

# Hub Edits

Introduction:

*Las Meninas* is a strange, beautiful painting. Its intricacies and indeed labyrinths of representation give the viewer so many points of entry and yet all of them resist interpretation. What makes this painting so intriguing is its apparent simplicity – no single element is itself incomprehensible; strange, perhaps, but by no means incomprehensible. Yet these elements grouped together, the scene they set in motion, and the initial genesis of that motion, these matters become suddenly mystifying. The result is that one can engage with this painting and continue finding new meaning and relations, continue experiencing how its simplicity opens into complexity.

Michel Foucault's essay, simply titled "Las Meninas" and first published in his book *The Order of Things* (1966), analyzes the structure and aesthetics at play in this Velázquez masterpiece. Although this is not a traditional essay on literary theory or the craft of story, it is important for writers to consider this type of aesthetic and structural analysis as a means of understanding the shape and relations in their work.

Before reading these notes on Foucault's essay, it is worthwhile to acquaint yourself with the painting itself: its figures and its overall form. Below, I have included an image of the painting to help ground you in the essay. Enjoy!

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- **Michel Foucault, *Las Meninas***
- “The painter is standing a little back from his canvas. He is glancing at his model; perhaps he is considering whether to add some finishing touch, though it is also possible that the first stroke has not yet been made...between the fine point of the brush and the steely gaze, the scene is about to yield up its volume.”
- The painter in the painting, Velázquez himself, has placed himself to one side of the painting on which he is working
  - For us, the spectator, the painter appears at the right of his canvas – he is not obscured by his large canvas but at any moment he may step to the side and go back behind the canvas he is working on and disappear from us
  - “He has no doubt just appeared, at this very instant, before the eyes of the spectator...now he can be seen, caught in a moment of stillness.”
    - Once the painter steps back behind his canvas, “he will enter that region where his painting, neglected for an instant, will for him, become visible once more, free of shadow and free of reticence.”
      - The canvas painted in the painting is the other, the hidden, since no one, not even the painter, is looking at it
    - The effect created is making us believe the painter cannot simultaneously “be seen on the picture where he is represented and also see that upon which he is representing himself.”
    - Thus the painter stands now at the threshold of two mutually exclusive moments – painting, and being seen
- In the painting, the painter is directing his eyes towards us only in so far as we happen to occupy the same position as his subject
  - The scene upon which the painter is gazing is not accessible to us because it is not represented
    - We could guess what the painter is looking at if we could glance at the canvas he is working on, but all we are permitted to see is the rigid, geometrically structured reverse side of the canvas
  - There is a line from the eyes of the painter to that which he is observing, and since we stand right in the field he is observing, that line runs through us – it runs through the picture and ultimately off the canvas itself into our presence
    - Because we are held in this gaze and on this line of observation we are then linked to the representation of the picture
    - This begins as a simple form of reciprocity: we are looking at a picture in which the painter is looking at us
      - And yet this seemingly simple reciprocal act of looking reveals a tangle of uncertainties
  - Although we, the spectators, are greeted by that gaze we are also dismissed by it, replaced by that which was always there before we were: the model whom the painter is looking at
  - “But, inversely, the painter’s gaze, addressed to the void outside the picture, accepts as many models as there are spectators”
  - “In this precise but neutral place, the observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange”

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- In the neutral gaze of the painter in the painting (Velázquez himself) the spectator and the model, the subject and object, reverse their roles to infinity, each reciprocating the role of subject and object depending on position
  - The canvas in the painting, whose back is to us, stays stubbornly invisible – it prevents the relationship of these gazes from ever being discoverable or definitely established
    - “Because we can see only that reverse side, we do not know who we are, or what we are doing – seeing or being seen?”
  - The painter is observing us from a place that keeps changing its relation, its content, its identity
    - But the fact that the painter’s eyes cannot move actually refers us back to what the painter might soon be looking at: the motionless canvas
    - We can trace a triangular pattern between the painter’s eyes, the invisible place occupied by the model, and the surface of the canvas on which the painter is working
- As soon as they place the spectator in the field of their gaze, the painter’s eyes seize hold of him, force him to enter the picture
  - The spectator is given a privileged position – that of being looked at by the painter
  - The spectator, who is invisible to himself in the way we are unable to see our face (without a mirror) is nonetheless visible to the painter
  - And so this privileged position is also a trap, something that enlightens us to our being observed while at the same time reminding us we are invisible to ourselves
- The overall painting is lit by light coming through a window at the extreme right of the canvas (the window itself is not depicted, merely the light coming through it)
  - The window is the common ground of the painting, since its lights captures everyone in the painting
  - “From the right of the painting there streams in through an invisible window the pure volume of a light that renders all representation visible”
    - “To the left extends the surface that conceals, on the other side of its all too visible woven texture, the representation it bears”
- So in the painting we are observing ourselves being observed by the painter; he can see us by dint of the light that lets us see him
  - “And just as we are about to apprehend ourselves [be seeing the canvase the painter is working on], transcribed by his hand as though in a mirror, we find that we can in fact apprehend nothing of that mirror but its lusterless back – the other side of a psyche.”
- On the back wall of the painting are hung several canvasses, but only one stands out, one that “shines with a particular brightness”
  - The canvas in the center of the painting has a thicker frame around it, and a thin white line around its borders, and appears lit but from an unknown source
  - Of all the canvases shown in the salon or studio where this scene is taking place, this especially bright one is the only one that fulfills its function as it allows us to see what is represented on it

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- However, this is not a canvas at all but a mirror, showing us the actual subjects of the large canvas that has its back to us in the painting
  - No one in the painting is looking at this mirror – most of the figures in the painting, including the painter, are staring at the subjects of the painting within the painting
    - “Of all the representations represented in the picture this is the only one visible; but no one is looking at it.”
    - The figures are all turned to face what is taking place in front; in other words, the figures are mostly gazing out at those (the subjects being painted) who must be gazing back at them
    - This indifference to the mirror is equaled by the mirror’s own indifference
      - The mirror is actually reflecting nothing of all that it could be reflecting - it reflects neither the painter, nor the other figures in the room, nor the room itself
  - “In Dutch painting it was traditional for mirrors to play a duplicating role: they repeated the original contents of the picture, only inside an unreal, modified, contracted, concave space”
    - One saw in the mirrors of these Dutch paintings, the same things as one saw in the first instance in the painting, but “decomposed and recomposed according to a different law”
  - In *Las Meninas*, the position of the mirror is completely central
    - Therefore, given the location of the mirror, we ought to expect it to reflect the breadth of the room in front of it and not narrowly show only the two figures all the way opposite it
    - “The mirror cuts straight through the whole field of the representation, ignoring all it might apprehend in that field, and restores visibility to that which resides outside all view”
    - The mirror is addressing itself to what is invisible
      - It reflects that thing that all the figures in the painting are looking at (at least, those figures who are looking straight ahead)
      - “It is therefore what the spectator would be able to see if the painting extended further forward”
    - At the far end of the hall, ignored by everyone, the surprising mirror “holds in its glow the figures that the painter is looking at, but also the figures that are looking at the painter”
    - In the overall painting we see a painter at work, painting his subjects and looking at them more or less straight on
      - Thus, by very nature of the theme of this painting we can never see the subjects the painter is looking at within the same painting
      - The mirror then is the device that allows us to see, in the center of the canvas, what is invisible in the painting
  - Ironically, Velázquez himself was supposedly told by his mentor: “The image should stand out from the frame.”
- II.
  - The mirror and the window

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- “The window operates by the continuous movement of an effusion which, flowing from right to left, unites the attentive figures, the painter, and the canvas, with the spectacle they are observing; whereas the mirror, on the other hand, by means of a violent, instantaneous movement, a movement of pure surprise, leaps out from the picture in order to reach that which is observed yet invisible in front of it, and then, at the far end of its fictitious depth, to render it visible yet indifferent to every gaze.”
- To the right of the mirror are steps and an open door leading to a corridor
  - In the corridor is dazzling yellow light that never enters the room
  - Its brightness makes it a near limitless space and against this limitless space a man stands in profile
    - The man’s feet are on different steps; one knee is bent
    - He may be about to enter the room or he may be pausing there to observe what is going on inside or he may be leaving the room
    - We do not know where this man is coming from
      - If he is arriving he is coming from connected series of corridors we can never have access to
      - If he is leaving, he could have been standing in the forefront of the scene (the part invisible in the painting) just a short while ago
    - Nevertheless, he appears on the threshold of the area represented, coming in and going out at the same time
- From the painter’s gaze, which makes up an “off-center center to the left” we then see the back of the massive canvas on which he is painting, then we move back to the paintings hung on the back wall (with the mirror in the center), then to the open doorway, then to more paintings on the right-hand wall, and then, finally, at the extreme right, the window (which is really just an indenture from which light is emitted; we do not see the window itself)
  - This shape resembles that of a spiral
- In the foreground are eight figures including the painter
  - Five of these figures, their heads somewhat bent or turned perhaps, are looking straight out of the picture at the invisible subjects
  - At the center of this group in the foreground is the little Infanta (historically she is Margaret Theresa, daughter of Philip IV, King of Spain)
    - A vertical line cutting the canvas into equal halves would pass right between her eyes
- Beyond all question, the Infanta, the young girl being waited on, is the true focus of the painting
  - She captures the most light, is more or less centered
  - Also, to emphasize her, Velazquez makes use of a traditional visual device – beside her he has placed a secondary figure, kneeling and looking in towards the central figure
    - “Like a donor in prayer, like an angel greeting the Virgin, a maid of honor on her knees is stretching out her hands towards the princess”
    - This maid’s face stands out in perfect profile against the background
      - Her face is at the same height as that of the child

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- She is looking at the princess and only at her
  - A little to the right there is a second maid of honor – she is turned toward the Infanta, leaning over her somewhat, but this maid’s eyes are clearly not looking at the Infanta but at the front, at the same spot already being looked upon by both the painter and the Infanta
- The remaining figures in the foreground are in pairs – the two dwarfs standing at the far right, the two attendants in the middle ground
  - In both these groups of two, one person is looking at the front and one looking away
  - If the painter on the left-side and the male-courtier in the back of the foreground on the right-side represented opposite lines of an X, the X would cross right at the Infanta’s face
  - The princess is then standing in the center of a St. Andrew’s cross, which is revolving around her with its “eddies of courtiers, maids of honor, animals, and fools.”
    - But this pivoting movement is frozen by the spectacle wherein all characters have suddenly become motionless, have paused to look out at something
      - And it is only by the presence of the mirror that we are able to understand why this swirling scene has come to a sudden pause, able to see what these figures have themselves paused to see
- What then, we ask, is in that invisible, inaccessible place (inaccessible because it is “exterior” to the picture)
  - “What is the spectacle, what are the faces that are reflected first of all in the depths of the Infanta’s eyes, then in the courtiers’ and the painter’s, and finally in the distant glow of the mirror?”
- This painting then has two apparent centers – one is the Infanta and the other, is the mirror wherein the images of the king and queen stare out
  - The center then really depends on where the spectator decides to concentrate and make the center
- The question of this painting is a double one – one of who is looking at whom
  - The Infanta and her attendants and the painter are observing the king and queen, who are in turn observing all the people gathered in the room
  - “The entire picture is looking out at a scene for which it is itself a scene”
    - “It is a condition of pure reciprocity manifested by the observing and observed mirror”
    - The only “element” that is not looking at anything, or even moving, is the dog
      - It is not “intended...to be anything but an object to be seen.”
- One can sense the presence of the two sovereigns, the king and the queen, as one looks at this painting – they are what create the spectacle in the first place
  - It is the respectful glances of the figures, the “astonished” face of the Infanta that hint at their presence
  - Yet, “in the midst of all the attentive faces looking at them, all those richly dressed bodies, [the two sovereigns] are the palest, the most unreal, the most

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compromised of all the painting's images: a movement, a little light, would be sufficient to eclipse them." (this eclipse being their eclipse from the only surface in which they are visible: the mirror)

- The reflection of the sovereigns, the only corporeal depiction of them in the painting, is in fact the most ignored aspect of the painting since everyone in the room is not facing the back mirror
  - "In so far as they are visible they are the frailest and the most distant form of all reality"
  - "Inversely, in so far as they stand outside the picture and are therefore withdrawn from it in an essential invisibility, they provide the center around which the entire representation is ordered: it is they who are being faced, it is towards them that everyone is turned, it is to their eyes that the princess is being presented in her holiday clothes"
    - This center is "symbolically sovereign" since it is occupied by the king and queen
    - Their presence exists at an ideal point (since they are not visible) but a "perfectly real one too" since their invisible presence is what sets the whole painted scene in motion
    - Their reflection in the mirror on the back wall "restores, as if by magic" what is beheld in everyone's gaze
      - In fact the thing reflected in the mirror is the only thing not in the painting
        - Nothing internal and present in the painting is reflected, only that which is external
      - The function of the mirror then is to place in the interior of the painting that which is forever going to be foreign to the painting because it is not represented – this is the likeness of the king and queen or, as Foucault calls it, "the gaze which has organized it and the gaze for which it is displayed"
  - It may be that, in this picture, as in all representations – the profound invisibility of what one sees is inseparable from the invisibility of the person seeing
- Foucault's conclusion: "Indeed representation undertakes to represent itself here in all its elements, with its images, the eyes to which it is offered, the faces it makes visible, the gestures that call it into being. But there, in the midst of this dispersion which it is simultaneously grouping together and spreading out before us, indicated compellingly from every side, is an essential void: the necessary disappearance of that which is its foundation...and representation, freed finally from the relation that was impeding it, can offer itself as representation in its pure form."