

never shrill or peremptory in considering the issues, the events and personalities which the myths at once reveal and hide. Not "dispassionately" it seems to me, but equably. I am sure that Foster is writing on behalf of the values we find in his sentences: justice, lucidity, a sense of the relation between human action and the waste that necessarily darkens it. He writes superbly, not just well. He thinks as clearly as the complexity of the matters allows.

I am not entirely persuaded that he is right and the Christian Brothers in Newry wrong. The very fact that he and his colleagues are willing to see themselves as revisionists, without evident qualm or misgiving, is not reassuring: Revisionism is parasitic upon the myths it plans to subvert. There is no point at which one's irony ends, once it starts. We are all revisionists these days, I recall Foster saying a year or two ago. Perhaps we are. But I am not sure that we should be endlessly gratified by our belated wisdom. Posterity has not

yet spoken.

In the meantime, nothing but good—unless the good includes a tincture of complacency—can come from the application of intelligence such as Foster's to the history of Ireland. The present danger in writing about Irish history is that we may try, in Hans Blumenberg's phrase from *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, to give ourselves that past which releases us from the past. It is a temptation which Nietzsche offers in *Use and Abuse of History*: "We seek a past from which we may spring, rather than that past from which we seem to have derived." The problem with the history of Ireland is that many of us now crave to be released from it or by any means to transcend it. Foster's aim is to stay in history and make sense of it. What, starting perhaps afresh in 1972, we do with that sense is another day's work, matter for another story.

—Denis Donoghue '89

The Poet-Oracle of Spanish America

SOR JUANA OR, THE TRAPS OF FAITH.

By Octavio Paz. Translated by Margaret Sayers Peden. Harvard. 547 pp. \$29.95

For all our involvements with Latin America, the region—seemingly turbulent and resistant to modernization—offers no coherent image to Americans. The great Latin American novels of the 1960s and '70s, usually in fine translations, convey the spirit of the culture but are to most readers more expressive than explanatory. With Mexico, to be sure, where the biography at hand is set, we had a love affair from 1910 to 1940, during the heroic years of the Revolution: The country beguiled us with its muralists and its charismatic insurgents. By now, though, for most of us, Mexico has again receded into the Latin American miasma, where history seems predetermined yet shapeless, societies oppressed yet unruly, intellectual life stylish

yet rhetorical, popular culture vibrant yet declassé.

Of books in English which explain the historical logic and identity of these nations, few avoid the jargon of academia or the formulas of journalism. One vigorous exception is *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950; trans. 1961), a free-ranging essay on life and thought in Mexico by one of its leading poets and critics, Octavio Paz. Mentioned only in passing in his book is an intriguing figure, the 17th-century poet-nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Now, more than three decades later, Paz returns to this distant but kindred spirit, this time locating her at the center of a book four times the length of *Labyrinth*.

Sor Juana is no mere biography of a nun; even broader than *Labyrinth*, it moves easily among the philosophical, scientific, theological, and literary traditions that illuminate Sor Juana's cast of mind.

Paz's feat is striking: Imagine T. S. Eliot—instead of devoting a few allusive passages to the English metaphysical poets—writing a 500-page study of John Donne's poetry, mind, career, historical antecedents, and present-day significance. But Paz has done even more. He has forsaken his own 20th-century viewpoint and assumed that of Sor Juana, a cloistered female in a misogynous, highly structured society, faced by the same pressures and hypocrisies encountered by the heterodox or gifted person in the convulsive Mexico of today. The result is a life-and-times study, but the times include our own.

Sor Juana was born to unmarried parents in the rural village of San Miguel Nepantla in 1648 and christened Juana Ramírez de Asbaje. She could read and write by the age of six and clipped off locks of hair when she failed to master her grammar. Around age 10 she was sent to Mexico City, where she lived first with relatives, then at the viceregal court. On one occasion she defended herself against 40 of the realm's most learned minds, the viceroy reported, as a royal galleon might have fended off a few canoes. To such a prodigy, the prospects of conventional marriage were depressing, particularly given the limits imposed by her birth and poverty. The alternatives—prostitution or



concubinage—were equally bleak. So at 19, just when she captured the respect of court society, she entered the convent of the Discalced Carmelites. Finding the regime too severe, she decided less than two years later to take the veil in the more permissive convent of San Jeronimo.

Convent life may have redirected Sor Juana's sexual urges, but it did not suppress the erotic playfulness of her poetry. Paz speaks of a "neutralization" of sex beneath her religious habit, saying that it served her appropriation of "masculine" learning. Gender, she discovered, was a social not a natural obstacle to learning. Her mythological identifications—whether with the wise, beneficent goddess Isis or with Apollo's arrogant son, Phaeton—all represented knowledge, poetry, and prophecy. Her library became for her a house of language, peopled by beings who were more real and enduring than humans: ideas.

Sor Juana was, above all else, a poet. And Paz proves to be a peerless guide to her verse, showing how she drew from the great Spanish poets of her age even as she found her own voice. Of the Spanish-language poets who wrote in Sor Juana's time, Paz says, "the truth is none of the others could compare with her; they were not peers or rivals, only a chorus."

Sor Juana's poetry in many ways closed an era in the Hispanic world. Hers is the last elegant voice to issue from colonial 17th-century America as it began its decline from baroque grandeur. Yet despite Sor Juana's poetic achievement, its intellectual undergirding was cramped by its distance from the new science and political philosophy of Europe and by her own prudence in matters of orthodoxy. Because her speculative life was limited by the ecclesiastical establishment, she saw the world almost mediævally, as emblem and hieroglyph of spiritual truths. In her private life also, as Paz notes, an adventurous soul was checked by the intrigues and jealousies of her 17th-century community and by the inevitable restrictions of a collective routine.

Sor Juana's scientific understanding was passé, but her cultural perceptions were prophetic. Even her dated interests—her obsession with neo-Platonic mysteries and neo-scholastic metaphysics—anticipate a poetic mode of the modern age. In Sor Juana's richest poem, "First Dream," she evokes an isolated soul facing not God but boundless space. Sor Juana's true heirs appear only two centuries or more later: the Valéry of *Le cimetière marin*, the Mallarmé of *Un coup de dés*, and Latin American poets such as Chile's Vicente Huidobro and Mexico's José Gorostiza.

During Sor Juana's lifetime, the 1680s were her years of greatest incandescence and fame. Then came a time of plague, famine, and riots. Being an anomaly, a prominent intellectual woman, she antagonized the prelates, and she lost her patronage at court. No longer could she sustain her creative spirit in solitude. She signed in blood a renunciation of all secular learning, and she surrendered her precious books and musical and scientific instruments, keeping only three prayer books and some hair shirts and scourges. After years of watchful waiting the prelates had won. In 1695, aged 46, Sor Juana died of the plague while attending her sisters.

Beyond her literary significance, Sor Juana still exemplifies the troubled spirit of Latin American culture. She raised her voice in a world blocked from modern paths by the Inquisition, cumbersome bureaucracy, a stratified society, a peripheral location. Modern Latin America often seems equally held in check: Reforms,

revolutions, and technocratic programs have not fulfilled the agenda of more than a century and half of independence. The "marvelous realists" of Latin America's literary "boom"—writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortazar, and José Donoso—assert as a generation what Sor Juana affirmed in isolation: that Latin America is a civilization unto itself, that it challenges the rationalist, often predatory, values of the modern world. Paz himself, in *One Earth, Four or Five Worlds*, says that the "great wound of the West" has been the same "separation of history and morality" which Sor Juana experienced; García Márquez, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, even challenges the efficacy of our notions of linear time. This ironic, transcendental way of seeing the world that characterizes so many Latin American writers has its precedent in Sor Juana, in her limitations and her achievements in spite of them.

Sor Juana has been hailed as the "Tenth Muse," the "Phoenix of America" and "the first feminist of America." To Paz, her deeper significance lies in the insoluble contradiction between herself and her world, a symbol of Mexico's ambivalent modernization during the centuries that have ensued. This biography—splendidly written, richly informed, deeply thoughtful, and skillfully translated—opens a grand new window on the tribulations and meanings of Spanish-American civilization.

—Richard M. Morse, Secretary
Latin American Program, WWICS

What Aristotle Didn't Know

MYTH AND TRAGEDY IN ANCIENT

GREECE. By Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet. Translated by Janet Lloyd. Zone Books. 527 pp. \$28.95

MYTH AND SOCIETY IN ANCIENT

GREECE. By Jean-Pierre Vernant. Translated by Janet Lloyd. Zone Books. 279 pp. \$22.95

For at least two decades now, much of the most challenging and controversial work in literary and social criticism has been emanating from France, and its effect on the study of the humanities in the United States and Great Britain has been little less than seismic. The most common