

Reseña de *Approaches to the Theory of Freedom
in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,*
de Virginia Aspe Armella
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UMSNH, 149 pp.

Based on a certain secularization and a naturalization of Theology as a response to Luther's increasing influence, a new form of humanism shaped the Catholic Counter-Reformation during the XVII and XVIII centuries. In this context, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, whose friendship with the Criollo Jesuits of Puebla City is well known, gave birth to poetry that argues on the strictly and perennial philosophical questions, in a dialogue with the heritage of Suarez and Luis de Molina, the Counter-Reformation most remarkable figures.

In this book, Virginia Aspe focuses primarily, but not exclusively, on the nun's most famous poem, *Primero sueño*, following Tarsicio Herrera Sapién, Aureliano Tapía Méndez, Alejandro Soriano Vallés, Dolores Bravo Arriaga, and Dorothy Schons, who have reconsidered Sor Juana's work, bearing in mind the influence of the Aristotelian and Jesuit traditions in the formation of her philosophical and theological views and arguments, especially on those concerning freedom and human nature.

In order to understand what Sor Juana had in mind when composing her famed verses, Aspe explores, in the first chapter, the influence of Aristotle's theories, which Sor Juan knew by direct sources. For example, in her philosophical poem *Primero Sueño*, the presence of Aristotelian topics is immense: the poet shows a great familiarity with notions such as substance and accident, the categories, the speculative syllogism and the scientific demonstration, the distinction between being and essence, induction and deduction, as well as hylomorphism.

Aspe affirms that Sor Juana's objective, when writing *Primero Sueño*, was to find a "philosophical vision of the world of reason",

only through rational faith, rather than a vision of the divine, like other mystics of the time. Nonetheless, considering that *Primero Sueño* was written in 1692, just three years before her death, and two before her profession of faith –when Sor Juana stated her deep devotion to God and her desire to renovate her vows–, I consider that it is impossible to affirm that *Primero Sueño* is motivated only by an intellectual drive: it must also be spiritual. In spite of this, Aspe clearly shows that

For Sor Juana, wisdom is poetry because it is open to dialogue, rather than being motivated by the raw desire to emerge as the winner of a debate (Aspe, 2018: 30).

Aspe examines the whole poem in a very precise way and contrasts it with the ancient Aztec poetry and philosophy, the *Huehuetlatolli* (*Sayings of the Elders*). Besides, the author offers a schematic frame of the Pre-Columbian poetry and its intellectual conception of the world. These introduces the reader into one unique aspect of Sor Juana's poetry: the mix between Hermetic, Christian and Modern traditions with Pre-Columbian motives. From this, Aspe concludes that “*Primero Sueño* is, without doubt, the first great synthetic work of Mexican philosophy” (Aspe, 2018: 45).

The second chapter is dedicated to the study of the idea of freedom in Sor Juana's works. The incursions of the Jesuit *ratio studiorum* in such various topics, ranging from Theology and Rhetoric to Baroque Art, allowed Sor Juana to rethink classical problems from new perspectives, taking into account the latest scientific knowledge and the occult pagan wisdom. The Jesuit doctrine on casuistry also had an impact in Aesthetics; as Aspe writes, “probabilism solidified in the Novohispanic Baroque, promoting a capricious art, affective and with little connection to classical cannons” (Aspe, 2018: 49).

Chapter three focuses on the influence on Sor Juana's thought of the Jesuits of Coimbra, Suárez and Molina, whom she probably met through her confessor and the bishop of Puebla. Aspe portrays the 17th-Century in the New Spain, especially in Puebla, where the influence of the Coimbra School was noteworthy, as testified by Molina's *Concordia liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis divinae praescientia*. Even though Sor Juana never mentions Molina directly, Aspe finds

indirect evidence showing that she used his work to defend freedom, by using astrological and other pagan and hermetic elements, as opposed to Dominican thesis on the relationship between grace and liberty.

In *Primero Sueño*—Aspe affirms—, one can find all of the following:

intellectual curiosity; rationalism and moral autonomy; eclectic positions; the topics of the Other; the synthesis between the Judeo-Christian tradition and that of Greece and Rome; the heterodox integration of modes of argumentation; the frank Hermeticism of the Jesuit Kircher... (Aspe, 2018: 95).

The book ends up addressing why Sor Juana's poem portrays a dream; not only because it was a prevalent topic in the Baroque literature, especially in Calderón, Quevedo and Gracián, but because she's thus escaping the judgement of the Inquisition, as the one who dreams of a sin and can't, hence, be blamed. Nevertheless, the form and structure of the poem remind more to the classical Greek-roman writers, Virgil, Cicero and Statius. Besides, the astronomical references must be seen in a double fashion: 1) as a manner that Sor Juana found to be closer to science (she was aware of Cartesian mechanics), 2) as a metaphor of gaining intellectual freedom through knowledge.

Approaches to the Theory of Freedom in Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is a well-written book focused on the philosophical aspects of Sor Juana poetry. It makes a concise treatment of the Novohispanic intellectual life and insists in its relationship with Jesuit theology. The references to the most remarkable specialists in the nun allow this study to propose a new and exciting hypothesis on the sources of Sor Juana's conceptions. Furthermore, the analysis of *Primero Sueño* clarifies the presence of Descartes, Aristotle, Plato, Kircher, Góngora, Gracián, Ovid and many others in it.

Probably, it would have been better to place the second chapter at the end of the book, instead of the third one; so, in this way the reader could better follow the general argument of the book. Besides that, in order to have a better understanding of the sources of

this book, it is suggested that future editions offer an index of all the philosophers and thinkers quoted by Sor Juana.

This book will be interesting for those readers who want to go in depth in the philosophical dimension of Sor Juana, and her exhaustive reading of the Novohispanic Philosophy. Aspe's study will also help to put aside the current opinions that see Sor Juana as a renegade nun without any real theological interest of her own.

To summarise, this work contains an exciting synthesis of the available bibliography regarding Sor Juana, offers a brief contextualization of the cultural and intellectual life of the 17th century, reviews in detail *Primero Sueño*, and proposes that Sor Juana philosophical and theological ideas were influenced directly by Pueblan Jesuits, readers of Suárez and Molina.

In the current days of Modernity, when genuine poetic genius has tossed aside, Sor Juana's poetry might be a path to remember how beauty makes its home in the mix of the crafted technique and the knowledge of the hidden parts of the soul. In this sense, Aspe's book will offer a lot to think and rethink about Sor Juana and our Novohispanic and Mexican modernity.

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Referencias

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