

## “Heaven and Earth Conspire”: Grace and Nature in Sor Juana’s *The Divine Narcissus*

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*This essay highlights the dynamic theology of nature and grace expressed within The Divine Narcissus by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–95). Inspired by thinkers such as Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux and, later in her life, an emphasis on the Immaculate Conception, she details an aesthetic relationship between grace and nature: human nature is created to reflect, in grace, the perfect beauty of the incarnate Son of God. Moreover, by securing positive roles for the contributions of women and for indigenous Mexican religious devotion, she highlights the way in which this dynamic between nature and grace recovers the authentic voice of the least in society—those whose voices have been unjustly suppressed by violent domination.*

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“SING, my tongue!” The opening words to Thomas Aquinas’ *Pange lingua* take on a surprisingly prophetic air in the work of the seventeenth-century Mexican poet, playwright, and theologian Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–95), who deploys an abridged version of this hymn at the end of her drama, *The Divine Narcissus*.<sup>1</sup> Sor Juana’s work is remarkable for more than its keen display of poetic talent. By skillfully recontextualizing the mystery of salvation in view of the conquest of the

<sup>1</sup> Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Selected Writings* (hereafter SW), trans. Pamela Kirk Rappaport (New York: Paulist, 2005), 170. Citations from Juana Inés de la Cruz, *The Divine Narcissus*, originally published in 1689 (69–170) will also be referenced by act, scene, and line number as follows: DN 5.16.2226–38.

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New World, she develops in this work a clear, concise, and beautiful Christology and theological anthropology, which inspire her characters to break into song. For Sor Juana, *Pange lingua* represents a song at the very heart of humanity, a voice that erupts from within through the inspiration of divine grace. By illustrating the relationship between Christ and the world in terms of humanity's beautiful reflection of the perfect image of Christ, Sor Juana's *The Divine Narcissus* demonstrates how the relationship between nature and grace leads to the recovery of an authentically human voice on the part of the lowly.

Sor Juana's works have surged in popularity over the last thirty years, but the majority of scholarship focuses on her defense of women's writing and education with little attention to her theological views. Some recent essays address this lack, but additional study still needs to be done to appreciate her theology fully. In fact, as one delves into her writings, it becomes clear that her views are all deeply interconnected. Her defense of women and her advocacy for the indigenous peoples of Mexico are inseparable from both her fondness for Catholic tradition and her theological convictions about Christ and the human person.

Therefore, I will explore how Sor Juana's *The Divine Narcissus* innovatively communicates a theological anthropology in terms of a beautiful relationship between nature and grace. For Sor Juana, beauty is not a mere rhetorical device; beauty is truth and truth is beauty, such that her ideas are inseparable from the poetic and allegorical images that shape them. Because of this, the relationship between nature and grace is never a mere isolated point of metaphysics. Rather, it is a beautiful mystery that must flow forth in a song that, by its very nature, liberates and calls forth the voice of the lowly into a divine accompaniment.

### ***Approaching The Divine Narcissus***

This exploration of Sor Juana's theology will take three steps. First, we will cover important background of and hermeneutical considerations for the text. Second, we will discover its major theological and Christological themes. Finally, we will unravel these themes, explaining how they form an important theology of nature and grace that recovers a voice on the part of the least.

### ***Hermeneutical Complexities***

The task of retrieving Sor Juana's insights is complicated by the ways her work has been forced into a too-narrow hermeneutical mold. Many commentators read Sor Juana through the lens of direct and subversive rebellion against oppressive powers and social constraints. Although not without merit,

this hermeneutic of rebellion has made it all too easy to assume that Sor Juana's genius lies nearly exclusively in those statements that run contrary to the established norms of societal convention and ecclesiastical doctrine. This assumption quickly proves too restrictive, however, because the bulk of her views can be traced to one or another accepted and established Christian tradition. Even her remarkable defense of women's intellectual abilities relies heavily upon both female and male examples from the tradition. Overlooking this, scholars too often mischaracterize her insights as being more at odds with orthodox Roman Catholicism than they really are.<sup>2</sup> Because they rely heavily upon anachronistic retrojections of twentieth-century assumptions back into Sor Juana's corpus, it remains to be shown whether the documentary evidence really justifies the more inflated views that have been attributed to her, such as Frances Kennett's claim that she "gives Mary a role in the Trinity."<sup>3</sup>

This hermeneutic of rebellion tends toward the abuse of the hermeneutic of suspicion. If one digs for a hidden and subversive meaning underneath the text, it becomes easy to ignore whatever Sor Juana intends to say upon its surface. When, for example, Sor Juana frequently extols the Immaculate Conception in the highest language possible, some interpreters conclude—to the exact contrary of her own words—that this means precisely that she is *not* devoted to the Immaculate Conception and does not believe one letter of what she actually says.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See for example Pamela Kirk Rappaport, "Christ as Divine Narcissus: A Theological Analysis of *El Divino Narciso* by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz," *Word & World* 12, no. 2 (1992): 149.

<sup>3</sup> Frances Kennett, "The Theology of *The Divine Narcissus*," *Feminist Theology* 25 (2000): 74, 78; Electa Arenal, "Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Speaking the Mother Tongue," *University of Dayton Review* 16 (1983): 96; Linda Egan, "Donde Dios es todavía mujer: Sor Juana y la teología feminista," in *Y diversa de mí misma entre vuestras plumas ando: Homenaje internacional a Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*, ed. Sara Poot Herrera (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1993), 327. Cf. Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Obras completas* (hereafter *OC*), ed. Alfonso Méndez Plancarte, 1st ed. (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1951), 2:211; de la Cruz, *SW*, 205. For critique and clarification, see Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Sor Juana: Beauty and Justice in the Americas* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 62, 93; Dinorah Cortés-Vélez, "Marian Devotion and Religious Paradox in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz," *Renascence* 62, no. 3 (2010): 181–82, 189.

<sup>4</sup> See Marie-Cécile Bénassy-Berling, *Humanisme et religion chez Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: la femme et la culture au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Editions hispaniques, 1982), 256–58; Kennett, "The Theology of *The Divine Narcissus*," 76–77. Against this minimization of Sor Juana's devotion to the Immaculate Conception, see Cortés-Vélez, "Marian Devotion and Religious Paradox in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz," 181–82; George H. Tavard, *Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Theology of Beauty: The First Mexican Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 93–94.

Although contemporary scholarship owes much to Octavio Paz for recovering Sor Juana as a major topic of interest today, it also owes to him something of its obsession with rebellion. For Paz, modern poetry is inherently rebellious, and to this extent there is something distinctively modern about Sor Juana. Her work pursues the axiomatic "atemporality" of poetry, which stands outside of history and its metanarratives of progress, rationalism, and morality.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, Paz assumes that Sor Juana's renunciation of writing toward the end of her life could not in any way have been motivated by faith, but must rather have been the culmination of her countercultural quest for pure, disinterested knowledge apart from history and action. The sum result is that Paz's reading has reduced Sor Juana to a mere symbol for the transcendence of art. In relation to such a grand idea, the author herself means little: "The work shuts out the author and opens to the reader."<sup>6</sup> Reducing her theological insights to a set of "brilliant speculations," Paz brushes them aside coolly, averring, "It is not easy to take her theological opinions very seriously."<sup>7</sup>

In this way, by rejecting any straightforward authorial meaning to the texts, such views run the risk of denying Sor Juana's ability to speak her own mind. If we validate her ideas only to the extent to which they appear revolutionary and countercultural, we miss the ways in which she understood her own theological project as deeply rooted in Roman Catholic and Spanish tradition. In fact, Sor Juana displays her true genius primarily by manipulating and reshaping these contextual influences, even if her ultimate conclusions are not always strictly against the grain. As Stephanie Merrim writes, she "both bespoke, with a hyper- and self-consciousness, *and* transcended her milieu."<sup>8</sup>

My goal here, consequently, is to take Sor Juana at her word. Privileging a hermeneutical lens that is responsive to the cultural and linguistic assumptions out of which she wrote, I want to show how the interaction between her own genius and her broader context forms a vibrant Christology and theological anthropology. Allowing her ideas to be shaped deeply by inherited traditions and context, she exercises a genuine and creative freedom with regard to these materials, such that her work remains irreducible to her influences.

<sup>5</sup> Octavio Paz, *Sor Juana, or, The Traps of Faith*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1988), 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 343.

<sup>8</sup> Stephanie Merrim, *Early Modern Women's Writing and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999), xi. See also Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, 67; Tavard, *Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Theology of Beauty: The First Mexican Theology*, 184.

### ***Background of the Work***

It is necessary to understand the genre and literary context of *The Divine Narcissus* and how these realities promote its theological significance. First published in 1690, the work follows the tradition of baroque drama that had been popularized by Spanish Golden Age figures such as Lope de Vega and Pedro Calderón de la Barca.

The baroque style might seem bizarre to a modern audience. Boasting abstract characters such as “Pride,” “Human Nature,” “Synagogue,” and “Paganism,” *The Divine Narcissus* articulates theological meaning through a dense symbolic matrix characteristic of the seventeenth-century Spanish stage, where biblical narratives collide with classical Greek myths, and late medieval theology sings through lofty characters mounted upon colorful floats. Eschewing obvious comparisons, the allegory of Spanish baroque theater sought out rare but powerful relationships between sign and signified. Hence, baroque writers chose Greek myth as the vehicle for the Christian message not because of any superficial similarities, but rather because of deeper connections that might be found under the surface. Through such connections, joined with the growing complexity of sets, costumes, and spectacle, “The baroque poet hoped to astonish and astound.”<sup>9</sup>

In terms of genre, *The Divine Narcissus* is an *auto sacramental*, a liturgical drama intended to celebrate the Eucharist on the feast of Corpus Christi.<sup>10</sup> Such *autos* sought to communicate the Christian mysteries through the beauty of poetry, song, and motion.

Sor Juana artfully deploys this well-established format by reinterpreting the Greek myth of Echo and Narcissus as a symbol of the Eucharistic encounter between Christ and Human Nature.<sup>11</sup> In the classic version penned by Ovid (ca. AD 8), the nymph Echo falls madly in love with the perfectly handsome youth Narcissus. Because of a curse, Echo is unable to express her love, able only to parrot back what she hears. Faced with this language barrier and

<sup>9</sup> Paz, *Sor Juana, or, The Traps of Faith*, 53.

<sup>10</sup> Pamela Kirk Rappaport, “Introduction,” in *Sor Juana Inés De La Cruz: Selected Writings*, by Juana Inés de la Cruz (New York: Paulist, 2005), 15; Alexander A. Parker, “The Calderonian Sources of *El divino Narciso* by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,” *Romanistisches Jahrbuch* 19 (1968): 258–59. Cf. Jonathan Ellis, “How Is a Narcissistic Christ Possible? The Theological Tradition Behind Sor Juana’s *El Divino Narciso*,” *Bulletin of the Comediantes* 59, no. 1 (2007): 170.

<sup>11</sup> Ellis, “How Is a Narcissistic Christ Possible?,”; Ivelisse Urbán, “Ontología de la metáfora en *El Divino Narciso* de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,” *Romance Notes* 49, no. 3 (2009): 259. On the cultural significance of this myth, see Robert Folger, “Narcisos: La economía de los géneros en Calderón y Sor Juana,” in *Variaciones e innovación de un modelo teatral: XV Coloquio Anglogermano sobre Calderón, Wrocław, 14–18 de julio de 2008* (Göttingen: Steiner, 2011), 171.

prompted by prideful vanity, Narcissus rejects Echo's love. She languishes in lonely forest caves and slowly dies, losing her physical form and becoming a mere sound—an echo. As a divine punishment for Echo's wrongful rejection, Narcissus becomes entrapped by the same love that doomed her. Seeing his own reflection in a pond, he becomes infatuated with his own visage. Overpowered and held in place by love, he wastes away, and a white narcissus flower—a daffodil—grows in his stead.

In a striking twist, Sor Juana casts Christ in the role of Narcissus. She reshapes the story to describe the romance between Christ and Human Nature. This Narcissus loves Human Nature because it is his very own image. In contrast, Echo represents Satan, who strives to keep humanity from receiving Christ's love. Grace, however, intervenes and guides Human Nature to be reflected in the water. When Narcissus perceives her in the water, he becomes enamored of his own divine image reflected in Human Nature. Because of this, the death of Christ-Narcissus is neither a wasting away nor—as in earlier pre-Ovidian versions—a suicide. Rather, for Sor Juana it is the crucifixion and the Mass, in which Christ's loving self-sacrifice brings about the white flower that is the Eucharistic host.<sup>12</sup>

Sor Juana's borrowing from Greek mythology is still governed by Scripture and Catholic tradition. Underneath the surface of the myth lies a thinly veiled retelling of the Song of Songs.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, as Jonathan Ellis points out, her retelling is rooted in Bernard of Clairvaux's classic sermons on the canticle, which provide her with the framework whereby the beauty of the bride represents her closeness and relationship to Christ, her divine lover.

Sor Juana's identification of Christ with Narcissus is relatively novel, though not unique. The more obvious allegory, well-attested at the time, presents Narcissus as a symbol of fallen humanity, governed by sinful self-love. Still, the idea of Narcissus as an allegory for Christ can be found in a 1650 treatise by the German Jesuit Jacob Masen, as well as in another late-seventeenth-century *auto* attributed to Diego de Nájera y Zegrí.<sup>14</sup> The latter also portrays Echo as a positive image of the church. In this inverted rendition, Narcissus does not reject Echo but marries her, only to be murdered by jealous rivals.

Given their differences and the extent to which the depth, creativity, and symbolic density of Sor Juana's *auto* go well beyond other renditions of the myth, Alexander Parker avers that these works really only underline the

<sup>12</sup> See note 64.

<sup>13</sup> Ellis, "How Is a Narcissistic Christ Possible?," 174.

<sup>14</sup> Parker, "The Calderonian Sources of *El divino Narciso* by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz," 262–63.

originality of Sor Juana's *auto*.<sup>15</sup> For her, the link between Christ and Narcissus is no mere superficial connection. Rather, it allows her to present a vivid theology of the relationship between grace and nature that captures something of the divine emotion of the Song of Songs, the deep and insurmountable bond of love that draws the Son of God into the Incarnation.

### Theological Themes

Now that we see how Sor Juana's work is rooted in Catholic tradition, and having gestured at her uniqueness, it remains to be shown how her blending of Christ and Narcissus is theologically important; that is, how it reveals a Christology and how this Christology grounds the relationship between nature and grace.

In order to illustrate these points, we will look at several key themes that shape the work from within. First, we will consider how Sor Juana relocates the sacramental encounter between Christ and humanity within the context of the New World. Secondly, we will look at her concept of human nature and how it is defined by Christ. Thirdly, in connection with this, we will establish how the ironic character of Narcissus expresses a theological understanding of the relationship between Christ and the world. These points will allow us to recognize the outlines of her theology of nature and grace.

### *The Revelatory Character of the Contextualizing Function of the "Loa to Divine Narcissus"*

*The Divine Narcissus* is preceded by a *loa*, a shorter drama that sets the stage and serves as a back story for the production. Although such introductory *loas* were common in Spanish theater, it was relatively uncommon for them to be so directly related to the main *auto*.<sup>16</sup> Here, however, the *loa* and the *auto* function as a complete set. The former contextualizes the latter by framing it in terms of the evangelization of the New World.

This contextualizing function is vital for *The Divine Narcissus*. By effacing the seemingly clear distinction between text and context, the *loa* proposes that the history of salvation recounted in *The Divine Narcissus* is not a mere past event, but a history that is enacted again within the encounter between Christianity and indigenous, Nahua religion.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Patterson, "Jesuit Neo-Scholasticism and *Criollo* Consciousness in Sor Juana's *El mártir del sacramento, San Hermenegildo*," *Hispania* 96, no. 3 (2013): 461; Rappaport, "Introduction," 17.

<sup>17</sup> Nahuatl was the language of the Nahua peoples who lived in the region of New Spain just prior to the Spanish conquest. These peoples included the Mexica, the then-dominant tribe, who are more commonly spoken of somewhat improperly as the Aztecs.

action of *The Divine Narcissus* belongs to a kind of sacramental time, a temporality which, without being atemporal as such, is able to permeate throughout history and bind together distinct and unrepeatable moments.<sup>18</sup> The romance between Christ-Narcissus and Human Nature, which spans all of time but is enacted once and for all in the historical event of the Incarnation, death, and Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, also happens ever-again in the ongoing spiritual encounters of Christ within the world.

Sor Juana recognizes that if in fact the Gospel validates the meaning of human nature as the unconditional object of divine love, then this validation must extend even to the New World. For Sor Juana, the religious zeal of the indigenous pagans was a genuine though blind and impotent attempt to reach out to the primal love of God.<sup>19</sup> In view of humanity's implicit orientation toward God, divine revelation appears to be the norm of human experience rather than the exception. Accordingly, even pagan myths bear hints of the divine truth: "... even from/pagan pens God/lets flow ideas,/offering glimpses/of his most exalted mysteries."<sup>20</sup>

Sor Juana's affirmation of pagan religion speaks poignantly to her understanding of language. She views indigenous religion through a traditional linguistic framework rooted in particular in Augustine.<sup>21</sup> The ability to speak truth—even when encased within lies—belongs properly to human language as such, and to that extent paganism bears within itself all of the risk and promise of human speech in general. In a sense, language is capable of lying only because it is capable, more primordially, of speaking truth. Truth underlies mythology as the more basic potentiality of human discourse as such. Building upon such a view, it has often been common practice for Christians to validate Greek and Roman mythology or philosophy. Rather than going in an altogether different direction, Sor Juana further draws out the consequences of this linguistic theory by recognizing that the inner orientation of language toward speaking the truth must extend even into the New World.

Her theology thus rests upon a positive belief in the fecundity of human speech to reveal something true about the divine. Nevertheless, it would be too much to claim syncretistically that Sor Juana places all human religions on equal footing.<sup>22</sup> As Robert Folger points out, Sor Juana's use of the

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Jorge Checa, "El divino Narciso y la redención del lenguaje," *Nueva Revista de Filología Hispánica* 38, no. 1 (1990): 212.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>20</sup> de la Cruz, *SW*, 94 (de la Cruz, *DN* 1.1.127–31). See Urbán, "Ontología de la metáfora en *El Divino Narciso* de Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz," 259–60.

<sup>21</sup> Checa, "El divino Narciso y la redención del lenguaje," 198, 208.

<sup>22</sup> See for example Sor Juana's *Devotional Exercises* in de la Cruz, *SW*, 212–13. Cf. Kirk Rappaport, "Christ as Divine Narcissus," 153; Kirk Rappaport, *Sor Juana Inés de la*



Narcissus myth, like the first stage in the evangelization portrayed in the *loa*, is essentially violent.<sup>23</sup> The symbolic function of the myth is achieved at the expense of a dramatic abridgement and restructuring of its key elements. Pagan religion includes authentic “imitations” or “emblems of our holy truth” encased within lies sown by the devil.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, as Miriam Hahn shows, whether or not Sor Juana’s *loa* can be read as a “veiled critique of colonialism,” the way in which she reads Nahua religion through the lens of Greek mythology really only serves to justify Christian evangelization.<sup>25</sup> To be clear, Sor Juana was certainly sympathetic to the indigenous peoples of the New World, but her sympathy must be appreciated according to its proper context and character. Rather than validating indigenous forms of expression on their own terms, Sor Juana sees them as validly expressing truth when viewed through a decidedly Christian lens.

Sor Juana is hardly an innovator in this belief. As early as the second century, theologians such as Clement of Alexandria and Justin Martyr already advertised Christianity as the fulfillment of all human religions and thought systems.<sup>26</sup> Like them, Sor Juana does not imply that all religions point to some extrinsic and decontextualized truth, which properly belongs to no one religion in particular. Rather, Catholicism itself is the truth to which all religions point, and indigenous paganism is thus validated through its relation to this revealed religion.

Key examples of the significance of the New World context within Sor Juana’s thought can be found within her poetry. Sor Juana experiments within numerous liturgical songs at developing a chorus of authentic New World voices. She weaves together diverse styles and forms of speech, including African, Nahua, Latin, and Iberian elements.<sup>27</sup> For example, the African

*Cruz: Religion, Art, and Feminism* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 51–52; Kennett, “The Theology of *The Divine Narcissus*,” 81; Chad M. Gasta, *Imperial Stagings: Empire and Ideology in Transatlantic Theater of Early Modern Spain and the New World* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 203, 219.

<sup>23</sup> Folger, “Narcisos,” 187. See also Julie A. Bokser, “Sor Juana’s *Divine Narcissus*: A New World Rhetoric of Listening,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (2010): 233.

<sup>24</sup> de la Cruz, SW, 73, 79 (*Loa* 2.108, 4.261–62); Checa, “*El divino Narciso* y la redención del lenguaje,” 200.

<sup>25</sup> Miriam Hahn, “‘As If There Were No Damages’: Representing Native American Spirituality in the Dramas of Lope de Vega and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,” *Ecumenica* 8, no. 1 (2015): 10, 12–13.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, 83.

<sup>27</sup> de la Cruz, OC, 2:14–17, 39–42, 71–74, 94–98, 314–16. Two are translated in Juana Inés de la Cruz, *A Sor Juana Anthology* (hereafter *Ant.*), trans. Alan S. Trueblood (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 124–29. See also Bokser, “Sor Juana’s *Divine Narcissus*,” 233.

parts incorporate African themes, African-sounding words, and Spanish words in an African dialect. Likewise, each Nahua part forms a *tocotín*, an indigenous dance, by incorporating Nahuatl words and themes. She combines these African and Nahuatl songs along with pieces in Spanish, Latin, and even Basque into playful *ensaladillas*—"medleys," or more literally, "little salads."<sup>28</sup>

In view of such eclectic borrowing, a central theme begins to emerge. For Sor Juana, the transcendent meaning of different cultures and religions emerges from within the symbol through a hermeneutical process governed by Christian tradition. Sor Juana's hermeneutic is not so violent as to see Christian meaning merely as something imposed from without. Take for example how the *loa* describes an indigenous ritual wherein the "God of the Seeds" is worshipped through edible idols fashioned out of seed and human blood. Sor Juana clearly sees this as a symbol pointing toward the Eucharist. For Sor Juana, this is the case not because she, as the reader, imposes an extrinsic meaning upon the symbol. Rather, this is an intrinsic meaning rooted within the symbol as such. In such a lens, the Eucharistic meaning of this symbol appears not merely as one possibility among others, but rather as the deeper and more proper meaning, which makes its significance within indigenous religion possible in the first place.

For Sor Juana, human desire governs this deeper meaning. Nahua worship displays a clear yearning for a tactile, loving, and personal encounter with the deity.<sup>29</sup> This is because all human language calls out for the sacramental encounter that is realized once and for all in the Eucharist. In other words, we see in Sor Juana a clear human *desiderium naturale* for Christ. It is this intrinsically human desire that imbues human symbols with their Christic meaning. In relation to this, desire also serves the hermeneutical function of unlocking such symbols and decrypting their Christological index.

This vital function highlights the extent to which Sor Juana's hermeneutic of pagan religion cannot be reduced to an exclusively intellectual activity. Nahua religion can become the material of truth precisely because it is imbued with a desire that already points beyond the confines of its own restrictive logic, prior even to the reader's encounter with the symbol. To read such a symbol in Christian light is to uncover the irony whereby the symbol functions by always already having betrayed itself, having overstepped its literal function and given itself away to a deeper, allegorical meaning.

<sup>28</sup> See de la Cruz, *OC*, 2:82; Tavard, *Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Theology of Beauty: The First Mexican Theology*, 43; Kirk Rappaport, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Religion, Art, and Feminism* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 74.

<sup>29</sup> See de la Cruz, *SW*, 80–83 (*Loa* 4.276–79, 321–29, 348–53, 368–73).

At the start of the drama proper, Sor Juana explains the significance of pagan religion in terms of form and matter or soul and body. She introduces two characters: Synagogue, which stands for the truth of the Jewish dispensation, and Paganism (*la Gentilidad*), which provides the medium of the Greek myth of Narcissus.<sup>30</sup> In Sor Juana's words, Paganism contributes the material—mythology—which Synagogue informs “with another soul, another sense.”<sup>31</sup> Paganism makes a real and authentic contribution to the achievement of a higher unity, even though any real progress also necessitates the superposition of a higher form provided by Synagogue. The inner desire of matter is achieved by being taken up into the nobility of form.<sup>32</sup> Within the elevated form-matter unity, the material (Paganism) is not altogether annihilated or subsumed. Rather, like the flesh of the incarnate Word, it realizes its own intrinsic meaning in and through this unity.

In the case of Paganism and Synagogue, this hierarchical form-matter relationship is still subject to an ironic inversion.<sup>33</sup> At one time, the error of Greek paganism stood alongside the truth of Jewish revelation. In light of Christianity, however, the unitary monotheism of Judaism also becomes overly constricting, whereas pagan philosophical categories actually aid in the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. Rather than destabilizing the hierarchical relationship, this inversion points to the sense in which the form-matter unity of Synagogue-Paganism becomes itself the matter to be taken up into the higher form of Christianity. Far from diminishing the meaning of Synagogue and Paganism, for Sor Juana this actually uncovers it. All religions bear real and intrinsic meaning and value, which is retrieved and articulated through the hermeneutical process that *is* Christianity itself.

In this way, the encounter between paganism and Christianity that sets the context and symbolic framework of the *auto* performs a vital linguistic function without being reducible at all to a mere figure of speech. This encounter uncovers from within pagan material the deeper truth about God. At the very same time, it uncovers thereby the deeper meaning about humanity as such. Humanity *is* a hermeneutical event; it is the radical realization of the concrete conditions of divine self-communication within the world. In the end, then, the New World context of *The Divine Narcissus* speaks to something

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 89–95 (de la Cruz, *DN* 1.1.1–155).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 94 (de la Cruz, *DN* 1.1.141–45).

<sup>32</sup> de la Cruz, *OC*, 297 (no. 183). See also Ester Gimbernat de González, “Speaking through the Voice of Love: Interpretation as Emancipation,” in *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz*, ed. Stephanie Merrim (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 170–72.

<sup>33</sup> de la Cruz, *SW*, 92 (de la Cruz, *DN* 1.1.70–78).

cosmic. The play is local in order to be universal; it can be universal only because it recognizes the universal within the local.

***The Beauty and Resplendence of Human Nature***

Sor Juana also describes the unity between Synagogue and Paganism in terms of beauty: the latter clothes the former in order to reveal a beautiful truth. This is more than a mere rhetorical device. For Sor Juana, beauty is integral to the truth, and humanity *is* that beautiful truth that is revealed by this melding of Greek and Hebrew.<sup>34</sup> In this way, Sor Juana's understanding of human religiosity, discussed previously, is nothing more than the flip side of her theological anthropology. This theological anthropology is deployed through the category of beauty, which illuminates the meaning of human nature in relation to the divine Son. Because of this, Sor Juana's Christology will function anthropologically, and her anthropology will be irreducibly Christological.

On first analysis, Sor Juana seems to espouse a strikingly positive impression of humanity. This is, however, not at all to say that she overlooks or minimizes the Fall.<sup>35</sup> In line with tradition, she sees the redemption as reconfirming the basic goodness of human nature. God's free love for humanity is responsive to that goodness created by love itself, a basic goodness that cannot be altogether destroyed by sin. Patristic theologians typically expressed this idea by differentiating the image of God from the likeness of God. The image is irrevocably part of who we are as humans, and thus cannot be destroyed. The likeness, on the other hand, was lost due to sin and needs to be progressively recovered through the process of divinization or deification. Human intelligence traditionally constituted a significant aspect of this image and likeness, but it also pointed to other distinctive aspects such as the freedom and incomprehensibility of the human person.<sup>36</sup> Building upon this traditional platform, Sor Juana sees likeness to God as a kind of grace-given ontological beauty that reflects the person's intimate, loving, and sanctifying relationship with Jesus Christ.<sup>37</sup>

This idea of the loss and recovery of a divine likeness runs underneath the *auto's* retelling of the story of the Fall through the mouth of the satanic Echo.<sup>38</sup> Reiterating well-established scholastic themes, Sor Juana's Echo

<sup>34</sup> de la Cruz, *Ant.*, 188.

<sup>35</sup> See for example de la Cruz, *SW*, 98 (de la Cruz, *DN*, 1.2.241-44).

<sup>36</sup> See Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 314.

<sup>37</sup> Ellis, "How Is a Narcissistic Christ Possible?," 174. Sor Juana also includes the intellectual meaning of the image. See de la Cruz, *OC*, 2:6-14 (nos. 219-23).

<sup>38</sup> de la Cruz, *SW*, 104-106 (de la Cruz, *DN* 1.3.417-32, 439-41, 500-06). Cf. de la Cruz, *Ant.*, 181-82.

explains the rift between Human Nature and Christ-Narcissus: the offense, made infinite by the infinite dignity of the God who has been offended, cannot be overcome by any finite means. Now that the beauty of Christ is cut off from his reflection in Human Nature, humanity suffers profoundly from its inability to gaze directly into the face of Narcissus unless this reflection is restored by grace.

This rupture between Christ and his reflection in humanity parallels a linguistic rupture that threatens the very meaning of Human Nature. Viewed in conjunction with the event of Babel, the Fall is simultaneously the decline of language, and the destabilization of the relationship between sign and signified. It gives birth to idolatry through what Jorge Checa calls “The ‘reification’ or ‘fetishization’ of the sign, a state in which ‘the reference to a prior *logos*’ is blocked off.”<sup>39</sup> To the extent to which the image of Christ in human nature has been obscured by sin, this has put into question the ability of human language to signify the underlying truth about God and the world. Inasmuch as humanity is of its very nature the reflection of this truth, humanity itself has been put into question. Just as Grace comes to the rescue with regard to Human Nature, the linguistic strategy of allegory functions analogously by uncovering underlying figural connections despite the sinful dominance of other, distancing attempts to control language.

There is one thing, however, for which the devil’s scheming cannot fully account: the *beauty* of Human Nature. “She is too much like him,” she moans. Having been made in the image of Christ, Human Nature is as if were bound to him by the gaze: “For the likeness has such power that there is no one who does not desire it.”<sup>40</sup> The goal of the devil, therefore, is to prevent this gaze, to keep Christ from looking upon his own image in Human Nature, lest the love of Christ overcome the chasm of sin. In this way, sin, as a moral category, is also every bit as much an aesthetic-ontological category. Sin functions to obscure the visage, to blur the likeness. Fundamentally, sin cannot destroy the beauty, the goodness of Human Nature; it can only disguise and distort it.<sup>41</sup>

Following in the vein of John Duns Scotus and Francisco Suárez, Sor Juana believes that the Fall alone cannot sufficiently account for the gift of the Incarnation. God’s salvific work is not reducible to a mere remedial response

<sup>39</sup> Checa, “*El divino Narciso y la redención del lenguaje*,” 202–03. He quotes John Freccero, “The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Patrarach’s Poetics,” in *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, eds. Patricia A. Parker and David Quint (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 27.

<sup>40</sup> de la Cruz, *SW*, 105 (*DN* 1.3.455–66).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 98 (de la Cruz, *DN* 1.2.215–18, 232–40).

to sin. Rather, the Incarnation was motivated by divine love prior to and beyond human sin. Perhaps inspired by Suárez's claim that Mary's motherhood was always part of the divine plan, Sor Juana even argues that the beauty of the Virgin Mary provided sufficient warrant for the Incarnation beforehand.<sup>42</sup>

Infused with the scholastic vision of the prior unity of being, beauty, truth, and goodness, Sor Juana recognizes beauty as a thoroughly ontological concept.<sup>43</sup> The beauty of Human Nature is neither skin deep nor in the eye of the beholder but rather in the essence of its maker. Following Augustine, beauty consists of the proportional and harmonious ordering of parts toward a greater whole, which is summed up in Christ.<sup>44</sup> Thus, Michelle Gonzalez summarizes, beauty is intrinsically relational.<sup>45</sup> It is a participatory reflection of the divine resplendence of Christ, whose beauty draws in all created beings as the very center of their existence; "his magnetic charm" draws in both persons and inanimate objects alike: "rocks and woodlands and fields as well."<sup>46</sup>

In this way, Christ himself is the light of truth that shines forth within all genuine beauty. Christ-Narcissus is the original source of all beauty and the nexus at which worldly beauty comes to recognize its own divine origin.<sup>47</sup> For Sor Juana, the vibrant relationship between Creator and creation is expressible in terms of reflection, mirroring. This in no way makes creatures out to be divine. At the same time—echoing many prior voices within Christian tradition, broadly conceived—the human search for Christ is at one and the same time a search for the beauty in creation and in oneself.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 63–64; de la Cruz, *OC*, 2:221–22 (no. 358); Tavad, *Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Theology of Beauty: The First Mexican Theology*, 1189–1219; Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, 79–80. Cf. Kennett, "The Theology of *The Divine Narcissus*," 76. On Scotus and Suárez, see Sarah Jane Boss, "Union with God: The Mother of God as the Sign of Creation's Destiny," *Maria: A Journal of Marian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2001): 61–62, 66.

<sup>43</sup> See Tavad, *Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Theology of Beauty: The First Mexican Theology*, 189–90.

<sup>44</sup> de la Cruz, *OC*, 3:463, 468–70; de la Cruz, *Ant.*, 82–85. See Augustine, *De ordine* and *De musica*; Tavad, *Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Theology of Beauty: The First Mexican Theology*, 186. Augustine, *De musica*, *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 102, ed. Martin Jacobsson (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2017). *De ordine*: Augustine, *Contra academicos libri tres, De beata vita liber unus, De ordine libri duo*, *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 63, ed. Pius Knoll (Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1922).

<sup>45</sup> Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, 59.

<sup>46</sup> de la Cruz, *SW*, 97 (de la Cruz, *DN* 1.2.197–98); see also 93 (de la Cruz, *DN* 1.1.108–11).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 166 (de la Cruz, *DN* 5.16.2054–98). See Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, 75.

This points to the central insight of *The Divine Narcissus*: the real meaning of human nature is only really perceptible in light of grace. Grace alone enables nature to fulfill its proper function of reflecting the perfect image of Christ.<sup>48</sup>

In view of these points, although Sor Juana holds a relatively positive understanding of human nature, she is not optimistic in the sense of relying on the merits of mere human nature considered apart from its relationship with Christ. Rather, her optimism, as it were, centers entirely upon grace and divine love.<sup>49</sup> The perduring goodness of humanity that remains despite sin persists only in view of humanity's intrinsic orientation toward and openness to Christ.

By thus translating the drama of salvation into the aesthetic language of image and beauty, Sor Juana draws out the significance of the form of Christian truth and highlights human nature as the site wherein the event of truth really happens once and for all. The function of humanity itself is revelatory; human nature is a kind of sacrament that makes present the very image of the Son of God in the world. Sin attempts to interrupt this function by obscuring the outward image, but the freedom of grace effects the true sacramental resplendence of human nature.

Finally, in the sacrament of the Eucharist, which embodies the Incarnation, death, and Resurrection of Christ, we encounter the very culmination of the sacramental meaning of humanity as such.

### *Christ-Narcissus as the Template for Nature and Grace*

Sor Juana's anthropology is thus deeply Christocentric. Within Sor Juana's drama, the ironic character of Christ-Narcissus defines the profound relationship between Christ and humanity or God and the world.

This point is well illuminated via what Stephanie Merrim refers to as the "verbal narcissism" of the text.<sup>50</sup> Rather than using the character of Narcissus in order to focus on moral or psychological narcissism, Sor Juana abstracts the self-reflexive pattern of narcissism into a literary-allegorical superstructure. Narcissus and Echo represent two related figurative devices: allegorical reflection and degraded dissimilative repetition, respectively. Merrim explains, "Whereas allegory—the *Divino* Narciso—functions by

<sup>48</sup> de la Cruz, *SW*, 123–27 (de la Cruz, *DN* 3.7.1105–12, 1133–48, 1214–17).

<sup>49</sup> What Sarah Boss says about Suárez seems also to hold true for Sor Juana: his "optimism about the human condition corresponds to his high Mariology." Boss, "Union with God," 66.

<sup>50</sup> Stephanie Merrim, "Narciso *desdoblado*: Narcissistic Strategems in *El Divino Narciso* and the *Respuesta a sor Filotea de la Cruz*," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 64, no. 2 (1987): 112.

similitude and mirroring, its reprobate double—Eco/Narciso—signifies through dissimulations and strategies, the Babelic freeplay of language ..."<sup>51</sup> Echo's voice functions catachrestically, that is, through the improper or ironic use of a word or sign to signify something outside of its proper scope of meaning.

Echo is thus a kind of hollow, false reduplication of Christ. As the true narcissist of the story, she embodies a figuration that both reduplicates and corrupts or inverts the original. Echo's angelic beauty is distorted by her own inward reverberations. Her orientation toward the divine other curves back in on itself, such that she and her companion characters Pride and Self-Love form a kind of "counter-Trinity."<sup>52</sup> Because of this, she strives through dissimulation to misdirect Christ-Narcissus to lead him away from Human Nature.

Despite her intentions, however, her echoes ultimately serve to proclaim the truth about Christ's love. In perhaps the cleverest scene of the work, Narcissus muses upon falling in love with Human Nature, and Echo unwillingly repeats his words with an ironic twist. Narcissus begins: "For the one who was immortal ..." Echo and Narcissus echo back: "love thus made mortal." Later, Narcissus muses on "my divine nature, which is impassible?" and Echo replies: "passible," resonating with the Incarnation. In this way, even the babbling echo of sin cannot help but proclaim the paradoxical truth of divine love.<sup>53</sup>

In contrast to Echo's catachrestic speech, Narcissus' allegorical reflection represents a divine strategy that is intrinsic to Christ's very identity. As the one who perfectly mirrors the divine Father, he reflects this image into the world, which, in turn, reflects it back unto him. This is no mere figure of speech. What poetry attempts linguistically is accomplished ontologically in the aesthetic relationship between Christ and creation.<sup>54</sup> In contrast to Echo's sinful Self-Love, Narcissus seeks his own image precisely by seeking it within the *other* of creation. Divine reflection is a kind of discourse that is oriented toward the other at its very core. Julie Bokser sees this receptivity as a kind of divine "rhetoric of listening" grounded in love, "a listening that receives souls as part of, yet apart from, the self."<sup>55</sup>

Christ's invocation of the world elicits a response: it calls for humanity to mirror his own divine reflection by rediscovering its own beauty in

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 114. See also Stephanie Merrim, "Mores Geometricae: The 'Womanscript' in the Theater of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz," in *Feminist Perspectives on Sor Juana*, 112-16.

<sup>52</sup> Merrim, "Narciso *desdoblado*," 113; Parker, "The Calderonian Sources of *El divino Narciso* by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz," 269.

<sup>53</sup> de la Cruz, *SW*, 141-51 (de la Cruz, *DN* 4.12); see also 154 (de la Cruz, *DN* 4.13.1781-85).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 166 (de la Cruz, *DN* 5.16.2111-14).

<sup>55</sup> Bokser, "Sor Juana's *Divine Narcissus*," 243.



humanity's inward index toward the divine *Other*, who is Christ-Narcissus. Reflection is thus the pattern of both divine revelation and the drama of salvation. In particular, human beings reflect the more primordial initiative of Christ's love by loving the *other*, the image of Christ within the neighbor.<sup>56</sup>

Importantly, by thus patterning the relationship between Christ and humanity in terms of reflection, Sor Juana is able to link the immanent reality of God to God's economic love for creation in a way that radicalizes divine mercy without ontologically binding God to the world. The Incarnation represents an absurd interchange, a paradox so beautiful that it must be true. Christ's passionate love even to death approaches us so powerfully that it is *as if* Christ is overcome, subdued, and washed away by the torrent of this love. The "as if" here is vital. Christ "(if one may say so)/was consumed, tenderly, melting in the sweet fire of love."<sup>57</sup> Sor Juana's language is reminiscent of Gertrude of Helfta, who writes, "Love, I say, imperious love, which does not wait for judgment and dispenses with all reason, has, as it were, my most sweet Lord—if I may dare speak thus—has inebriated you even to madness, in that you should join yourself with one so unlike you."<sup>58</sup> Christ's love is thus imaged as a powerful, almost erotic attraction for humanity. For Sor Juana, this attraction is intimately linked to the idea of beauty, inasmuch as it is fueled by the power of divine beauty reflected in the human person.<sup>59</sup>

Despite these strong claims, both Gertrude and Sor Juana fully recognize and accept that God is immutable and impassible: incapable of changing, suffering, or being overcome. And yet, this mystery seems to stand in tension with their experience of a Christ who is so enamored as to seem overcome or "wounded by love," as Song of Songs 2:5 says in the Septuagint and some early Latin versions.<sup>60</sup> In view of this experience, Christ's emotional attraction can only really be depicted as more vivid and intense because it is not rooted in any temporary or fleeting fancy. If humans can be swept away by imperfect love, the perfect love of God realizes this all the more perfectly without infringing upon God's divine nature or implying that the Creator stands in need of creation. For Sor Juana, the fact that Christ does

<sup>56</sup> See her *Devotional Exercises* and *Athenagoric Letter*: de la Cruz, *SW*, 191–92, 233–34, 237, 239.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 166–67 (de la Cruz, *DN* 5.16.2132–34); cf. 131, 151 (de la Cruz, *DN* 3.8.1316–25; 4.12.1700).

<sup>58</sup> Gertrude of Helfta, *The Herald of Divine Love*, trans. Margaret Winkworth (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 106 (2.8.3) modified slightly. Cf. Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist, 1980), 325.

<sup>59</sup> Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, 80.

<sup>60</sup> de la Cruz, *SW*, 133, 145 (de la Cruz, *DN* 4.9.1377,79; 4.12.1604–09). Cf. John 19:28.

not need our love does not decrease divine amour but demonstrates it more powerfully.<sup>61</sup>

The operative category here is grace. Sor Juana echoes a conviction that divine love cannot be merited precisely because, as grace, it must be received as a pure and unrequited gift.<sup>62</sup> Grace is freedom in the truest sense. Love forges a relationship of absolute freedom, and in freedom alone Christ subjects himself to torture and death for the sake of love. Pure love has no reason, seeks no reward, follows no rules, except for its own higher logic beyond all logic, which follows the pattern of divine beauty. Christ thus freely wills the beautiful for beauty's own sake, and to do so is at one and the same time to condescend for us and to reaffirm his very own beauty and goodness. In the freedom of grace, the unfitting and undignified self-subjection of the Son of God becomes paradoxically most befitting for his greater dignity.

Satan-Echo seems triumphant in the crucifixion because Christ's absence from the vision of Human Nature will cause humanity to forget him.<sup>63</sup> To prevent this, Christ makes provision for the beautiful witness of his death to remain visible forever. At his death he leaves behind a white lily. Inspired by Bernard of Clairvaux, Sor Juana sees the lily as a symbol of Christ, and of Mary too inasmuch as she is a reflection of Christ. At the same time, this flower is the Eucharist, "a reminder and a sign/in memory of his death/as a pledge of his affection."<sup>64</sup> The sacramental order flows naturally out of the death of Christ in order to make present the beauty and love of Christ. For Sor Juana, who argues elsewhere that the death of Christ is the greatest display of divine love, there is a fundamental thematic overlap between the Eucharistic host and the crucified body of Christ.<sup>65</sup> The Eucharist is the presence of Christ's death, and as such it is that very image of divine love made present for all times. Love is made sacramentally present for all times because love itself is constitutive of the relationship between Christ and Human Nature.

### Sor Juana's Theology of Nature and Grace

As we have seen, *The Divine Narcissus* illustrates a comprehensive theology of grace and human nature that runs underneath her ideas. As Tavad

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 141 (de la Cruz, *DN* 4.12.1538–39); 239 (de la Cruz, *The Athenagoric Letter*).

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 123–24 (de la Cruz, *DN* 3.7.1104–1112). See also de la Cruz, *Ant.*, 188.

<sup>63</sup> de la Cruz, *SW*, 154 (de la Cruz, *DN* 5.13.1786–96).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 167 (de la Cruz, *DN* 5.16.2139–54); de la Cruz, *OC*, 2:211 (no. 349); Ellis, "How Is a Narcissistic Christ Possible?" 177–79. See also de la Cruz, *OC*, 213–14 (no. 351).

<sup>65</sup> de la Cruz, *SW*, 224–25, 237–39; de la Cruz, *OC*, 2:207–08. See also Patterson, "Jesuit Neo-Scholasticism and *Criollo* Consciousness in Sor Juana's *El mártir del sacramento, San Hermenegildo*," 463.

points out, although inspired by traditional sources such as Augustine, Sor Juana's thought is pioneering for the way in which her theological and discursive methodology is dramatically centered upon the concept of beauty.<sup>66</sup> With this in view, perhaps the *auto's* greatest accomplishment lies in its use of the concept of beauty in order to preserve the traditional, dynamic relationship between nature and grace. Nature, created so that it might in grace reflect the beauty of the divine Word, is defined by this life-giving relationship.

This is all the more significant for the fact that Sor Juana forges this theology of nature and grace during a pivotal period when even in Spain the theological understanding of this relationship is being dramatically reconfigured through the ongoing influence of important theologians such as Domingo Bañez (1528–1604) and Francisco Suárez (1548–1617). Suárez builds his understanding of humanity upon the axiomatic belief that nature must be fully comprehensible on its own, apart from the gift of divine grace. Henri de Lubac famously argued that this marks a significant departure from early treatments that, though varied, saw the meaning of humanity as mysteriously revealed by the relationship of grace. According to de Lubac, by forging a logical—if not also real—distinction between humanity in the state of grace and a “pure nature” prior to the reception of grace, Suárez inadvertently gives rise to a theological imagination founded on the assumption of a basic incongruity between the natural and the supernatural. Humanity must be first and foremost understood without reference to God. Accordingly, in relation to this would-be pure state, the gift of grace appears as a kind of alien superimposition—something perhaps not outright opposed to human nature, but still at least initially incompatible.

We cannot here provide an adequate treatment of the history and complexity of this development. Nevertheless, it is vital to understand that the separation between nature and grace was intended, at its face, to uphold the dignity of human nature and the gratuity of divine grace. To say that God created nature such that it would require the aid of grace easily seems to imply that nature as such is broken and that God, by issuing such broken merchandise in bad faith, owes the grace to his creatures as though by a kind of implied warranty. If human nature is a purely passive, utterly dependent recipient of divine grace, then neither is nature truly human nor grace truly free.

Reading Sor Juana against this backdrop allows us to better appreciate her theological perspective. Of course, it would be simplistic and opportunistic to claim that she directly replies to Suárez, especially considering the extent to

<sup>66</sup> Tavad, *Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Theology of Beauty: The First Mexican Theology*, 196.

which his Mariology closely resembles her own.<sup>67</sup> The significance of Sor Juana's theology of nature and grace lies not in any rejection of then-contemporary trends, but rather in the way in which it recovers older traditions, especially those of Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux. By weaving these together in an inventive poetic style, Sor Juana preserves a positive view of the relationship between grace and nature. This ultimately serves to empower women and recover the voice of the lowly.

***The Immaculate Conception, Grace, and the Feminine***

Sor Juana demonstrates the theological relationship between nature and grace especially through the interplay of feminine symbols. Although she does not elevate femininity at the expense of masculinity, woman's innate fecundity for symbolizing humanity as such serves to recover the positive meaning of human nature and womanhood at one and the same time.

It is no surprise that modern readers often approach Sor Juana's corpus asking how her feminine perspective highlights the spiritual roles and dignity of women today. They have given intense—perhaps even excessive—attention to Sor Juana's decisions regarding the genders of characters such as Narcissus, Echo, and Human Nature.<sup>68</sup> For the most part, these decisions can easily be seen largely as a product of Sor Juana's cultural context and traditional Christian symbolism. Not only was it grammatically standard to represent Human Nature as feminine, but it also followed a long tradition among both men and women, who saw femininity as a privileged symbol for humanity as a whole.<sup>69</sup> More than anything else, Sor Juana's decision here demonstrates her reliance upon the Song of Songs and the sermons of Bernard of Clairvaux.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Sor Juana's negative portrayal of the feminine Echo may be striking, but such negative feminine symbolism also appears, for example, in the Old Testament's oft-repeated image of Israel as the unfaithful bride.

Sor Juana's more interesting and easily overlooked decision pertains to the character of Grace. Grace is important here not merely for being feminine, but also for moving Sor Juana's feminine Human Nature beyond a mere, stereotyped passivity. Grace herself is both passive gift and active giver. The gift of Grace defines the relationship between Human Nature and Christ-Narcissus,

<sup>67</sup> See note 73.

<sup>68</sup> See Judith A. Kirkpatrick, "The Word and the Woman: Creative Echoing in Sor Juana's *El divino Narciso*," *Hispanófila* 122 (1998): 57–58; Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, 107–08.

<sup>69</sup> See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 261–69, 287.

<sup>70</sup> Ellis, "How Is a Narcissistic Christ Possible?," 179.

allowing the former to become—in the words of Michelle Gonzalez—“an active agent in her own redemption.”<sup>71</sup>

Guided by Grace, Human Nature embodies a sort of active-passivity, an open and ardent receptivity toward the divine Other. Irreducible to a mere tool of self-gratification, she represents a genuine partner for Christ-Narcissus within a relationship of mutual fulfilment. It is not so much that Human Nature oscillates between states of subjectivity and receptivity, but rather that the sacramental economy subverts the active-passive distinction. The Eucharist represents this well, inasmuch as it is a divine gift that relies on human involvement and human symbols in order to make present a higher reality. Human action cannot demand transubstantiation, and yet the gift depends upon the material contribution of human efforts in order to imbue them with a higher form. Recalling Merrim’s category of “verbal narcissism,” the reflective relationships that Sor Juana draws between Narcissus and Human Nature, Synagogue and Paganism, and seeking and receptivity all serve to illuminate this dynamic interplay between activity and passivity, grace and nature.<sup>72</sup>

Sor Juana’s firm devotion to the Immaculate Conception makes this key point particularly clear. She sees the Virgin Mary as the pinnacle and quintessence of the sacramental relationship. Even though Mary’s special preservation from sin is entirely a gift of divine grace, Sor Juana still sees it at one and the same time as bound up with Mary’s free and active consent to the Incarnation of God’s Son in her womb. She seems here to have in mind something like the view of Suárez, for whom the motherhood of Mary must involve more than a mere instrumental causality.<sup>73</sup> Depicting Mary as the pinnacle of intellectual development, Sor Juana imagines her as a rational, intellectual collaborator in Christ’s perfect plan.<sup>74</sup>

*The Divine Narcissus* describes Mary’s role principally in terms of reflection. She is the pure water in which Christ-Narcissus discovers his own perfect image. The grace of the Immaculate Conception enables Mary to

<sup>71</sup> Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, 69, 77.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Kennett, “The Theology of *The Divine Narcissus*,” 72.

<sup>73</sup> de la Cruz, *SW*, 124–27 (de la Cruz, *DN* 3.7); de la Cruz, *OC*, 2:209–10, 214–15; Boss, “Union with God,” 62–64. Fernando Suárez, *Commentariorum ac disputationum in tertium partem Divi Tomae (n.p., 1614)*, II, disp. 1, sec. 1, 3. See Tavard, *Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Theology of Beauty: The First Mexican Theology*, 67–68; Paz, *Sor Juana, or, The Traps of Faith*, 461–62. 3. For a brief overview of Suárez’s theology of grace, see Ramón Kuri Camacho, “Francisco Suárez, teólogo y filósofo de la imaginación y la libertad,” *Revista de Filosofía* 58, no. 1 (2008): 79–101.

<sup>74</sup> Cortés-Vélez, “Marian Devotion and Religious Paradox in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,” 183–97; de la Cruz, *OC*, 2:6–14.

reflect her Son most perfectly.<sup>75</sup> To this extent, she also represents the perfection of Human Nature as the *imago Christi*. For Christ to gaze at his mother is for him to discover in her the true beauty of humanity perfected by the light of divine grace, a beauty that perfectly reflects his own divine splendor.

Elsewhere, Sor Juana brilliantly expands this reflective analogy in a song meditating on the verse "I am black and beautiful" (Song 1:5).<sup>76</sup> Charred blackness, far from denoting sin or ugliness, is an emblem of Mary's relationship to Christ the divine sun. The harsh light of grace shining upon her from the moment of her conception has burned that pure image deeper into her very being. This solar enrichment allows her to perfectly reflect Christ's beauty. Mary's reflective quality is truly a gift of divine grace, and yet it is one that Mary herself freely and actively engages by her own humility: "the more she humbled herself,/confessing herself a slave,/the more she revealed the Master/who had purchased her freedom,/and so was free of any other."<sup>77</sup> Grace grounds true freedom, a profound relationship wherein Mary's reception of grace empowers her to become a free and active cooperater in the mystery of salvation. Mary reflects Christ not like a mere static photograph. Rather, she is a kind of living picture who embodies the very movements of salvation: the self-opening and active reception of the Son of God into human life.

There is a tendency among some commentators to see Echo in a similar vein as a symbol of autonomy, the self-liberating woman who manages to recover her ability to speak despite suppression by a hegemonic, patriarchal authority. Connecting this image to Sor Juana's own silencing by ecclesiastical authorities, these commentators paint Echo as a kind of Promethean figure, whose association with the devil would accord more with patriarchal expectations than with Sor Juana's own theological motives.<sup>78</sup> Such an inverted,

<sup>75</sup> de la Cruz, *SW*, 125–26, 134–35 (de la Cruz, *DN* 3.7.1133–48, 4.10.1410–12); Parker, "The Calderonian Sources of *El divino Narciso* by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz," 270; Tavad, *Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Theology of Beauty: The First Mexican Theology*, 121. See also de la Cruz, *OC*, 2:99–110, 211–12; Ellis, "How Is a Narcissistic Christ Possible?," 177–79. She also links the Immaculate Conception with water in other works, such as de la Cruz, *SW*, 177; de la Cruz, *OC*, 2:105. The water also points to baptism and the crucifixion. Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, 79; Checa, "*El divino Narciso* y la redención del lenguaje," 209.

<sup>76</sup> de la Cruz, *Ant.*, 132–35. She revisits this theme in de la Cruz, *SW*, 121 (de la Cruz, *DN* 2.6.1037–40). Interestingly, Sor Juana also points to this beautiful blackness in an earlier *villancico*, where an African voice praises Mary as "*una Nenglita beya*," a beautiful black girl. de la Cruz, *OC*, 2:315; cf. 16.

<sup>77</sup> de la Cruz, *SW*, 47–48; de la Cruz, *OC*, 2:10–12. See also Cortés-Vélez, "Marian Devotion and Religious Paradox in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz," 197; de la Cruz, *SW*, 121, 181.

<sup>78</sup> See Margo Glantz, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Hagiografía o autobiografía?* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1995), 105; Kennett, "The Theology of *The Divine Narcissus*," 70–71;

Gnostic reading of the text makes little sense, however; for as Folger notes, “No nineteenth century reading could interpret this as the appropriation of women’s authority.”<sup>79</sup> At the very least, Sor Juana makes no attempt to present Echo as a sympathetic character.

On the contrary, read in contrast with Human Nature, the autonomous agency of Echo is shown to be a mere pretense. Echo appears to be supremely active in her plan to sabotage the lovers’ reunion, but in the process, she reveals herself to be a mere passive imitator, frozen within a mimetic fixation that causes her to be nothing more than a babbling repetition of Christ’s more primordial activity. She is entrapped by her hatred. Echo despises Human Nature *in response to Christ’s love because Christ loves her*. Her actions thus turn out to be ineffectual because they lack genuine agency rooted in the free originality of grace. Far from a “creative echoing,” her attempts to express herself end up expressing the truth of the Incarnation instead. In the end, in face of the Eucharist, all of Echo’s threats turn out to be mere chatter; the beauty of Christ’s love leaves her in mute silence.<sup>80</sup>

### ***Salvation as the Recovery of a Voice***

We are now in a position to recognize how Sor Juana’s Christology leads to a recovery of the voice of the lowly. Certainly, Sor Juana’s audacity in the face of societal conventions recovers a theological voice from a woman’s perspective. Theologically, however, her work really goes beyond this. “The voiceless,” writes Michelle Gonzalez, “whether they are women, the Indigenous, or Africans, are given a voice through Sor Juana’s literature.”<sup>81</sup> In effect, Sor Juana paints salvation itself as the recovery of a voice. Her expansive understanding of human dignity, with its positive estimation of marginalized peoples, rests upon the sense in which the beauty of grace draws forth an authentically human proclamation of the truth.

To begin with, the voice that sings this entire drama—from the voice of Music that opens the play at the beginning to the voices that break out into the *Pange lingua* at the very end—is decidedly human. Both the *loa* and the *auto* begin and end with song erupting forth from all of the characters. The revelation of divine mysteries through allegory only prompts them all

Kirkpatrick, “The Word and the Woman,” 65; Sarah Finley, “Embodied Sound and Female Voice in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz’s Canon: *Romance 8* and *El divino Narciso*,” *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 50, no. 1 (2016): 209; Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, 78, 103–04. Cf. Merrim, “Narciso desdoblado,” 114; *Early Modern*, 191–94.

<sup>79</sup> Kirkpatrick, “The Word and the Woman,” 60–66; Folger, “Narcisos,” 190.

<sup>80</sup> de la Cruz, SW, 169 (de la Cruz, DN 5.16.2196–98). Cf. Kirkpatrick, 62. See also Checa, “*El divino Narciso* y la redención del lenguaje,” 218.

<sup>81</sup> Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, 92.

the more to break out into song.<sup>82</sup> In this way, the romance between Christ and creature elicits an active response on the part of humanity, a response that can only really be expressed in terms of beauty. The proper function of Human Nature is to reflect, to proclaim, to resonate with the song of Grace.

It is not incidental that Sor Juana's indigenous and pre-Christian characters join in the song. The very humanity of the indigenous peoples was put into question by the conquest; it silenced the songs of the Nahua. In response, the narrative of salvation restores their dignity precisely by restoring to them a voice. With it, they do not sing just any song, nor is their voice allocated to some distinct and separate aesthetic sphere; rather, the voice of those who were denied a voice resurges precisely within one and the same song that proclaims the love between Christ and Human Nature.

At first glance, this claim would seem to be nullified by Miriam Hahn's intelligent and biting critique of Sor Juana's linguistic colonialism.<sup>83</sup> In fact, Sor Juana's advocacy for indigenous voices must be put in proper perspective in view of her theological anthropology. For Sor Juana, the voice of the indigenous is recoverable precisely in and as the voice of humanity as such; that is, as the voice of a deeper human identity that stands underneath and grounds all cultural expressions. One way or another, for Sor Juana this deeper identity is unmistakably Christian. To this extent, Hahn is not wrong when she argues that Sor Juana's approach denies indigenous voices the ability to speak solely on their own terms. For Sor Juana, an indigenous voice is recoverable to the extent to which it is compatible with a Christian way of speaking.

Hahn recognizes that this "verbal colonization" is not an intentional act of linguistic violence on Sor Juana's part, but stems rather from her basically Christian and premodern worldview, which is firmly grounded in the idea of universal truth.<sup>84</sup> From Sor Juana's own viewpoint, this apparent silencing of the purely indigenous tongue actually serves the purpose of opening up a deeper, more authentic kind of voice. It calls forth the voice of praise, which goes hand in hand with a reverent silence in the face of a marvelous beauty that transcends mere words.<sup>85</sup> Because reverent silence does not arise out of a lack of meaning, it is truly a productive speaking that, by its silence, proclaims the extent of that which cannot be put into words.<sup>86</sup> If Nahuatl is

<sup>82</sup> de la Cruz, *SW*, 88 (*Loa* 5.495–96).

<sup>83</sup> Hahn, "'As If There Were No Damages': Representing Native American Spirituality in the Dramas of Lope de Vega and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz," 10, 12–13.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, 17.

<sup>85</sup> See the *Devotional Exercises*: de la Cruz, *SW*, 183–86.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 255 (*Response*). See also Julie A. Bokser, "Sor Juana's Rhetoric of Silence," *Rhetoric Review* 25, no. 1 (2006): 5–21.



left dumb in the face of the awe-inspiring mystery, this is no less the case with Spanish, Greek, or Latin.

In other words, for Sor Juana the authentic voice of the lowly is not grounded upon competition. She does not push a strong indigenous versus Spanish agenda any more than she forms a female versus male dialectic. Thus, in her advocacy for women, rather than forming a distinctive and exclusive space for women's voices as opposed to men's, she seeks instead to show how the voice of truth is already present and active within women's intellect. As Gonzalez puts it, "Sor Juana was not critical of masculine discourse; she was critical of her exclusion from it."<sup>87</sup> In this sense, the brilliance of the voices of women or indigenous or African persons lies not in their ability to speak a separate, disparate truth, but rather in their ability to speak one and the same timeless truth in a distinct and uniquely beautiful way. Such beauty, moreover, can never be a mere incidental wrapper or rhetorical device for delivering this truth because that very beauty is integral to the truth itself.

Similarly, Sor Juana's defense of her own voice as a woman is striking because unlike Teresa of Avila, whom she saw as a model for her intellectual life, Sor Juana makes no appeal to mystical experience to legitimize her writings.<sup>88</sup> In short, she does not defend herself on the basis of any special knowledge or exclusive perspective that would set her above her interlocutors. Her voice is not authorized by her own particular merits, but rather stems from a basic human capacity for intelligence that is actualized by the gift of grace. Thus, instead of arguing that all women are equally intelligent, she points out with a kind of Socratic wit that all men and women are equally foolish.<sup>89</sup> This move is vital. To do otherwise, to legitimate women's voice with respect to men's, would be to assume that some stereotypical male intelligence sets the standard by which women's intelligence is to be judged. For Sor Juana, the real standard of intelligence is beyond sex. There is a deeper truth of grace that all humans must approach with reverent silence.<sup>90</sup>

In the same way, for Sor Juana the legitimacy of the voice of indigenous persons is not constructed by competition. Violence and political domination cannot award a voice any more than they can definitively silence one. Thus, the voice of the conquered is not meaningful over and against the conquerors. Rather, it is intrinsically meaningful because it bears a direct and real relationship to divine truth, which is uncovered by the light of grace. Grace empowers

<sup>87</sup> Gonzalez, *Sor Juana*, 95.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>89</sup> de la Cruz, *SW*, 277 (*Response*).

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 278 (*Response*).

genuine speech, and yet at one and the same time this speaking is authentically the voice of the lowly echoing forth out of a basic Christological index that belongs to human nature as such.

For Sor Juana, the Christianization of indigenous speech does not demand that it abandon its own unique identity, even if it ceases to be constitutively pagan. Rather, it is the process of indigenous culture learning to speak itself anew. It is the continual discovery of a kind of speaking that uncovers something deeper and truer about the humanity of the indigenous peoples, until Christianity appears not as an external imposition from without, but rather as the genuine realization of an internal and authentically human inheritance.

### **Conclusion: Sanctification as Learning to Sing**

Coming around full circle, we can see how Sor Juana's theological ideas form a coherent theology of nature and grace in view of divine beauty. Beauty crosses the insurmountable divide between the absolute being of God and the contingent being of creation, inasmuch as the basic and noble purpose of the created world is to reflect the beauty of God. Humanity has a primal aesthetic function, prior even to sin, which already transcends the natural world by pointing to a God that stands above and beyond it. In this sense, the world is intrinsically directed beyond itself. In relation to this, the grace of Christ appears not as a mere external imposition but rather as something that freely and gratuitously completes and perfects nature as from within.

Thinking of beauty more in terms of reflection allows Sor Juana to conceive of a participatory relationship between God and human beings that is not threatened by either distance or proximity. To reflect the fullness of divine beauty does not degrade divinity's transcendence. The loveliness of the spotless Virgin Mary does not compromise the unique beauty of her Son, but rather confirms it. Likewise, the fact that beauty belongs first and foremost to Christ does not degrade the aesthetic function of the creature. There is a sense in which the reflection of beauty is itself part of the image and integral to the dynamic of beauty that is the relationship between God and the world. Hence, Mary herself functions "to make beauty beautiful."<sup>91</sup> A reflection or copy adds something unquantifiable even to the perfection of the original.

It is precisely in this sense that Sor Juana's theology of nature and grace restores the voice of the lowly. To be granted such a voice is not a gift for its own sake, but rather for entering into the chorus of praise that sings of

<sup>91</sup> Tavad, *Juana Inés de la Cruz and the Theology of Beauty: The First Mexican Theology*, 192, 195.

divine beauty made sacramentally present within the world. In other words, it enables discourse for the sake of beauty and beauty for the sake of discourse.

In relation to this, the spiritual life is not a matter of seizing upon one's own distinct voice against the restrictive contextualizing factors of doctrine, authority, or culture for Sor Juana. Rather, it is a process of learning to sing —of becoming conscious and expressive of the way in which one's own personal beauty fits into the broader tapestry of a beautiful world reflecting the image of God in Jesus Christ. That Sor Juana advocated for the voices of women, indigenous, and African people comes as no surprise, therefore, for the very diversity of forms and expressions is actually integral to the cohesive pattern of beauty in itself. It is not merely that these other voices can offer something helpful. Rather, they are in some sense actually necessary within the grand scheme of divine and human beauty as such.

The splendor of a divine music addressing our very natures lies at the heart of what it is to be human and a creature of God. By her own understanding, even Sor Juana's secular writings should be seen as an attempt to join in and respond to the music of God. The beauty of Christ's love demands a response, and although human words cannot of themselves compare or add anything to Christ's beauty, still this human response is mysteriously a part of that beauty itself. Elsewhere, Sor Juana sums this up in a meditative poem:

Such great desire in heart have we,  
The object of one's love to be,  
No knowledge there may us avail,  
Our search to cause to cease or fail.  
Though my response add nothing still,  
To love that here invite my will,  
Nor might I cease while yet I live,  
To yearn that I response may give.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>92</sup> de la Cruz, *OC*, 1:167, rendered into English rhyme in order to preserve something of its effect. A more literal translation can be found in de la Cruz, *SW*, 59.