

About This Painted Dream

Here at last is my only likeness in which I recognize myself and where I will be recognized. Here is my appearance fixed on this canvas that will survive me. Here is how I see myself, and how I see myself is how I will be seen. Soon, when my heavy flesh ceases to be, they will see the reflection from the mirror of my eyes, the reflection of my world, which my skill, arduously mastered, has stubbornly determined to depict. Here remains my appearance, my apparition to which I give, by means of artful simulacrum, an existence that, although illusory, is more lasting than that of my body, worn out now by so much folly, so much sleeplessness spent adorning naked surfaces with color.

Rival of the sun, with my excessive exertions I have paid for the honors received from this court full of ambushes; caught up in the most diverse duties, I have managed to procure the pleasure of my Señor at the cost of my displeasure. I owe nothing, satisfaction and dissatisfaction balance out, the one his, the other mine.

I paint here, I paint myself in this room of the Alcázar so lavish with paintings. A few years ago it was the seat of his gracious majesty, Baltasar Carlos, whose catafalque it was my lot to design and erect. Oh, sorrowful prince! Various times, thanks to the ingenious tricks of my art, I managed to transfer you to wood or canvas in a manner considered so true to life, although feigned, that now there remains of you, here a boy, here a young man, only the life that my craft gave you, the

brilliance of my brush strokes, the bright visions that years ago my brush was able to conceive.

Here I make my portrait, brush in hand, hand at work, given over completely to the task of bringing my image to life, at the cost of my own. I picture myself in this place of certain death, where the reaper snaps the shoots off the tender stalk, in this enclosure of melancholy that causes us to wither, where so many faces grew pale, semblances I had to copy and enhance, this alcove converted from luxurious morgue to a workshop for fabricating depictions that employ the vanity of art to transmute the vainglory of the princes or to balance two illusions: the power of the king with the prominence of the painter that I am, watch the one, mirror the other of this ashen kingdom, of this faded empire of shadows.

“Pareja, mix up for me, quick, a light indigo and a thick crimson. Hurry, Pareja, I have to shade the hoopskirts of María Agustina and make Nicolasito’s jerkin more velvety. Then ready for me the carmine, the vermillion, the purple. I have to liven up these brocades that are too austere, make the taffetas flame with scarlet touches. I want to make the fiery red of the water jug rival in splendor the face of the Infanta. The same red reappears on the lower edge of my palette so that the link may be established between them (in the same way light acts as a link making discordances concordances), so that all will know that every aspect these paintings feign with such elegance, all their beauty, are but contrivances forged by my own fantasy.”

Such is the clear key to the first enigma, the others are more hidden. This hieroglyphic theater is regulated by subtle symmetries, by geometric perspicacity, that orders, according to distance, the dimensions of forms

in the oblique space to such a degree of discipline that the use of visual tricks again becomes a necessity. In the background, the lines of the fallen pyramid converge upon the silhouette of that other Velázquez, a relative who occupies my old post of chamberlain. The vanishing point is situated in the hand of my homonym, who pulls open the veil of forgetfulness to let the light spill out its wonders, to let the light, like the illumination that my art provides, bestow on each distinct object a beautiful existence. And this illustrious hand, allegory for mine, is the same distance away from the one that holds the brush, the one of artifice, as that one is from the tiny angelic hand of the Infanta, a digital triangle that is metaphor for my manual mastery as maker of images.

I am known in the court as taciturn because I do not participate in court society, as biting as it is petty. Aloof from so many intrigues, I prefer saying nothing with my mouth that I can say more eloquently with my images. Words that quicken my inventiveness I find in books that captivate by means of ingenuity and cleverness.

“Pareja, you lazy rascal, no one will give you a more dignified bearing than the one I gave you in my portrait. There you seem as noble as those of good lineage, even more so. In this court of brainless princes anybody is capable of entering the gallery of notables. Look at my jesters and dwarves, my buffoons, my simpletons, they are not merely entertainers; members of the human race like us usually have more common sense than their masters. Pareja, clean these brushes for me very carefully, hand me the sable ones, the very finest. I am missing a yellow, get me a gold and an ivory. I have

to lighten the tone of this carpet, where the sun is shining on it. It is furry, the dog is also furry; I will establish a warmer harmony between them.”

The same distance as that between the right hands of the two Velázquez, a recurring allusion to the author of such phantasmagoria, the divine face of the Infanta is from the cretinous one of Mari Bárbola, the two of them looking from the scene out at the spectator. Fortune and misfortune have equal billing in the nonsensical theater of this world. Thus, as complementary day and night require one another, so on the proscenium the solar girl and the lunar dwarf are made harmonious. Correlative extremes, with them I provoke at one and the same time a sagacious correspondence and a persuasive counterpoint.

It is presumed that the king and the queen are posing for a portrait of great pomp, and that the mirror in the background duplicates their images. It is understood that whoever observes this painting is placed in the position of the sovereigns; whoever observes it exchanges in a fleeting instant, fugitive as the power of the supreme ones, his low condition for the highest rank. My good King Philip, you who granted me as much glory as drudgery, favors and services are equally matched. Withered majesty of a feeble kingdom, diminished by the war, damaged by misgovernment, I know your face down to the tiniest line; more than thirty times I transferred it to canvas to leave a record of your time, of that wasting away that disillusioned and disheartens, of its waxing and of your waning. And the wan queen, the German one, pallid mother of unfortunate progeny, for her I concocted the ceremonial events of her reception, when she came to Madrid for her nuptials; in her

honor I erected triumphal arches, arranged majestic perspectives, and raised that Monte Parnaso, where the four continents, over which warring Spain would impose its dominion, celebrate the glory of the imperial bond. Thus the contemptuous sphinx arrived to swell our misfortune. On various occasions I reproduced and copied her, she posing in a sepulchral silence while my brush mimicked the iciness of her masque.

This mirror dims the faces, diminishes; it reflects not so much the face of flesh as that of the soul. The dynastic image is clouded over at the same pace as the empire unravels. The face is as diffuse as the kingdom is dissolute, corruptible, the one and the other, your flesh the same as mine.

“Look, Pareja, I draw everything with this brush. A few traces are enough to make the muslin flowers become full blown, to suggest the pattern of the laces or the diaphanous quality of the tulle. A few skillful touches and the smoothness of the canvas responds, bulges out or forms a hollow; a few appropriate spots let the eye joining them together imagine every material according to its volume and substance, perceive the likeness of each separate thing. And you will ask yourself why this immense, canvas-covered easel is shown from the back, whether the Infanta and her attendants are bursting in to watch me paint the sovereigns or is it the sovereigns who are watching me paint the Infanta. Or perhaps I make believe I paint anyone who rests his eyes on my painting. In one way or another, the easel is the attribute of my craft, a reminder that the pleasures art provides come from this mastery capable of transforming such odds and ends into wonders; it affirms that the marvel consists of paint spread over canvas.”

Little breath remains to me, my end is approaching, my body and soul surmise it is so, they divine the departure. I have spent my life fulfilling duties. Finally I paint, for my own account and for my own delight, this allegory, my allegation. Unknown spectator of some tomorrow, remote witness of my talent, to you I leave my alluring labyrinth. I have transmitted the arcanum of my world to the space of this painted dream.