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Velasquez and the Postmodern Circle of Mirrors

I agree with Uzi Awret that Diego Velasquez's seminal painting, *Las Meninas*, is an expression of self-consciousness in many different ways. But my first response was to the *feeling tone* Velasquez evokes in his work, which felt dark and rather grim to me. I think this painting may be a meditation on the mortification of the flesh, a theme that was surely familiar to Velasquez. It is a contemplation of human vanity.

Self-consciousness is not just a cognitive act. The so-called 'self-conscious emotions' include pride, vanity, shame and guilt; their cognitive components are self-aggrandizement, perfectionism, and self-criticism. The self-consciousness emotions are enormously powerful motivators in life. Pride and self-celebration can be seen in three-year olds. Starting in middle childhood, children can feel so intensely embarrassed at times that they want to sink into the ground. Mutual ridicule emerges in social play, a game of shaming others and avoiding self-shame. In adults, severe mental disorders like paranoia and depression are thought to be evoked by intense feelings of shame and constant self-criticism. Self-consciousness is a great force in human lives.

In human history self-consciousness goes back at least to neolithic times, when graves were decorated with red ochre, marked with great stones, and endowed with weapons, jewelry, servants and food to accompany the dead soul to the underworld. Tens of thousands of years ago humans started to decorate their bodies, to perform dance displays and group rites, engage in ancestor worship, identify with clan animals, propitiate dead enemies and animals, and worship gods and spirits. All those activities address the question, 'How do I look?'

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What do they think of me? Will the gods who are seeing us now give us luck in tomorrow's hunt? Will they punish my breach of some taboo?' Those are intensely self-conscious questions.

Curiously, it is postmodernism that has an endless obsession with the observing self. The very word '*post*-modernism' is a proclamation to the world that the 'modern' era is no longer legitimate: there is a 'crisis of modernity'. Now this is a rather self-serving 'crisis', since it enables postmodernism to march on to the centre stage. Thus there is a lot of self-obsession in the very act of proclaiming postmodernism. At the centre of the circle of mirrors is the ego of the PoMo observer, entranced by in his or her own reflections. It is the demigod Narcissus hypnotized by an infinite regress of self-images.

Postmodernism seems rather vain. Other cultures are much more pessimistic in their self-conscious thoughts. The Biblical wisdom literature says, 'Vanity of vanities / All is vanity.' Iconic representations are prohibited in Judaism and Islam precisely to avoid the temptation of self-glorification. Such a pessimistic and self-critical view of the self is also in tune with Graeco-Roman Stoicism and with traditional Christianity. Buddhism begins pessimistically with the reality of pervasive suffering and degradation in human life. The Jews, according to tradition, smashed all their musical instruments after the destruction of the Second Temple, and thereafter only allowed one singer to lead the liturgy. It was a devastating act of self-abnegation, a symbolic destruction of pride.

So human cultures, including postmodernism itself, all seem to bring out certain self-conscious emotions, ranging from vanity to profound self-abnegation. A cynic might say that all human cultures try to answer the plaintive question, 'Well, what about *me*?' A technological civilization provides all the necessities in life except for personal significance: no wonder postmodernism is obsessed with itself.

The Maids of Honour

Las Meninas gives us an interesting mix of pride and humility. The maids of honour surround the Infanta Margarita in the brightly lit front of the painting. But the Infanta herself glances to the side, as if looking in a mirror and wondering, 'Do I look pretty?' The only human being in the painting who does not seem to be posed in a self-conscious way is the little girl running into the scene from the right, apparently pushing the dog with her foot. She is the only spontaneous, un-self-conscious character in a royal culture of pride and show.

The give-away for me is the depiction of Velasquez himself, very much the tall, handsome, and saturnine Hispanic grandee, looking at the Infanta. Toward the rear wall of the painting, Velasquez' figure is echoed by another brightly lit black-clad watcher, outside the door of the family room. Velasquez and the mysterious outsider, dressed identically, hold the centre of the painting between them, like two bookends.

Las Meninas evokes Rembrandt's famous series of self-portraits, beginning with his first mirror painting as a young man, shamelessly revealing his enthusiastic self-love. 'Dude, you are cute!' we can imagine him murmuring to himself. Near the end of his life, Rembrandt's last self-portrait shows an elderly man who seems still to be mourning the loss of his beloved wife Saskia: 'Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything', as Shakespeare put it in *As You Like It*.

What is astonishing about the Rembrandt self-portraits is their fearlessness. It is the young Rembrandt, after all, who paints himself as being in love with his own image. And it is the same absolutely honest eyes, a lifetime later, who see him in old age. The *objects* of those paintings are always true to the externals of life; but the conscious observer is absolutely clear in his ruthless determination to paint the truth. It is as if the observing ego remains clear and consistent while only the body changes.

What about Velasquez? In *Las Meninas* we see him as an image of manly strength. Like the young Rembrandt, the Spanish painter does not hesitate to show his self-approbation. His appearance reflects the courtly ideal of the age. The greatest contrast is to the figures of King Philip IV and Queen Mariana, shown in a deliberately vague and distant mirror image against the rear wall of the room. It is an enormous paradox.

Remember, this is the proudest royal family in Europe at the time, in a chivalric Hispanic culture in which the ideal ruler is a glorified man on a horse, who rules and dominates his people. Velasquez's image of the royal couple undermines that ideal in the most shocking way. They are shown far back, hovering over the central scene like ancestral spirits, secreted in a mirrored niche. Precisely where they are located at all is a puzzle. Their substantial reality seems to be in question.

Contrary to all the social conventions of the time, it is the King and Queen who are made to look fragmentary and unreal, and the painter — who was after all only a servant hired to glorify the royal family — who stands out as handsome and real. It seems like a slap in the face to all the public pieties of the Golden Age of Spain. Just imagine one of

today's *caudillos* on the international scene — Vladimir Putin or Hugo Chavez — being satisfied with such a painting.

So it's a puzzle picture. Those sharp violations of social and political conventions are not accidental. They signal something.

In the foreground, the female dwarf is a comical companion, a kind of court fool. Yet she is placed at the forefront, equal in prominence to the Infanta Margarita herself. The painter seems to be telling us how this child of promise, who will be Queen some day, is not so different from the royal fool after all.

Even the dog looks gloomy, stretched out toward us on the floor. His head is bulging and frowning, echoing the bulging head of the dwarf, as if the painter is pointing by contrast to the fleeting fragility of the Infanta's self-conscious prettiness.

How did Velasquez get away with this *lése majesté*? In Europe at the height of royal power, a painting like this would be taken as satire or a deadly insult. Louis XIV would not have tolerated it. Being royal meant being surrounded by lifelong flattery and obsequiousness. Painters and sculptors were expected to embellish the royal figure, not make it look ridiculous.

I would suggest that Velasquez painted the characters this way because the royal family itself was in deep sympathy with the theme of human vanity. Historians believe that Velasquez was a personal favourite of the King, in a society where social distances were huge and often unbridgeable. In those circumstances, friendships across the social chasm had to be kept private. This is a very private painting, according to the history, to be kept in the royal apartments and not for public display. To show it in public might have caused an uproar. The prestige of the King was at stake, and with King's reputation went the power of his court and even the survival of the state.

Perhaps we should see *Las Meninas* as a private conversation between Velasquez and his patron, a message among friends who shared the same deeply pessimistic outlook. Politically, this was a time of decline for Spain and its royal house. *Las Meninas* is dated 1656. Eight years before, the Treaty of Westphalia marked the end of Spanish and Catholic dominance in Europe, and the beginnings of the modern nation-state. Ten years before *Las Meninas*, in 1646, the heir-presumptive to the throne, Baltasar Carlos, had died. In the absence of a healthy male heir the royal succession was in doubt. That may be one reason for the gloomy feeling this painting evokes.

Wikipedia notes about Philip IV

The utter exhaustion of his people in the course of perpetual war, against the Netherlands, France, Portugal, Protestant forces in the Holy Roman Empire and Great Britain, was seen by (Philip IV) with sympathy, but he considered it an unavoidable misfortune

He was idealised by his contemporaries as the model of Baroque kingship. Outwardly he maintained a bearing of rigid solemnity, and was seen to laugh only three times in the course of his entire public life.

But, in private, his court was grossly corrupt. Victorian historians prudishly attributed the early death of his eldest son, Baltasar Carlos, to debauchery, encouraged by the gentlemen entrusted by the king with his education. This shocked the king, but its effect soon wore off. Philip IV died broken-hearted in 1665, expressing the pious hope that his surviving son, Carlos, would be more fortunate than himself.

I cannot avoid mentioning the greatest novel of the time, *Don Quixote*, which constantly plays off the hero's dreams of a grandiose life of chivalry against the grubby facts of reality. Cervantes' book was written at the beginning of the century, but it must have been well-known to Velasquez and his circle. *Don Quixote* gave a comical cast to the images of chivalry which rose to their peak in the royal house itself. By the reign of Philip IV, Cervantes' satire must have seemed to be coming close to reality.

Are There Any Lessons To Be Learned?

One point is the intensely emotional nature of self-consciousness. A lot of our self-conscious reasoning works in the service of ego, of pride and shame. Only in very early childhood are we free from wondering about ourselves.

Human self-conscious emotions are quite old and enormously powerful, as shown in tens of thousands of neolithic grave sites, and much rarer cave paintings. Even the great pyramids of Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, South-East Asia, and Meso-America reflect an obsessive self-consciousness that made empires try to transcend the limitations of death itself.

So basic are the self-conscious emotions that the most self-conscious philosophical movement in history, postmodernism, is not immune to its own emotions.

Postmodern thinking is above all *emotionally* self-conscious, because it struggles to answer the question of every other culture: 'What about *me*? What is my role and purpose in the world?' But PoMo gives no answers, just more and more reflections of the self in the circle of mirrors.