

Diego Velazquez

This article was written to
Pretty-Molly-Betty
who once fled El Prado Museum
she found gloomy and morose.
I agree though I am addicted to it.

The Velazquez show, you would have fled, again. Unquestionably he was a representational genius but with a freak visual brain, hit, as it were, by the 'stroke' of genius intelligence. The damage was made worse by his being stuck so long in the numbing corridors of the worse kind of Spanish-German-Habsburg-Protestant-Catholic palaces. A royal family of haemophiliac sickly inbred power inheritors propped up on massive gorgeous horses by acid buffoons. The exhibition closes with a *coup-de-théâtre*: an amazing enormous white horse. But dreadful, really. Marcel Duchamp is a descendant of his: deadly gentlemen. My fantasy is that poor Diego's heart (Sevillan – he comes out of the realist provincial “bodegon”), was ravaged when he saw Caravaggio's paintings: the sensuality, the daring, the pleasure, violence, transgression, the scandalous theatricality, all of which was morally and politically totally out of his reach, forbidden, closeted. I do admire and envy, for sure, his famous *sforzatura* brushstrokes, OK. And his amazing faces and the hazed lighting atmospheres of his conceptual spatial settings (they beat any contemporary installation). But a lot of the portraits: incredibly well painted disasters. That dreadful Pope! (And he called himself Innocent!)¹



One thing: I did spend absolutely privileged time with the National Gallery Mirror Venus; imagine, alone for ten minutes or more with her! The museum guard came and chatted me up a bit, saying this was the best time to come to the show – late-evening openings. Sure: I was hesitating whether to start caressing her curves and kissing her bum. She seems a lovely enough milkie sweetie. But, is she not actually a simple, cute soubrette, a maid – like in *Las Hilanderas*² - which is maybe my favourite of Velazquez's paintings? Were these girls his *péché mignon*? Or his *anima* figure, as our Jungian friends would put it? I am not at all sure what

¹ A fellow and similarly twisted-minded painter, nowhere near Velazquez's status though, took to this dreadful prelate and his awful cage-like chair: Francis Bacon. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Study_after_Vel%C3%A1zquez%27s_Portrait_of_Pope_Innocent_X
² See: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Las_Hilanderas_\(Velázquez\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Las_Hilanderas_(Velázquez))

would happen if she turned round and we saw her face. Peruvians warn: “Cuerpo de tentación, cara de arrepentimiento.”³ She is also a strange prostitute (yes: Venus is *Porneia*): beautiful buttocks and gorgeous curved waist (yes: Betty Page) but no smile, no twinkle, no flower, no adornment, no perfume. It seems like another of Velazquez’s miraculous hazy, glowing “visages”. Or is there something else at play? I could not understand why the face in the mirror was bigger than her head, since it is further away from us, onlookers... Is this another inverted, nasty, anti-mythology perspective twist of old Diego’s? He is want to get his own back in this type of convoluted fashion, unable to pick up the whores and boys that Caravaggio did.... See his horrible genius at work in *Los Borrachos*⁴ (not in the Paris show.) Or his supreme intellectually vicious *The Forge* (which is in the show): petulant Apollo-Felipon⁵ posing as a *Noli me tangere* holier-than-thou Christ snitch, reporting to ‘poor hard-working proletarian’ Vulcano, in front of all his apprentices: “your wife is in bed with Mars...” The bastard! The framing and every detail of this painting show utter painterly intelligence. But it’s also the most unsexy painting there is. If you enter the scene’s jealousy paranoid plot (including its sweaty forge-sauna homoerotics) and the *delirium tremens* that followed (in mythology, Vulcano-Hephaistos throws the biggest cuckold brat temper there ever was!) you might even see Venus there, in that amazing white jug on the chimney edge, showing her behind...



Returning to the Venus mirror perspective inversion: someone must have speculated on its meaning. I remember Octavio Paz worked something out - mind you, he was an admirer of Diego Duchamp. I found it suspicious... Forbidding: that face in the mirror would stop me on my tracks from getting into bed with the girl... Why the contraption? It gives me a feeling that a dark *pícaro* Velazquez might be behind the curtain filming through a one-way mirror (somewhat like in *Las Meninas*). There are silk sheets, granted, and the somewhat leaded curtains (so far from Tiepolo’s Pink!⁶), but its not a very sensual, not very “venereal” boudoir, with only one meagre pink ribbon. I would have appreciated a bit of twinkling lights in the style of Bois de Vincennes fourgonettes.

³ Body of temptation, face of repentance.

⁴ See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Triumph_of_Bacchus

⁵ Velazquez gets dangerously close, in my view, to the similarity of traits between this Apollo and young blondie King Felipe (maybe the most astonishing full-size portrait in the Paris show.)

⁶ *Tiepolo Pink*, the title of one of the greatest art history books I’ve read, by Italy’s Roberto Calasso.

This was probably my last exhibition ever now. Basta. It is also now chic-seedy: all these "great masters" exhibitions. Lots of second-rate fill-in painters for maybe two or three masterpieces (five or six in this show.) And lots of very well-dressed couples kissing and cooing while sharing an audio recorded tour machine... I wonder if my other friend, Hermes, would have said again, as he did when Mars and Venus were caught in bed *in flagrante*: it was all worth it for that prime time with Venus...

Nota – I did find the Octavio Paz reference! (Viva Google!) Paz belongs to the “amplification” encyclopaedic generation, steeped in comparative scholarship; he does not address Velazquez through critical psycho-mythology. What he brings up, the analogy with Posada’s engraving, is an erudite, erotic-grotesque gentleman’s curiosity. Funny and somewhat scabrous, especially when linked to the Spanish saying: « ¿Qué tiene que ver el culo con las pestañas? »⁷

Checking this out led me to another mythological reference: Perseus and the mirror. In brief, Perseus had to cut the Gorgon Medusa’s head off, but he had to do so without catching her direct gaze which would turn him instantaneously into stone. The Gorgon is another irresistible feminine figure-*locus*, so the corridors leading down to her... ‘boudoir’ are full of heroic young men turned into granite statues (not unlike the frozen ones in the palace of the Iceberg Princess, described in Anna Griève’s book⁸.) Perseus decapitates the Gorgon Medusa by using a mirror (an indirect gaze.) The Medusa was Freud’s ultimate castrating female symbol, the famous *Vagina Dentata*, with vipers as pubic hair. I am sure Velazquez had all this somewhere in his mind while composing his apparently gentle, and even innocent-looking girl Venus. What triggered this association for me was Caravaggio’s very own Medusa. If you think all this is a delirious paranoid sidetrack, check the camel on the helmet of Velazquez’s Mars portrait (Venus’ favourite lover after all!): a broadside against mythology in the guise of an allegory against war⁹. Velazquez remained a court painter all his life, seeking advancement as a high-ranking bureaucrat. But Caravaggio had stolen his innocence away. The resulting mixture can be virtiolic.



One last note. I was never actually alone with Venus at the Grand Palais: there was someone else in the room. The curators of the exhibition placed the famous classical statue of the lying Hermaphrodite near to Diego’s Venus. I question this juxtaposition. One could say that the likeness is there but I found it too far-

⁷ See the Spanish-Mexican somewhat gross references in an article by Samuel Sotillo: <http://samuelsotillo.com/2013/08/24/las-metaforas-y-las-asentaderas/> The saying translates as “what is the link between arse and eyelashes?” There may be a further link here with Duchamp planting his LHOQQ under Mona Lisa.

⁸ The Iceberg Princesse is the Gipsy tale that Anna Griève analyses in her book : *Les Trois Corbeaux / Pour une science du mal dans les contes merveilleux*. Editions Imago, Paris, 2010.

⁹ Classic iconography is mostly ruled by historians who love deciphering the allegorical gossip in mythological paintings – and in the protocol details of royalty portraits. Power politics, above all. Of course such information sheds light onto the choices of painters. In Velazquez’s case these layered comments are very complex; El Prado is in many ways his private *pinacoteca*.

fetcher, too clever for Velazquez' contextual psychology, i.e. the suggestion that if the Sevillian Cupid tilts down the mirror we would see a hairy Medusa's vipers shrub, or a boy's cute sexual organs, like with the Hermaphrodite. I am only suggesting here - with a pinch of salt (and I think Velazquez paints with excess alchemical salt and dangerous doses of mercury – the very mixture that leads to the alchemical vitriol mentioned above) – suggesting that he was deeply disturbed and stirred by Caravaggio's (bi)sexual 'mobility'. I would have preferred the juxtaposition with the Venus Callipyge statue – Venus of the beautiful buttocks - because of the way she shows off, but also gratifies and challenges our gaze with her beautiful behind.

Dear Diego: I hate loving you, though, probably, I love hating you. (Whereas I love loving Caravaggio!)



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