Velázquez' "Las Meninas"

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(Self-addressed memo: Explain under what circumstances this piece was composed, why it was shelved, and why retrieved after sixteen years.)

Vassar College, 5:27 P.M. *on a Tuesday in the autumn of '65: a promising lecture on Velázquez is thwarted when the slide projector suddenly falters and the screen behind the professor blacks out. The projectionist shrugs and shows guiltless hands; then she and the rest of us subside in obscurity. But this darkness, we soon discover, dims all of Vassar, engulfs all Poughkeepsie, encompasses the state of New York and more. It was Con Edison's darkest hour, for we are speaking of November 9, 1965, and of the Great Northeastern Power Failure which, from my vantage, began with the fading out on the screen of* Las Meninas. *To make up for the lecture lost, I wrote it out and sent each student enrolled in the course her own copy for Christmas. And that's how these presents came to be written.*

Then the question arose whether to publish or not. But before I could make a move, Michel Foucault produced "Les Suivantes," a remarkable meditation whose opening lines confirmed Las Meninas *as an epistemological riddle.*[1] *Other essays, book chapters, even entire monographs crowded after. To prolong the procession at its tail end seemed tiresome, like joining a dismally long line at the supermarket; better move on.*

But, of course, one keeps reading the literature. And the literature on Las Meninas *is an epitome of recent thinking about illusionism and the status of art. This picture of 1656, which an eighteenth-century admirer had dubbed "The Theology of Painting"—and which the Prado formerly blazoned in huge letters of brass as the* OBRA CULMINANTE DE LA PINTURA UNIVERSAL—*has*

1. Foucault's "Les Suivantes" is the first chapter of his *Les Mots et les choses*, Paris, 1966 (englished as *The Order of Things*, New York, 1973). Along with a letter dated November 15, 1966, Annette Michelson sent me the book—"not solely for what it may propose in its non-art-historical way concerning Velázquez, but simply because it is the work of one of the most interesting people now thinking and writing." That I never acknowledged her gift is one of my shabbier misdemeanors—for which I take this occasion to offer apology.

become a cherished crux for modern investigators, for geometricians, metaphysicians, artist-photographers, semioticians, political and social historians, and even rare lovers of painting.[2]

Last year brought two more essays in tandem on Las Meninas.[3] *The first, written by a paradox-loving philosopher, erred (like Foucault's) in its initial assumption about the viewer's implied position. The second, correcting the first, belabored the obvious—granting that "the obvious" is what one normally overlooks. (The viewer's position in* Las Meninas *is self-evident and should never have been a problem.) Though this latter essay was unusually conscientious, and despite its plea that the picture "be understood as an inexhaustible emblem of the power of painting," in the end—to my mind, at least—the interpretation suffered from misplacement of emphasis.*[4] *What I miss in this—and in more historically minded recent approaches to* Las Meninas*—is the necessary engagement with the whole painting, the sense that every part of it matters. Whether the picture's essential meaning is discovered in the cross of the Order of Santiago on the proud painter's doublet, or in the effect of the mirror on the rear wall, a disproportionate acreage of the canvas remains unaccounted for.*

To say it another way: the ontological or epistemological puzzles now being discerned in Las Meninas *are posed in earlier paintings with vastly less apparatus. Parmigianino's tiny* Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror *in Vienna is quite as paradoxical as some believe* Las Meninas *to be. (Do you, when you look at it, become Parmigianino?) Or Pontormo's* Portrait of Duke Alessandro de'Medici *in Philadelphia: the subject looks straight out of the picture while drawing a woman's face, evidently from life. What does this make of the viewer who is patently the object of the depicted draftsman's attention?*[5] *Both these works are emblems (though perhaps not "inexhaustible") of the power of painting. And I would mention one other in this series of pictures whose subject, design, and illusionism place the actual world in a dependent position. I have in mind a large foursquare painting by Frans Floris, created originally (1556) for the clubhouse of the Antwerp Painter's Guild—that is to say, as a professional emblem. The picture shows a painter, presumably a likeness of Floris himself, seated before his easel, at work on a panel of which we see only the back. Nor would we know what or*

2. See Kenneth Clark, *Looking at Pictures*, New York, 1960, pp. 31ff.

3. John R. Searle, "*Las Meninas* and the Paradoxes of Pictorial Representation," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 6, no. 3 (Spring 1980), 477–88; Joel Snyder and Ted Cohen, "Critical Response. Reflexions on *Las Meninas*: Paradox Lost," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Winter 1980), 429–47.

4. Having established the absolute geometric certainty of the perspectival viewpoint (which makes it impossible for the mirror to reflect the royal couple directly), Snyder and Cohen concede, in their envoi, that the picture allows, even encourages, precisely this "mistaken opinion." They suggest that the viewer is meant to realize his mistake in a "further realization." But this is not how a picture works. If two readings are allowed, then both are effectively present and ambiguously meant. I suspect that Snyder and Cohen would not disagree.

5. See Leo Steinberg, "Pontormo's Alessandro de'Medici, or, I Only Have Eyes for You," *Art in America*, vol. 63, no. 1 (January-February 1975), 62–65.

whom he is painting were it not for the incongruous presence of St. Luke's symbolic ox at his feet. The placid beast identifies him as St. Luke, patron of painters, so that his hitherward gaze, averted from the panel to study his model, cannot but be directed at the Madonna and Child. The outright glance, from the picture forth into the actual world, defines the artist as one whose eyes are fixed on reality. At the same time, this glance makes known that the Virgin and Christ are with us—just as the king and queen are "with us" when we confront Las Meninas. *Thus it appears that what recent interpreters have thought most extraordinary in the Velázquez is demonstrably present in these sixteenth-century precedents. And still* Las Meninas *remains incomparable.*

But a survey of interpretations that have seen the light (or obscured it) in recent years is not my purpose. All I have in hand is a short revision of the paper I wrote sixteen years ago after that famous failure of power. The typescript was

Frans Floris. St. Luke. *1556. (Antwerp: Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts)*

dusted off several months ago when the artist-filmmaker Juan Downey asked me to read parts of it into the sound track of a film he was shooting about mirror images. His invitation gives the present retrieval its proximate cause. The remote cause lies in the cheerful acknowledgment that every description of Velázquez' picture remains, in one way or another, inadequate, as I understand mine also to be. Writing about a work such as Las Meninas *is not, after all, like queuing up at the A&P. Rather, it is somewhat comparable to the performing of a great musical composition of which there are no definitive renderings. The guaranteed inadequacy of each successive performance challenges the interpreter next in line, helping thereby to keep the work in the repertoire. Alternatively, when a work of art ceases to be discussed, it suffers a gradual blackout.*

*

What exactly does this famous key monument have to offer a person unaware of its fame and unread in the literature luxuriating about it? What does *Las Meninas* actually show?

At center, downstage, a little girl is being offered a drink of water in which she's not interested. Near her, coming in at the margin, a boy dwarf teases a drowsy dog, who couldn't care less. A woman in middle distance talks to a man who seems not to be listening; he's looking at us instead. Way in the back, a courtier in solid black, seeing nothing much to detain him, prepares to leave; his parting legacy being a backward glance and an attempt (unsuccessful) to let a little sunshine in by the door. What he leaves behind is a room full of pictures that are nearly invisible for lack of illumination, since the windows are shuttered and the lights on the ceiling are out. Most disappointing of all: the great canvas at left—on which, for all we know, something remarkable is taking shape—turns its back on us, adding a massive No to the list of negations. No wonder that the *dramatis personae* (all but three of them, to be exact) look straight out of the picture—there just isn't enough on their side of things to hold anybody's attention.

How is it, then, that this picture maintains such a steadfast grip on one's consciousness? Being so negligible in subject, and in appearance so loosely improvised, what makes it so confident of regard? It must be a force, an energy issuing from the picture that arrests and invites and ends by drafting us into its orbit. Looking at *Las Meninas*, one is not excluded; one hardly feels oneself to be looking *at* it, as one would at a thing over there—a painted surface, a stage set, or gathering of other people. Rather, we enter upon *Las Meninas* as if we were part of the family, party to the event.

But what *is* the event? What are we party to? The painter gives it to us to decide. He leaves it an open question whether these courtly characters have just

Diego Velázquez. Las Meninas. *1656. (Madrid: Prado)*

joined us or whether we've just walked in to interrupt them.[6] Either way, the picture is a disturbance of what a moment before must have been perfect stillness—witness the settled pose of the dog.[7]

A kind of reciprocity, then: as if we on this side of the canvas and the nine characters in it were too closely engaged with each other to be segregated by the divide of the picture plane. Something we bring to the picture—the very effectiveness of our presence—ricochets from the picture, provokes an immediate response, a reflex of mutual fixation evident in the glances exchanged, the glances we receive and return.

And what else is he showing us, this royal painter? A dim spacious hall, hung with pictures and alive with intruders, the entourage of a little princess. The event represented hardly deserves the term—for there is nothing eventful about a spoiled little girl of five being offered a drink of water. But it appears that a picture is being painted—the big canvas at left is under attack. Standing some distance behind, or rather before, his canvas, the painter seems to be hesitating, considering his next stroke, or perhaps waiting for things to settle. Meanwhile, his sight converges with the general concentration of glances upon his models, the parents of the little Infanta, Philip IV of Spain and Queen Mariana. The location of their

6. The former alternative was espoused in 1961 by the Madrid cartoonist Mingote. Some serious art historians remain similarly convinced that the "narrative" of *Las Meninas* can be rationally reconstructed; see the quotation adduced in Snyder and Cohen, pp. 432f.

7. The slumbering pet is a traditional index of tranquility: eg., the cat asleep in Barocci's etching of the *Annunciation* conceived as a silent moment; or the dog, cat, or lion of St. Jerome as token of what Melanchthon, following Plato, called the "sacred silences" attending mental labor. Significantly, an author portrait published in 1503 labels the attendant dog in the lower right "APATHES."

"Hay días en que no se le ocurre a uno nada" ("Some days nothing seems to be happening"). Cartoon by Mingote. Published in Mundo Hispanico, *February 1961, 75.*

Author portrait of Bernardino Corio. Woodcut from his Chronicle of Milan, *1503.*

mirror reflection on the rear wall assures us that the royal couple stand on our left. Consequently, those many looks that dart hitherward out of the picture must be their due rather than ours. But we also are implicated since we see ourselves seen. All of us—the implied presence of royalty, the persons depicted, and ourselves returning their glances—together we round out that sphere which the partitioning picture plane cuts in two.

It follows that the picture alone, the picture without its complementary hemisphere, is but one half its own system, hence seemingly centerless. Or, to put it more accurately, the picture's focal center keeps shifting. Ask where the center is, and the answer returned by the picture is not any one point, nor any two, but three and four; it depends on what you are centering.

If you address the width of the canvas, taking its measure from side to side, you discover the median in the little Infanta—at her left eye, precisely. Like a jewel in the dip of a necklace, she pinpoints the lower center.

Yet a glance at the perspective construction makes the centric point shift. The given orthogonals—the horizontals along the right wall and the procession of ceiling lights—converge upon the man on the stair inside the doorway. Halting to look, so that looking becomes his whole task and function, this man personifies the vanishing point of the central perspective, the point opposite our vantage. No question but that the perspective locates him at center.

On the other hand, if you consider the room we are in—a room whose full width is revealed by the rear wall with its doors, pictures, and mirror—you discover that the room's central axis falls to the left of the open door. No mistaking it: the light fixtures overhead clearly trace the midline of the ceiling, and the mirror, charged with the image of royalty, appropriates the midpoint of the wall. And that gives us three middles. Just as the Infanta marks the midline of the canvas; just as the man on the stair looms at the centric point of the perspective; even so does the looking glass define the centerline of the room. Three centers, nicely triangulated: the canvas as a physical object, the perspectival geometry, and the depicted chamber—each maintains its own middle. Three kinds of center, which in a simpler painting might have remained coincident to avoid unnecessary confusion, are here deliberately dispersed.

*

The scatter effect is accentuated by the dispersion of the three adult men in the picture: the one standing with folded hands against the right wall, the man in the door, and the painter. All three gaze on the royal pair this side of the picture—their convergent glances homing like spokes on their hub.

We begin to suspect that Velázquez made his composition seem improvised and unstable, not only by deploying within the picture three middles instead of one, but, more importantly, by conceiving his whole cast of characters as

subordinated to yet another centrality. For he located the picture's dramatic and psychological focus outside itself, displaced from what the picture actually shows to what it beholds. It is as though the depicted scene were a dependency, caught in reaction to its deferred center. That center, of course, is on our left. It resides in the royal pair bestriding the room's central axis in line with the looking glass in which their reflection appears.

But here a problem arises. We have found the perspectival vanishing point well to the right of the mirror, in the man on the stair. Now, in any coherent perspective, such as Velázquez employs, this vanishing point defines itself as the point directly opposite the viewer's eye. Thus the vanishing point in *Las Meninas* assures us that the station from which we perceive the scene lies oblique to the mirror—not perpendicular. Therefore, whatever the mirror may show to the king and queen, what it reveals to us, standing off to the right, can only be a reflection of something off to the left. It follows that what we see in the mirror must necessarily be a part of the painting in progress on the big canvas.[8] The result is an elegant ambiguity: a mirror that transmits data from two disparate places, from the king-and-queen's painted likeness and from where they stand in the flesh. Yet the two are the same. The reflection which the mirror imparts to us at an angle is one with the image which we know the king and queen to be getting in direct confrontation. We discover that Velázquez' summary looking glass conflates two distinct things into one: what the king and queen view from their station and what we see from ours—the real thing and the painting of it—the mirror reveals as identical, as if to grant that the masterpiece on the canvas mirrors the truth beyond any mirror's capacity to surpass. In this sense, *Las Meninas* may be taken to celebrate the truthfulness of the painter's art.

But praise of the mimetic powers of painting—though brought off here with staggering originality—is still conventional seventeenth-century ideology. And *Las Meninas* is in no sense a conventional picture. It undertakes a lot more, being concerned with nothing less than the role vision plays in human self-definition. The picture induces a kind of accentuation of consciousness by summoning the observer's eye to exert itself in responsive action and in intensified multiple acts of perception. And here the whole picture cooperates. That is why, in *Las Meninas*, the radiant signals are received from all over. An uncanny sensitivity to nuance of illumination differentiates every portion of matter. The background alone contrasts dull surfaces with the luster of a scintillant mirror, the sundazzle of outdoor space with the sparse gleam of a concealed window; while the remembered glow of extinguished lamps irradiates the dark ceiling. Most of the space represented is

8. The question has been asked whether double portraits figure in the Spanish tradition of royal portraiture. The answer is positive. Apart from Titian's half-length Charles V with the late Isabella of Portugal, we have record that Alonso Cano's first royal commission, after his appointment at court in 1638, was for a double portrait of Ferdinand and Isabella (see Harold E. Wethey, *Alonso Cano*, Princeton, 1955, p. 18).

sheer transparency, literally a *per-spective*, a "seeing-through." All is diaphane, and whatever residue of opaque matter might interfere is given over to promoting perception: an opened door, windows, lamps, mirror, and pictures. No other appurtenances, no other functions—not so much as a chair to sit down on. Nothing but what was created for sight. And the light itself rising everywhere to the occasion: lurking in the depth of a mirror; breaching a door; beckoning from a distant unshuttered window; and finally, in full flood up front, dissolving the picture plane, and spreading through the retreating gloom a diffused watchfulness that merely crystallizes in eyes and faces. There is surely no painting in which the emission of sight from human eyes becomes quite so structural, no painting wherein sight lines sustain so much of the hidden armature of the design, no painting whose *dramatis personae* are grouped and ranked according to what they see.

This last observation is worth spelling out: "grouped and ranked according to what they see." Begin at the foreground, right of center, where we—or rather our royal neighbors—are eyed by three watchers; a threesome composed in strict symmetry by the Infanta, the curtseying lady-in-waiting, and the female dwarf dressed in blue—three attentive young persons in triangular disposition. Notice next that each corner of this inner triangle is precisely backstopped by attendants whose positions stake out a larger, similar triangle: the boy with his foot on the mastiff, the kneeling *menina* before the Infanta, and, thirdly, behind the curtsey, the talkative chaperone. Finally the remaining three figures, the shadowy guard, the painter, and the valedictorian on the back stair, form a third outfielder's triangle—congruent with the second, similar to the first. Think of their places on the projected floorplan, and our nine dispersed characters describe three equilateral triangles, each group differentiated according to what it perceives. The girls of the inner triad look straight out, open to what they confront. The three backstopping figures see less; caught up in play, in service, or in conversation, they only see what preoccupies them. Lastly again, the three adult outfielders: they are so placed with respect to the painter's canvas that they alone see a complex of interrelations, or two worlds at a glance—their own and another; a stage to serve in and a painted equivalent purely visionary.

To round out the system, it remains for the viewer to lend his attentive presence—I mean the individual consciousness that salutes the picture alongside a king and queen. It remains for this self, ennobled by association, not only to complete the last triad that brings the company up to twelve, but, above all, to see the magic loop closed. As the royal presence is seen from within the picture to inspire a painting, so the viewer sees the averted painting engender its mirror image, which in turn guarantees the royal pair's real presence. The painter gives us the real, the reflected, and the depicted as three interdependent states, three modalities of the visible that cause and succeed one another in a perpetual round. Reality, illusion, and replication by art conspire in ceaseless recirculation.

But none of this works unless one agrees to participate. Accept the summons,

and the picture reduces the real world and the symbolic to psychic equivalence, like the two pans of a scale, each acted on by the other. Then, what one faces in *Las Meninas* is not only a framed object, a beautiful surface, an illusory space, a simulated event—though the painting is all of these. Rather, the picture conducts itself the way a vital presence behaves. It creates an encounter. And as in any living encounter, any vital exchange, the work of art becomes the alternate pole in a situation of reciprocal self-recognition.[9] If the picture were speaking instead of flashing, it would be saying: I see you seeing me—I in you see myself seen—see you seeing yourself being seen—and so on beyond the reaches of grammar. Confronted mirrors we are, polarized selves, reflecting one another's consciousness without end; partaking of an infinity that is not spatial, but psychological—an infinity not cast in the outer world, but in the mind that knows and knows itself known. The mirror within *Las Meninas* is merely its central emblem, a sign for the whole. *Las Meninas* in its entirety is a metaphor, a mirror of consciousness.

9. Several passages in Baltasar Gracián's *El Criticón* (1651–57) indicate that self-recognition by way of encounter would have been in Velázquez' world a familiar notion. In the opening chapter of this sagacious allegorical novel, Gracián's hero Andrenio, who has grown up on a desert island and has never before seen a fellow man, speaks thus to the shipwrecked Critilo: "You, Critilo, ask who I am, yet this is what I desire to learn of you; you are the first man I have seen till this day, and in you I find myself more vividly imaged than in the mute crystal springs which my curiosity often besought and my ignorance recommended." (Gracián knew Velázquez and regarded him as the foremost of modern painters.)