of vision, faith, and hermeneutics but also because it narrates a failed encounter with God. This section—from the pendants, to the tower, to the fall from the summit—is an allegory of the failure to read allegorically, an allegory of the uniquely modern *inability* to go beyond the material or literal level and attain a more anagogical level of understanding. As the soul attempts to read these pyramids, it confronts a succession of emblems—material objects meant to be understood allegorically—that resist interpretation. This poses a problem for the Eucharistic poems since these affirm that God is known, despite the attendant difficulties, through the emblems of the bread and wine.

Those who read Sor Juana as a late seventeenth-century Scholastic understand the failure of the first flight into knowledge and the pyramid section as a criticism of Neo-Platonism. They then argue that the following flight into knowledge is a vindication of Thomism. However, this second flight also fails. When the soul, after proceeding methodically, fails to understand the rose, the poet exclaims in frustration, "Pues si a un objeto solo—repetía / tímido el pensamiento— / huye el conocimiento / y cobarde el discurso se desvía... / ¿cómo en tan espantosa / máquina inmensa discurrir pudiera... la empresa / de investigar a la Naturaleza?" (757-780).

Before this failure of the Aristotelian/Thomistic approach to knowledge and immediately following the failure of Neo-Platonism, two Egyptian pyramids rise up into view and encroach upon the horizon. These pyramids, with their various emblems and hieroglyphs, make their appearance immediately after it is announced that the soul in flight "no pudo llegar a la región de su altura" (327); they (pre)occupy the soul throughout the next six stanzas. Each stanza attempts to read these enigmatic figures that, in the end, resist interpretation. This resistance is alluded to in the various metaphors and images of the first pyramid stanza. These cluster around blazons and acts of heraldry—*pendones, trofeos, bandera, publicar, (no) decir, (no) cantar las glorias y proezas*—that are curiously silent. The pyramids and

the heraldic emblems that adorn them announce, or more precisely fail to announce, something about the Ptolemys and their greatness. That is, they once made announcements to the wind and the clouds: “que al viento, que a las nubes publicaba” (346). However, they now are silent—“porque su copia enmudecía, / la Fama no cantaba” (350-51).

The soul attempts to read the pyramids in several ways. First, it tries to scale the objects, but as the soul moves closer to the apex, the pyramids grow so that their summit and flags disappear—“entre los vientos se desaparecía” (359). The emblems refuse interpretation, and the soul falls down the side of the pyramid to the dark shadows at its base. This attempted reading, which ends in a fall, is called a “visual alado atrevimiento” (368)—both a winged attempt and, if read as a pun, a one-sided attempt: *al lado*.

At the base, the soul endeavors to unlock the meaning of the pyramids by examining the hieroglyphs that cover their walls. These are thought to recount the myths of the ancients, and are referred to as “bárbaros jeroglíficos de ciego error” (381). Rather than directly reading these glyphs, the “Griego ciego,” Homer, is invoked and his stories stand in for the illegible markings on the wall. It must be remembered that Homer was believed to have allegorically interpreted Egyptian myths, transforming them into the tales of the Greek heroes and gods. In fact, in 1679 P. Daniel Huet, Bishop of Soissons and Avranches, argued in his *Demonstratio evangelica* that Homer was Egyptian (Allen 80). Whether Sor Juana knew Huet’s thesis or not, she was very aware of the hermetic tradition and of Homer’s putative role as translator of Egyptian knowledge. The blind allegorist not only cracks the code in his own writings, he interprets the pyramids in this poem.

Según Homero, digo, la sentencia
 las Pirámides fueron materiales
 tipos solos, señales exteriores
 de las que, dimensiones interiores,
 especies son del alma intencionales:
 que como sube en piramidal punta
 al Cielo la ambiciosa llama ardiente,
 así la humana mente
 su figura trasunta,
 y a la Causa Primera siempre aspira
 —céntrico punto donde recta tira
 la línea, si ya no circunferencia,
 que contiene, infinita, toda esencia— (399-411).

Just as blindness appears twice in *Fe's* soliloquy at the beginning of *El mártir del sacramento*, it appears twice in this stanza of the *Sueño*. Though the “bárbaros jeroglíficos de ciego error” is a criticism of pagan error, these errors point to truth when read allegorically. Even more, it is blind Homer who is able to look beyond the materiality of the pyramids and allegorically read them as exterior symbols of the soul. Homer's blindness, then, is similar to the blindness of Erasmian hermeneutics where blindness to material reality is necessary for achieving spiritual or allegorical insight.

The attainment of this insight—that the pyramids are symbols of the soul and that the soul points to the “Causa Primera”—does not conclude the reading of the pyramids, however. One would think that God—the “céntrico punto...que contiene, infinita, toda esencia,” to which the soul “siempre aspira”—would be the end of the chain of signification, but the reading of the pyramids continues. The next stanza, following an architectural analogy, equates the pyramids with the Tower of Babel. If what previously allowed a reading of the pyramids as representations of the human soul was a reading beyond the exterior, now a logic of exteriority and materiality is again at work. This opens up the signifying chain so that any large architectural structure could plausibly serve as a visual synonym for the pyramids. Sor Juana, though, only moves to the Tower of Babel, which brings into play the scattering of humanity and the fragmentation of language. The lateral step to Babel—itsself repeating the earlier “alado [al lado] atrevimiento”—turns into a digression that distances the pyramids from their allegorical interpretation as the “mental pirámide” that points to God (420). This digression, emphasizing the chaos, misunderstanding, and misinterpretation unleashed by God as a result of Babel, serves to introduce the soul's own confusion. Instead of enlightenment through allegory, the soul, in a fit of mystic rapture, confuses its own flight into knowledge—which has actually been a falling—with having attained the summit. From this “casi elevación inmensa” (435), it attempts to understand the whole world. However, the sheer multiplicity of things to be taken in at once refuses apprehension. Again, the soul falls from its presumed vantage point. Its entire project shipwrecked, it plunges like Icarus into the sea.

The criticism of allegorical hermeneutics developed in this section of the *Sueño* helps explain the unsettledness evidenced in Sor Juana's religious verse regarding an orthodox hermeneutics of faith. The *Sueño*, despite the failure to arrive at an all-encompassing knowledge, celebrates the desire to know and understand the world. Knowledge, however, is presented as a *desengaño*, a realization that there are things that escape philosophy and philosophical methods. The soul's refusal

to give up its search for knowledge despite constantly coming up against a world that demands it be read allegorically while resisting such a reading demonstrates a kind of faith, a hope against hope, in human ability to make something of the world. Faith, in the *Sueño*, can be seen in the poet's refusal to close her eyes and see past the material world, despite the difficulty of deciphering this world.

The movement of this essay has been a falling away from *Fe*'s programmatic refashioning of sight so as to exclude the material in order to see only the spiritual. Sorjuanine religious poetry does not often dispense platitudes such as the injunction to look with the eyes of faith; instead, it presents this type of vision as a predicament (*aprieto*), even as a contradiction (as in the denial of the need for eyeglasses in a poem that demonstrates faith to be a kind of eyeglass). In both "Verde embeleso" and the sonnet to Sahagún, Sor Juana vindicates materiality. In fact, the Sahagún sonnet recognizes that all allegorical readings depend on their connection to material reality—the bread must be physically consumed to receive its sacramental benefits. The *Respuesta* furthers this vindication of materiality and presents the material world as a book brimming with knowledge and intertextual allusions. However, the form of reading advanced in the *Respuesta* radically differs from that found in her religious poetry—books and objects in the world point to other books and other readings. The knowledge reading imparts has to do with this world. Furthermore, the *Sueño* questions the possibility of moving beyond the material into a spiritual or allegorical reading of the material world. This questioning of the possibility of reading the world allegorically is the center around which Sor Juana's Eucharistic verse circles. Sor Juana's religiosity, then, is an unflinching presentation of the paradox of God and of God's veil: the only way to know God is by knowing the veil, but the veil is itself a material covering, a sign, an emblem.

Notes

¹Every citation references the page number of the Porrúa *Obras Completas* edition, except the *Primero Sueño* where I cite the line number.

²The Porrúa edition contains a confusing punctuation erratum that places the question mark following *mandáis*. Instead, the 1692 *Segundo volumen de las obras de soror Juana Inés de la Cruz* places the question mark at the end of the stanza. Thus, rather than “both what you see and what you do not” being the answer, it is still part of the question.ssss

³I use *Fe* to refer to the allegorical persona and faith when speaking of the virtue itself

⁴Eliás Trabulse, María del Carmen Reyna, and Antonio Rubial García have all shown that Sor Juana managed her own affairs quite well. For an essay that explores Sor Juana's use of accounting vocabulary, see Linda Egan.

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