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Baroque Poetics and the Logic of Hispanic Exceptionalism

by

Allen E. Young

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

Committee in charge:

Professor Francine Masiello, Co-chair  
Professor Michael Iarocci, Co-chair  
Professor Robert Kaufman

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Abstract

Baroque Poetics and the Logic of Hispanic Exceptionalism

by

Allen Young

Doctor of Philosophy in Hispanic Languages and Literatures

University of California, Berkeley

Professors Francine Masiello and Michael Iarocci, Chairs

In this dissertation I study the how the baroque is used to understand aesthetic modernity in twentieth-century Spain and Latin America. My argument is that the baroque, in contemporary Hispanic and Latin American studies, functions as a myth of cultural exceptionalism, letting critics recast avant-garde and postmodern innovation as fidelity to a timeless essence or identity. By viewing much contemporary Spanish-language as a return to a baroque tradition—and not in light of international trends—critics in effect justify Spain and Latin America’s exclusion from broader discussions of modern literature. Against this widespread view, I propose an alternative vision drawn from the work of Gerardo Diego, José Lezama Lima and Severo Sarduy. These authors see the baroque not as an ahistorical, fundamentally Hispanic sensibility located outside the modern, but as an active dialogue with the wider world. In very different ways, they use the baroque to place the Hispanic world decidedly inside global aesthetic modernity.

In contrast to most contemporary scholarship on the topic, I do not take the baroque to be a predefined aesthetic practice, readily identifiable in seventeenth- or twentieth-century authors. Rather, I see it as a conceptual tool that can be, and has been, put to an array of different uses—among other things, to situate Spain and Latin America in relationship to the rest of the world. My approach thus highlights the term’s ideological valence, focusing on what it does instead of what it designates. The baroque’s current function, as a way to sideline the Hispanic world from a larger understanding of international aesthetic modernity, came about slowly and in response to political events (particularly the Spanish Civil War and the Cuban Revolution). Other visions of the baroque—other uses of this tool—offer more productive models of cultural dialogue and inclusion. These more compelling visions are what I find in the work of Diego, Lezama and Sarduy.

In chapter one I examine contemporary criticism and underline the contradictions inherent in viewing the baroque as an alternative, regional modernity. In the second chapter I trace the concept’s genealogy from nineteenth-century art history to contemporary Iberian and Latin American studies, in order to explore how it acquired its current functions. Diego and the 1927 group form the basis of the third chapter, in which I consider the baroque as a site of struggle over Spain’s cultural legacy, both before and

after the country's Civil War. In chapter four I read Lezama Lima's baroque in light of his teleological, future-oriented poetics, while in the fifth and final chapter I study how Sarduy theorized the baroque as epistemic groundlessness, arguing that it became for him—and for many others—a literary or cultural substitute for revolution. These three writers present visions of the baroque that do not exclude the Hispanic world but make it an integral part of what it means to be modern.

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For Dean

## Preface and Acknowledgments

In this dissertation I attempt to make sense of the concept of the baroque as it is used in contemporary Hispanic and Latin American studies, and specifically to understand how writers use it to relate Spain and Latin America to a larger narrative of modern art and literature. The project arose first of all out of sense of confusion: I have long been fascinated by a handful of twentieth-century writers commonly called “baroque” or “neobaroque.” But I never quite understood what exactly this label meant, and the definitions I most often came across—a certain exuberance or excess, a convoluted style or a subversive spirit—seemed to me hopelessly vague. Pinning down the term seemed all but impossible, so I soon turned to my attention to a different (and ultimately more interesting) set of questions: Why does the baroque loom so large in discussions of twentieth-century Spanish-language writing? What does this concept *do*? And why does it remain so unfamiliar among English speakers, even scholars of contemporary literature?

In the pages that follow I seek to answer those questions, first by examining the often very troubling ways the concept functions in contemporary Hispanic and Latin American studies, then by tracing its development from art history to literary criticism, and finally—and most centrally—by considering the very compelling, diverse and surprising ways it appears in the aesthetic thought of three twentieth-century writers: the Spaniard Gerardo Diego (1896-1987) and the Cubans José Lezama Lima (1910-76) and Severo Sarduy (1937-93). These writers offer a corrective to the exclusionary, exceptionalist approach of much contemporary scholarship. The details of this argument, along with its polemical stakes, are laid out in the introduction and the chapters that follow. For now I wish only to note that I have two complementary aims: on the one hand, to offer a sort of intellectual history of one of the key tools in the conceptual toolbox of contemporary Hispanism and Latin Americanism (namely, the baroque), and on the other, to advance an argument about the more productive and valuable ways that tool has been and could again be used.

This dissertation is part of (and a draft of) a larger project that will eventually include chapters on, perhaps among others, the Catalan art critic Eugeni d’Ors, the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier and the Argentine poet Néstor Perlongher, each of whom has played an important role in the history of the baroque. I hope that the reader will approach it as, if not exactly a work in progress, a work awaiting future expansion and development.

Dissertation writing is a long and lonely affair, but I could not have done it by myself, and I am grateful to the many people whose intellectual, moral, and financial support allowed me to see it to the end. First I wish to thank my parents, my sister Amelia and my brother Brian for their loving encouragement and pecuniary assistance over the past years. The University of California, Berkeley and the Department of Spanish and Portuguese provided various fellowships for the completion of this project, and the multi-campus U.C. Cuba research initiative generously funded a research trip to Havana. My dissertation committee, Francine Masiello, Michael Iarocci and Rob Kaufman, have provided invaluable guidance and advice about the project’s argument, scope and style,



and have above all helped me figure out exactly what I wanted to say. Others at Berkeley and elsewhere have likewise offered feedback at various points of the project, and in particular I would like to thank Anthony Cascardi, Natalia Brizuela, and Jesús Rodríguez-Velasco. Verónica López deserves special thanks for helping me navigate the many administrative labyrinths that completing a dissertation inevitably entails. Among the many friends and colleagues who have commented on or edited chapters, I owe an especially large debt to Karen Spira, J. Bradley Rogers, Mary Lee, Sarah Townsend, Juan Caballero, Paul Norberg, Amanda Doxtater and Laura Horak. But I reserve my deepest gratitude for my loving partner Dean, who has offered boundless intellectual inspiration and moral support, and to whom the following pages are dedicated.

**Introduction to**

**Baroque Poetics and the  
Logic of Hispanic Exceptionalism**

“Baroque” might call to mind a handful of associations: St. Peter’s Square in Rome, Velázquez and *Las meninas*, Bach’s arithmetic fugues, Bernini’s marble sculpture of St. Teresa, pierced by an ecstasy more earthly than divine. More loosely it suggests excess and complication, describing anything overwrought, overdone, overblown. But within the Spanish-speaking world, the baroque carries a very different set of associations, and it does more than name a period in the history of culture or a style of art or music. As this study explores, it frames a way of thinking about Spain and Latin America, their ties to each other, their relationship to their past, and above all their exceptional place inside or outside the modern world. It calls to mind contemporary fiction and poetry as much as seventeenth-century painting, and it is regularly applied the present as well as the past. Understanding how and why the baroque has taken on such a weighty role—and in particular how these concerns manifest themselves in the work of Gerardo Diego, José Lezama Lima and Severo Sarduy—is the aim of the following pages.

But to begin with the baroque in the narrower sense: as a period, the baroque extends the length of the seventeenth century, give or take a few decades, and abuts the Renaissance on one end and Neoclassicism on the other, sometimes buffered by mannerism or rococo. In stylistic terms, it points to a number of formal and thematic traits: heightened contrast, lavish ornamentation, asymmetry, extreme passion, a taste for the obscure and the exotic, a fascination with the theatrical, a morbid fixation on death, a flair for the monumental and a *horror vacui* or “dread of emptiness.” It follows in the wake of a dramatic challenge to, and retrenchment in, religious orthodoxy—the Copernican revolution and the Council of Trent—and it responds by giving the spiritual and metaphorical an unsettling bodily literalness. Beyond architecture, music and the visual arts, the term figures prominently in the literary history of several countries, and scholars sometimes use it (or did) as an umbrella term for seventeenth-century science, philosophy, urbanism, and a great deal more besides.<sup>1</sup>

In Hispanic literary history it occupies a particularly prominent position. It is Spain’s Golden Age, the time of Cervantes, Góngora and Calderón, the height of Spanish letters before their supposed descent into silence in the eighteenth century. In Latin America, the baroque is said to mark the origin of a continental tradition, one in which Balbuena and Lunarejo, and above all Sor Juana, gave voice to a new identity no longer reducible to its constituent indigenous, European and African elements. It is an imperial aesthetic that in America became something new, the art of the oppressor recast as an assertion of difference.

Exaggerated or not, these stories underline the baroque’s prominence on both sides of the Atlantic. But what gives the baroque in the Hispanic world an importance it does not have outside is its currency as a description of the present. In Spain and in Latin America, critics regularly use the term to discuss contemporary culture, above all literature. Since the 1970s, “baroque” has become a standard term for writing deemed exuberant, difficult, linguistically virtuosic or politically revolutionary. Sometimes

“neobaroque” is preferred to distinguish this recent phenomenon from its historical predecessor, though with or without the prefix, the fundamental premise is the same: baroque aesthetics reappear in the present and recent past.<sup>2</sup> It is most often associated with a few Cuban authors, notably José Lezama Lima and Severo Sarduy (both of whom I study here), and it has more recently been extended to several others from across Latin America and to a lesser extent Spain. Figures as distinct as Nicolás Guillén, Frida Kahlo, Jorge Luis Borges, Manuel Puig, Pedro Almodóvar and Guillermo Carnero, are now ascribed a deeper unity through the baroque.

This “return of the baroque” has become a critical commonplace within Hispanic and Latin American studies, and forty years after its original formulation it continues to drive much academic work, especially over the last decade, which has seen an explosion of criticism on the topic.<sup>3</sup> Outside Hispanic literature, too, critics occasionally use the baroque as a framework for understanding twentieth- or twenty-first-century cultural production, in Europe or the West more broadly, and some even propose it as an alternative to postmodernism.<sup>4</sup> But it is in Hispanic and Latin American criticism that the notion of a contemporary baroque has had the most success. It is often taken as proprietarily Hispanic and traced to a certain contestatory, anti-colonial political stance, and is applied to writers with little in common except their continent or language.

Just what makes these writers or their works “baroque,” however, remains distressingly elusive, for unlike the historical baroque, which exists within more-or-less agreed upon formal, thematic, ideological or epistemic bounds, the neobaroque, as used in contemporary criticism, encompasses a daunting array of styles and approaches—none of which bears an obvious relation to the seventeenth century. A cynic might even say that at its most simplistic the term serves as easy shorthand for a sort of Hispanic or Latin American nationalism. In fact, for some writers the baroque grounds a whole cultural identity: Latin America and Spain are even today avowed to be quintessentially, preeminently baroque. Alejo Carpentier’s extravagant assertion that Latin America “has always been baroque” finds an echo in critics such as Irlemar Chiampi, who not long ago called the baroque *o nosso devir permanente*—“our permanent becoming.” And they in turn point to an even earlier generation of critics who claimed Spain to be the “chosen land” of the baroque.<sup>5</sup> This odd concept lies at the center of debates on the modernity, identity, politics, and cultural autonomy of the Hispanic world.

Strangely, while there is no shortage of critical work on the historical baroque or its supposed reappearance in the twentieth century, few critics have sought to examine exactly why and how this concept achieved such undeniable prominence—or, for that matter, why it seems so natural to use it to describe the present. Some critics, like John Beverley, have voiced worry over whether the baroque’s “return” is a good or a bad thing, but few have asked whether or not it actually does return, or how one would even know.<sup>6</sup> After all, the writing now termed baroque seems more aligned with the avant-garde or postmodernism than with the early modern past. Why see it as baroque at all?

For a number of reasons that I discuss in detail in the first chapter, it would be difficult, and ultimately a little boring, to argue that the baroque does not in fact return, or that what goes under the label of neobaroque has little in common with its historical namesake. At best such an argument would amount to quibbling over nomenclature. And there is, in any event, an occasional family resemblance between (say) Lezama and Góngora, which suggests that the term makes some sense, at least for some works by some authors.

But if its awkwardness does not quite invalidate it as a description of contemporary culture, it does suggest that the term serves as something more than an aesthetic label. That is, its ubiquity and imprecision point the way to a much more interesting set of questions: rather than ask what the baroque *is*, or how and where it returns, one might plausibly study what it *does*, how it functions. These are the questions my project seeks to answer. Doing so involves setting aside, if only provisionally, the assumption that the baroque is a “thing” out there, a more or less well-defined style given to us as an object of study. I hasten to add that the baroque *is* a more or less well-defined period or style, as much as (say) Romanticism or expressionism are. But it is also a conceptual tool—a tool that in contemporary Hispanic and Latin American studies is put to a number of rhetorical, aesthetic and political uses. Above all, it lets critics assign Spain and Latin America a particular place on the map of modernity.

Over the following five chapters I seek to understand how this tool works, how it is used—as well as how intellectuals from the past used it in surprisingly different ways, and how else writers and critics might use it in the future. My argument is that the baroque serves as a troubling assertion of Hispanic exceptionalism, a way of claiming that Spain and Latin America do not quite participate in the same aesthetic modernity as mainstream Europe or North America. In effect, critics sideline the Hispanic world from shared narratives of the modern by recasting avant-garde or postmodern innovation as a constantly returning baroque—a baroque whose origin, moreover, lies in an essentialized identity. As a conceptual tool, the baroque places Spain and Latin America outside modernity.

Yet this same tool—this same term—has been used in remarkably different ways. The Spanish poet Gerardo Diego and the Cuban writers José Lezama Lima and Severo Sarduy each saw in the baroque a way of affirming the participation of Spain, Cuba and Latin America in the wider world. They wrote in very different times, held very different aesthetic and political commitments, and understood the baroque to mean correspondingly different things. Diego found in the seventeenth-century poet Luis de Góngora a model of aesthetic innovation that transcended the local; Lezama viewed the baroque as Latin America’s first moment of cultural maturity and synthesis; Sarduy defined the baroque as a break with the conservatism underlying even the most ostensibly revolutionary thought. What they have in common, as I argue in the chapters that follow, is a conviction that the baroque is a way to insert Spain and Latin America into the wider world. For each of them, the relevance of the historical baroque lies in its ability to spur on aesthetic innovation in the present, beyond the confines of the traditional or the regional. And they therefore point the way to an understanding of the baroque that does not leave the Hispanic world outside modernity, but places it decidedly and resolutely inside.

Of course, the distinction between contemporary uses of the baroque, on the one hand, and the uses that Diego, Lezama and Sarduy found for it, on the other, cannot be made so cleanly. Moreover, the baroque’s contemporary uses and meanings exist largely *because of* Diego, Lezama and Sarduy (as well as many others). In other words, they play an apparently paradoxical role, both transcending and helping found contemporary discourse on the baroque. Sarduy, in particular, exerted a considerable influence on how subsequent critics used the neobaroque, and his occasional statements about its uniquely Latin American character, for example, fostered precisely the problematic, exclusionary uses of the concept that I object to. But the bulk of his work points in a very different

direction, and presents the baroque's return as a response to a global epistemic shift, not the expression of an essentialized cultural identity. Something similar could be said about Diego and Lezama, whose thought on the baroque (and whose cultural politics generally) are far from unproblematic. On the whole, however, their baroque is mode of engagement with a wider world, and not a way to write Spain and Latin America out the history of modern culture.

As sketched out above, my argument may seem to beg the question of whether the Hispanic world really is left out of narratives of modern art and literature. Granted, exclusion and marginality look very different depending on where one stands, and even if Diego, Lezama, Sarduy or other authors occupy a marginal place in the English-speaking world, they are surely more central in Madrid or Havana, Buenos Aires or Mexico. But canonical modernists like Woolf, Proust or Kafka (for example) are central in *and* beyond their countries of origin, something that cannot be said of Diego, Lezama or Sarduy—or, for that matter, countless other Spanish and Latin American writers. To the extent that such a thing as a stable international canon of modern literature exists, the Hispanic world is largely absent, at least until the Boom. My project arises partly from the suspicion that the conceptual toolbox that Hispanist and Latin Americanist scholars use often winds up reinforcing that exclusion. In this sense the baroque might be a case study of a larger phenomenon.

I explore these issues over five independent but interlocking chapters. The first directly examines the theoretical contradictions of baroque discourse. I argue that the dominant view, which posits the baroque as an alternative or regional version of aesthetic modernity, rests on a fundamental paradox, for it implies that Spain and Latin America can be modern only by remaining faithful to an unchanging tradition. Nevertheless, this view does cast light on the limitations of conventional approaches to aesthetic modernity by revealing their unacknowledged geographic dimension. While modernity is generally understood as a historical category, a break between the present and the past, its temporal logic implies another, unrecognized break—a geographic division between a modern center and an unmodern “elsewhere.”

In the second chapter I trace the baroque's conceptual genealogy from the 1890s to the present, showing how its current role arose from earlier debates in art history about the meaning and relevance of the seventeenth century. Specifically, I follow five lines of argument, about the baroque's historical limits, its formal characteristics, its ideological orientation, its national affiliation and its relationship to modernity. This genealogical account fills an important gap in current scholarship, which tends to overlook how the concept itself was discursively constructed.

The third chapter focuses on Gerardo Diego's poetry and criticism to understand the Spanish cultural politics of the 1920s. The cosmopolitan, radically innovative aesthetics that Diego and others advocated in their own work, and found in Góngora, are recast after the Civil War as a staid renewal of Spanish tradition. In fact, at the hands of the Franco regime the baroque and the avant-garde suffer the same fate: a conservative, nationalist reinterpretation that erases their radical thrust. Diego's avant-garde reading of Góngora envisions a baroque turned toward the broader world, not just the national past.

Chapter four turns to José Lezama Lima to explore the baroque's reinvention as a post-avant-garde aesthetic grounded in processes of *mestizaje* and transculturation. Lezama produced early theoretical statements about Latin American art in the wake of the avant-garde, and his discussions of the baroque, notably in *La expresión americana*

(1957), grow out of that work. While often read as a champion of a uniquely Latin American baroque sensibility, Lezama in fact insists that the transculturation visible in the continent's historical baroque in fact shapes all cultural production, in Europe as well as America. He thus uses the baroque as an argument for the continent's relevance to a larger world. His indeterminate, teleological poetics point to a notion of identity that remains necessarily incomplete and stays open to future dialogue.

Picking up where the fourth leaves off, the fifth chapter examines Sarduy's neobaroque as a response to moment of crisis in Latin American culture—namely, a growing disillusionment with the Cuban Revolution in the 1970s. The neobaroque (a term Sarduy coined and defined) offered a model of revolutionary aesthetics that broke with the increasingly intransigent policies of Cuba's revolutionary government. In other words, it allowed intellectuals to reconceive revolution as an aesthetic project—consisting largely of an attempt to escape the confines of logic, rationality or signification—once they could no longer support the Cuban Revolution as a political project. But while his neobaroque offered a solution to a particular problem, Sarduy understood it as something that extended far beyond Latin America, and in fact defined the epistemic horizon of the present. His baroque thus affirms Latin America's place in a global aesthetic modernity.

While my project is grounded in Hispanic and Latin American literature, it examines how these literatures fit into a larger picture of modernity. Beyond the pitfalls or potential of a single term, it addresses the very possibility of inserting peripheral or regional cultural products into a larger field of discussion. If the baroque has been used unwittingly to justify Spain and Latin America's marginalization from modern literature, then a reconsideration of this concept, and an attempt to reformulate it in a more productive, less confining way, will have a much broader relevance.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> See, for example, Robert Harbison, *Reflections on Baroque* (London: Reaktion, 2000). John Rupert Martin's classic book *Baroque* (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1977) also links seventeenth-century art to social and scientific changes, as does Peter Skrine's *The Baroque: Literature and Culture in Seventeenth-Century Europe* (London: Methuen, 1978).
  - <sup>2</sup> Sarduy introduced the term in "El barroco y el neobarroco," in *América Latina en su literatura*, ed. César Fernández Moreno, (México: UNESCO/Siglo XX, 1972), pp. 167-84. Below I generally use the term "baroque" to refer to both the historical phenomenon and its supposed twentieth-century reappearance. Critics do not always make this distinction consistently. The basic assumption of the baroque's return, and hence is essential "continuity" with the seventeenth century, is what I call the "continuity thesis" in the first chapter.
  - <sup>3</sup> The bibliography on the baroque as a twentieth-century aesthetic phenomenon is extensive. Perhaps the best index of its recent popularity is the special section on "The Neobaroque and the Americas" in the January 2009 issue of the *PMLA*, which includes articles by Lois Parkinson Zamora, William Egginton, Ronald Greene, Monika Kaup and Salvador A. Oropesa. Recent book-length studies on the topic include William Egginton, *The Theater of Truth: The Ideology of (Neo)baroque Aesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); John Beverley, *Essays on the Literary Baroque in Spain and Latin America* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Tamesis, 2008); Luis Martín-Estudillo, *La mirada elíptica: el trasfondo barroco de la poesía española contemporánea* (Madrid: Visor, 2007); Lois Parkinson Zamora, *The Inordinate Eye: New World Baroque and Latin American Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Angela Ndalians, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004); Gregg Lambert, *The Return of the Baroque in Modern Culture* (London: Continuum, 2004); and Irlemar Chiami, *Barroco e Modernidade: Ensaio sobre Literatura Latino-Americana* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1998). Jorge Luis Marzo's fascinating book *La memoria administrada: el barroco y lo hispano* (Madrid: Katz, 2010) deserves a place apart as one of the few not to take the baroque's return as a given. He also curated with Tere Badia an exhibit on the baroque in Barcelona, entitled *El defecto barroco: políticas de la imatge hispana* (Barcelona: Centre de Cultura Contemporània, 2010). A number of anthologies have also appeared, notably Nicholas Spadaccini and Luis Martín-Estudillo, eds., *Hispanic Baroques: Reading Cultures in Context* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005) and Petra Schumm, ed., *Barrocos y modernos: nuevos caminos en la investigación del Barroco iberoamericano* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 1998). An extremely useful historical anthology containing a number of previously untranslated texts is Lois Parkinson Zamora and Monika Kaup, eds., *Baroque New Worlds: Representation, Transculturation, Counterconquest* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
  - <sup>4</sup> The most well-known example is Omar Calabrese's *L'Età Neobarocca* (Rome: Laterza, 1987), which presents itself as a semiotic analysis of cultural forms of the late-twentieth-century cultural forms, both aesthetic and scientific. More recently, Angela Ndalians and Gregg Lambert (cited above) apply the term outside the Hispanic context, as has Stephen Calloway in *Baroque Baroque: The Culture of Excess* (London: Phaidon, 2000). In France in the 1970s and 1980s, no doubt thanks to Sarduy, the baroque enjoyed a theoretical popularity, as discussed in the next chapter.
  - <sup>5</sup> Alejo Carpentier, *Razón de ser* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1976), p. 61: "América Latina fue barroca desde siempre." Irlemar Chiami, *Barroco e Modernidade*, p. xvii.
  - <sup>6</sup> One notable exception is Jorge Luis Marzo, whose book *La memoria administrada* examines the baroque as an ideological construct, the aesthetic correlate to *hispanidad*. Also worth noting is Francisco Ortega's brilliant essay "History of a Phantom," in *A Companion to Latin American Literature*, edited by Sara Castro-Klaren (London: Blackwell, 2008), which surveys five different recuperations of the baroque.

## Chapter One

### **The Baroque on the Map of Modernity**

Over the last few decades the baroque has come to occupy an increasingly prominent place in Hispanic and Latin American criticism, as a term both for early modern or colonial art and for postmodern or postcolonial cultural production. It refers to a dizzying variety of styles, modes, ideologies and periods, yet it often suggests, at least in its most recent incarnations, a handful of recurring traits: a contestatory, anti-imperial stance, a contorted or noncommunicative use of language, a generalized sense of excess, and above all an engagement with a specifically Hispanic or Latin American tradition. But if the baroque has become, in the words of, “a privileged concept for accessing the actuality of our own era,” we should consider why this might be so.<sup>1</sup> What strange affinity could tie our present to a remote period from the past? What view does the baroque offer onto our contemporary culture? And what is this concept, apparently suited to both the early modernity of the seventeenth century and the post- or late modernity of the twenty-first?

Perhaps the first step in answering these questions is to set aside the question of the baroque’s definition. Rather than approach the baroque as a style or essence easily identifiable in certain works and certain authors, it may be more productive to see it as a discursive construction, one that has been slowly elaborated over the past century. By “discursive construction,” I mean a series of related and mutually engaged or mutually reinforcing statements within a delineable field. In other words, take what I am calling the discursive formation of the baroque to comprise a series of related but more or less autonomous statements, which I study not in terms of their influence upon one another, nor in terms of their teleological relation to our current understanding of the term, but as an ultimately contingent, though not arbitrary, construction. To that extent, my use of “discourse” and “genealogy” is Foucauldian.<sup>2</sup> The authors and critics who wrote and write about the baroque are engaged in a discussion whose shared references are not so much a certain transhistorical style or a well-defined period in history as a host of assumptions and associations that define what can be said. Discourse about the baroque is and has long been subject to a number of regularities and limitations, and is hence circumscribed in its concerns. This is not to say that discussion about the baroque has not been contentious, for it has, and indeed, in the middle of the last century—though this fact is now largely forgotten—the debates surrounding the term’s stylistic marks and temporal limits reached a fever pitch among scholars of comparative literature.<sup>3</sup> But those debates took place within a more or less definable (if evolving) field; in other words, even when they disagreed about what or when the baroque was, the participants shared an implicit understanding of the axes along which debates could take place: about the baroque’s status as a historical period or a transhistorical style, about its ideological thrust, about its national affiliations, about its affinity with the avant-garde. (I plot the arc of these debates in the next chapter.) Carpentier, Sarduy, etc., and the numerous Hispanist and Latin Americanist critics who took up the term were certainly in dialogue with one another. But in studying the term, what one sees is less a series of influences than a cluster



of shared functions, of discursive ends to which the term can be put. As it is successively inherited and altered, one can see a historical development in how the debates are framed. To follow this development is to trace the genealogy of the baroque.

Or at least part of its genealogy—the part that gives the baroque its name. Current discourses about the baroque owe a great deal to other academic discussions, about transculturation, hybridity, coloniality, postmodernism, etc., as well as to broader social or political phenomena. Yet a narrower study, tracing the transformations within the term, can provide a corrective to a certain tendency in criticism that is perhaps too sure it already knows what the baroque is. What the word means now in Latin Americanist and Hispanist academic circles is not quite what it meant a century ago; the objects it designates and the associations it conjures have changed. As noted above, even within the confines of Hispanist and Latin Americanist discussions of the baroque, the word's referents are not consistent. Each successive use of the term—Lezama's, and later Sarduy's, for example—modifies it and redeploys it, if only slightly, and these gradual shifts in meaning are significant. And yet this fact is often forgotten: we tend to assume that the baroque is simply “out there” as a recognizable essence, that it stands unproblematically before us as an object of study, or even that we can apply (as one prominent critic did recently) Heinrich Wölfflin's analyses of Roman architecture to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.<sup>4</sup> Sixteenth-century churches and twentieth-century novels may both be “baroque,” but only when the term is given two wildly different meanings.

A discursive approach, then, accounts for a certain regularity within the term's use that does not depend on its definition. The critics and writers who embrace the term are not all talking about the same baroque, but they are nevertheless in dialogue with one another. Though they do not share a common definition of the concept, they use it in ways that are mutually intelligible and relatively narrow, and there is something shared or recognizable in how they frame the discussion and the importance they all ascribe to it. In this sense “baroque” is not just any word—it is a word whose use, within the field of Hispanic literature and literary criticism at least, is confined to certain boundaries (even if these boundaries change over time), and is linked to certain other discursive fields—specifically, identity and aesthetic modernity. Francisco Ortega has recently made this point: “the baroque preserves its recurring naming capacity in Latin America not because of what it positively signifies, but because in its many misnomers it marks a field of struggle over the meaning and legacies of our modernity.”<sup>5</sup> Rather than view the baroque as the experience or expression of that modernity, I propose seeing it as a conceptual tool, a way of staking a claim to a modernity that is specifically Hispanic or Latin American. What unity it has lies not in its positive content (some transhistorical aesthetic phenomenon) but in its discursive regularity, that is, in the rules about how the term or tool can be used, and to what end. The baroque offers itself as a discursive solution; it answers the question, “what is unique about Hispanic or Latin American modernity?”

At this point I should entertain the obvious objection. But (one might insist) *isn't* there something intuitively baroque about Sarduy, Lezama, Perlongher, others? As they took up the label for their own work, didn't they also dust off many of the same stylistic techniques so characteristic of the seventeenth century? Isn't the use of the term warranted by their exuberance, their flamboyance, their obscurity—in short, what they *do*, independent of what they say about it?

This raises the question of what counts as baroque, and how we know. And this problem is not trifling. To be sure, it makes little sense to insist on some “original”

meaning of the term that would refer only to the seventeenth century, for as long as the term has been around, it has been used to describe alternately a given historical period or a transhistorical style. In fact, as I discuss in the next chapter, this was one of the key debates about the term up until the middle of the twentieth century. Many of the earliest critics thought that the baroque could equally well describe art from other centuries: for them it was a transhistorical style that could be applied to Gothic architecture or Romantic poetry. The danger with such a definition, as René Wellek pointed out in 1945, is that the term's historical usefulness is then watered down, and its ability to delineate and illuminate the unity of a specific epoch is lost. Wellek highlights the problems inherent in any attempt to elevate "baroque" to a trans- or suprahistorical category, and particularly in any attempt to contrast an eternally recurring baroque with an equally eternal classicism. Under such a reductively simple schema, he notes,

half the world's history and creations are baroque, all which are not purely classical, not flooded by the dry light of the intellect. The term thus used may have the merit of drawing attention to this recurrence of an emotional art of stylistic overelaborations and decoration, but it has become so broad and vague when cut off from its period moorings that it loses all usefulness for concrete literary study. To divide the world of literature into Renaissance and baroque or classicism and baroque is no better than dividing it into classicism and romanticism, realism and idealism. At the most, we achieve a separation into sheep and goats.<sup>6</sup>

To be sure, one could use "baroque" beyond its narrow historical confines without elevating to a transhistorical constant. One could likewise try to redefine the term to shift the central focus from late sixteenth-century Rome to (say) early eighteenth-century Latin America. Or one could propose a supplementary meaning for the word that simply designates a handful of twentieth-century writers. The problem is not exactly one of policing the definition of the term, for the term has long been subject to many competing definitions. Wellek himself despaired of ever finding an adequately specific definition, and nevertheless strongly advocated its use.<sup>7</sup> There is nothing necessarily wrong with calling twentieth-century writers "baroque" or "neobaroque"; one could simply redefine the term to refer to the common traits linking them. And in any case, the term *neobaroque* would seem to sidestep the problem: its prefix *neo* is a tacit admission that the twentieth-century baroque is not exactly the same beast. Yet redefinition brings its own problems.

The question might be clarified by turning to what Gilles Deleuze says in *Le Pli* about the baroque's problematic existence. Deleuze recounts that, in response to the term's rapid expansion in meaning, many commentators attempted to limit the term to specific genres, periods or places, and even to deny its existence. "It is nevertheless strange," he notes, "to deny the existence of the Baroque as one does unicorns or pink elephants. For in this case the concept is given, while in the case of the Baroque it is a matter of knowing whether one can invent a concept capable (or not) of giving it existence."<sup>8</sup> I take this to mean that one can deny that unicorns or pink elephants exist because one knows what they are; the concepts "unicorn," "pink" and "elephant" are more or less fixed. But it makes no sense to deny the existence of something that lacks an established definition. To put it somewhat differently, one cannot simultaneously ask, "what is the baroque?" and "is there a baroque?" In the first question, one assumes that

the baroque exists, and asks about its definition; in the second, one assumes that the baroque has been defined, and asks whether it exists. Deleuze continues: “the Baroque has no reason to exist without a concept forming this very reason. It is easy to render the Baroque inexistent; all it takes is to propose no concept for it.” It would be equally easy to make a *different* baroque exist: one only has to propose a concept to go by that name—perhaps a style of writing, a group of authors, or a certain exuberant, transgressive, parodic stance.

Deleuze overstates the case, of course. One cannot simply propose any concept one wants under the heading “baroque,” nor can one redefine the term on a whim. Even though it is not as well established as concepts like “unicorn” or “elephant” or “pink”—and even though its history is a history of extravagant, even outlandish definitions—the baroque is nonetheless not an entirely arbitrary concept. Its meaning is socially and historically restricted, and it is subject to certain discursive regularities. Thus no serious definition of the baroque can exclude the seventeenth century (even if it excludes certain works or figures within that century), nor can it exclude all of Europe (even if it excludes whole countries within it). Nor can it refer exclusively to contemporary Hispanic or Latin American writers. To be sure, this is not what most critics propose; the twentieth-century baroque is not at all separate from or incompatible with a conventional historical definition—on the contrary, it is *continuous*. Even with the prefix “neo,” which would seem avoid the issue by signaling both the echoes and the distance between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, the emphasis ultimately rests on continuity. Hence one critic, after stating that the colonial baroque was “a means of projecting an American cultural identity against the colonizing power of Spain,” immediately adds that its twentieth-century reappearance is just the culmination of this much older process: “it would be the mid-twentieth century before the decolonizing strategies of the New World Baroque were fully articulated.”<sup>9</sup> The neobaroque may be a different movement, but it is fundamentally continuous with its historical namesake. This insistence on continuity, however, makes for a very awkward concept, for now the baroque must encompass not only the bulk of seventeenth-century cultural production from Europe and its colonies but also a central current within twentieth-century Latin American literature—while at the same time excluding current non-Hispanic or non-Latin American writing.<sup>10</sup>

### **Solutions of continuity**

This peculiar and awkward concept underpins much current criticism, which tends to see the baroque not as a discursive construct but as a transhistorical style tied to Latin America’s “essence” and its insertion into a globalized modernity. The baroque subtly slides from aesthetic description to identitarian designation, a move that Hernán Vidal regards with suspicion and not a little exasperation:

As used in contemporary Latin American and Latin Americanist academic and artistic circles, the term “Baroque” is an explanatory metaphor derived from a formalistic definition of the term anchored in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and projected as a transhistorical notion of Latin American cultural identity.... In a leap of faith we are expected to believe that modern Latin America has always been “Baroque.”<sup>11</sup>

Vidal registers the strangeness of using the term to ground a transhistorical identity, and more importantly, he puts his finger on a fundamental paradox at the heart of much criticism on the topic: “*modern* Latin America has *always* been ‘Baroque.’” The baroque is at once modern and timeless, and its return is simply a return of what was always there. As a figure for the modern, or for Latin American aesthetic modernity as such, it is thus highly equivocal; it posits not a break but a continuity.

Vidal, certainly, is not alone in questioning the awkwardness of this assumption. John Beverley, for example, has voiced skepticism about the “the strong tendency in modern Latin American cultural discourse to see the Baroque as the essential or foundational style of Latin American identity.”<sup>12</sup> And Walter Moser, for his part, has underscored the need to question “what for many seems to have become self-evident: the self-evident fact of the continuity, the always-already-there-ness of the baroque.”<sup>13</sup> Continuity between the foundational literature of the seventeenth century and the aesthetic practices of the twentieth is, as Moser suggests, far from obvious, and one of the functions of the baroque seems to be to allow critics to posit such a continuity. Indeed, as stated above, the continuity of the baroque defines, according to one very widespread view within Hispanist criticism, the specificity of Hispanic or Latin American aesthetic modernity. Taking a cue from Beverley and Moser, I will call this view the continuity thesis.<sup>14</sup> (Often this thesis posits continuity in the form of a “return” of the baroque; but as this is paradoxically the return of what was always there, or of what was most authentically Latin American or Hispanic, “return” may here be understood as a kind of continuity.) We should now examine a few of its more significant formulations.

The classic version is found in Roberto González Echevarría’s 1993 book *Celestina’s Brood* (whose subtitle is in fact *Continuities of the Baroque in Spanish and Latin American Literature*). For González Echevarría, the historical baroque, with such figures as Silvestre de Balboa and Juan de Espinosa Medrano, is the origin of Spanish American modernity, a modernity which consists of an awareness of the self as strange, belated, “other.”<sup>15</sup> He links this foundational modernity with its twentieth-century echo in the avant-garde. Hence, he claims, when avant-garde writers enacted a revision of Spanish-language poetry, they turned to the seventeenth century. “Since it was in the Baroque that a creole sensibility began to assert itself,” he states, “it was in the Baroque that the avant-garde sought the origins of its own poetic language.”<sup>16</sup> This sounds reasonable enough, but then the avant-garde poet under discussion is Nicolás Guillén, and it is unclear why he should be considered baroque. Guillén surely did not call himself that, and on the face of it his poetry has little to do with that of Góngora or Quevedo.<sup>17</sup> While some Latin American avant-garde groups did look to the seventeenth century for inspiration, certainly not all of them did, and the echo of the baroque in Guillén’s poetry is hardly self-evident. In fact, *what* exactly links Guillén’s pared down, highly conversational poetry with the rhetorical acrobatics of the Golden Age is not clear, other than that Guillén is Hispanic. The argument is almost a non sequitur: since the first expression of Spanish American identity is found in the seventeenth century, the Spanish American avant-garde is—even when evidence shows the contrary—by definition baroque. Calling Guillén’s poetry “baroque” allows González Echevarría to link him to the origins of Latin America as such; the “general poetic revision at the core of modern poetry written in Spanish” that he sees in Guillén and other writers—in other words, their break with the past—is thus recast as the reaffirmation of a centuries-old identity.<sup>18</sup>

González Echevarría's account was particularly influential, and is often cited as a starting point in discussions of the baroque's return, not because he was the first to propose the concept—as discussed in later chapters, it stretches back at least to Sarduy—but because he was perhaps the first to place critical essays on the Spanish Golden Age and colonial baroque side by side with essays on twentieth-century neobaroque in one overarching argument.<sup>19</sup> (Previous work on the neobaroque generally focused solely on the twentieth century.) González Echevarría's argument was both a clarifying exposition of previous ideas and the foundation of something new.

Subsequent critics have worked along similar lines, even when they do not directly refer to him. In her essay “O Barroco no Ocaso da Modernidade” (first published in 1994 and included in her 1998 book *Barroco e Modernidade*) Irlemar Chiampi identifies four moments of reappropriation of the baroque throughout the twentieth century; these roughly correspond to the four major “cycles of poetic rupture and renovation”: *modernismo*, avant-garde, *nueva novela* and post-boom.<sup>20</sup> Latin America's aesthetic modernity, from its first appearance in late nineteenth-century *modernismo*, arises under the sign of the baroque. “[T]he continuity of the baroque,” she argues, “reveals the contradictory character of...modern experience, which cannibalizes the aesthetics of the break produced in hegemonic centers, while at the same time reinstating what is incomplete or unfinished from its own tradition.”<sup>21</sup> In essence, Latin America's aesthetic modernity is not only a break, but also a recuperation of a specifically Latin American tradition. As such, it constitutes not only a modernity but a “counter-modernity.” The neobaroque of the postboom revises ideological values of the historical baroque, and consequently seeks to “allegorize the aesthetic and cultural dissonance of Latin America as periphery of the West.”<sup>22</sup> The baroque is at the conjunction of modernity and identity: it is the aesthetic that marks Latin America's participation in aesthetic modernity and distance from it.

A more recent formulation of the continuity thesis is Lois Parkinson Zamora's book *The Inordinate Eye*, published in 2006. While her approach is not identical to González Echevarría's, one can nevertheless see the same conjunction of identity and modernity, and like him, she readily identifies a baroque aesthetics in artists and writers (Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Borges, among others) who are not often considered baroque or neobaroque, and who did not, it seems, use the term to describe their own work.<sup>23</sup> This is because the baroque, on her reading, is an organic development of traditions that date back to the seventeenth century, when it was transformed from a colonizing instrument to a means of resistance and self-definition. According to Parkinson Zamora, the twentieth-century baroque stems from a much older tradition. It is

a postcolonial ideology aimed at disrupting entrenched power structures and perceptual categories. This ideology, termed Neobaroque in the 1970s, has provided Latin American writers the means by which to contest imposed ideologies and recover relevant texts and traditions... With its decentering strategies and ironic perspectives, the Neobaroque has been considered by some critics as a Latin American postmodernism, but the resemblance is misleading. Unlike the poststructuralist categories regularly imposed by, or imported from the United States and Europe, the Neobaroque is deeply rooted in Latin America's histories and cultures.<sup>24</sup>

The resemblance to postmodernism is misleading, she claims, because it fails to note the neobaroque's particular Latin American roots. But the resemblance is also revealing, because it is proof that the continent is not lagging or belated—it is as up-to-date as postmodernism.<sup>25</sup> In Parkinson Zamora's view, then, the neobaroque looks both forward and backward. Latin American aesthetic modernity, or this version of it, is firmly rooted in its past, both in the historical baroque and in a long-standing cultural identity.

Continuity here brings together aesthetic form and identity by positing a sort of timeless baroque essence in Latin American culture. Other critics, however, have theorized this continuity in more nuanced ways. Mabel Moraña, for example, in an intriguing article entitled “Baroque, Neobaroque, Ultrabaroque,” reads the baroque as the “allegorical reproducibility of the struggles of power [around the] insertion of the American world” into the West.<sup>26</sup> The twentieth-century baroque is not exactly the survival of a given aesthetics, but the return of the repressed—the repressed, in this case, being a state of coloniality. If the baroque persists, it is not because of any baroque essence or identity, but because Latin America still exists in a colonial condition within the West. The baroque is a dialogue with the “basic cultural and ideological matrices...of *modernity* and *coloniality*,” and channels “forms of *disjunction* and *disruption* of modern consciousness.”<sup>27</sup> Her argument, then, differs from that of González Echevarría and Parkinson Zamora in that it does not posit vague baroque “roots” or a transhistorical baroque identity. Nevertheless, she does take as a given the basic unity of the different baroque manifestations; hence she speaks of “an aesthetic style of imperial origin that reemerges in the context of the Cuban Revolution, is reaffirmed in the settings of the post-dictatorships in the Southern Cone, and is reinstalled in the fragmented settings of postmodernity.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, Moraña understands the neobaroque to be fundamentally continuous with the seventeenth-century baroque; and while she does not trace this continuity back to a timeless baroque identity, she does understand it to be inseparable from Latin America as such. It is specific to, or even symptomatic of, Latin America's problematic modernity.

Monika Kaup and William Egginton have likewise proposed models of continuity that avoid tracing the baroque back to identity. For Kaup, the baroque offers a way out of the intellectual impasse of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. She states that “the recovery of the Baroque is linked to the crisis of the Enlightenment and instrumental reason,” a crisis that makes viable “an earlier, alternate rationality and mode of thought (Baroque reason) that had been repressed and vilified as an aberration.”<sup>29</sup> For Egginton, too, the baroque is historically grounded but not historically bound: it is “a persistent option or possibility or strategy of the aesthetic configuration ushered in by the historical baroque; its aesthetic possibilities, in other words, transcend the particularity of seventeenth-century Europe but are historically and philosophically informed by the specific problems of Euro-American modernity.”<sup>30</sup> While its reactivation is not the inevitable expression of a continent, it is not exactly arbitrary, insofar as it responds to a geographically grounded situation of modernity. Both critics invoke Deleuze to distinguish between “major” and “minor” strategies in the baroque: the European baroque may have been linked to the Counter Reformation and absolutist monarchy, but in its recent American manifestations it is a strategy, as Kaup claims, of “becoming-minor, of a European form becoming other, becoming new, a majoritarian form becoming minoritarian, articulating an emergent, provisional, yet uncertain identity.”<sup>31</sup> Latin American writers self-consciously employ baroque forms to forge an alternative

identity and rationality. Egginton largely agrees but adds a word of caution, noting that the neobaroque is not in and of itself contestatory or “minor,” and that the same aesthetic practices can be put to commodified or commercial (i.e. “major”) ends.<sup>32</sup> Ironically, by acknowledging that there is no necessary link between aesthetic form and ideological content, both Kaup and Egginton end up drawing a questionable binary distinction between “good” and “bad” versions of the baroque. In this sense, their positions are not far removed from that of Parkinson Zamora, who sees the neobaroque as almost by definition transgressive—the difference is that they simply locate the transgressive baroque on the “good” side.

I have given this lengthy (though by no means exhaustive) summary of recent criticism on the baroque to roughly sketch what I am calling the “continuity thesis.” And while not all critics subscribe to it, it does represent, to my mind, a mainstream view in Hispanic and Latin American studies. González Echevarría, Chiampi, Kaup and the others do not fully agree with one another, and they share neither a unified definition of the baroque nor an explanation for its continuity or reappearance.<sup>33</sup> But for all their differences, they share a number of assumptions or—what is perhaps another way of saying the same thing—they operate within the same discursive field and within the same discursive limitations. Pointing out what they have in common can cast light on the parameters of that field, to define, if only tentatively, the boundaries of the discourse on the baroque.

At least four assumptions stand out in this discursive construction. First, of course, is that the neobaroque is in a fundamental sense continuous with the historical baroque, however qualified or contingent this continuity may be. In other words, the neobaroque is understood through an analogy with a specific, seventeenth-century past. This means, among other things, that studying Góngora or Sor Juana is both relevant to, and furthermore necessary for, understanding the writers of the neobaroque. The emphasis on the baroque’s transhistorical character serves to remove Carpentier, Lezama or others from a twentieth-century historical context: it suggests we should read them primarily as carrying on baroque tradition, rather than (say) as responding to a particular post-avant-garde moment.

Second, the baroque is understood as the expression of an identity across an imperial divide, either of a colonial or postcolonial Latin America or of a metropolitan and colonizing Europe. Even when cast as the self-conscious adoption of cultural codes, the baroque utterance (of Carpentier, Sarduy, etc.) is taken to be a statement about or in favor of a given identity. Furthermore, this identity exists within a strange temporality that links the present to a foundational past in the seventeenth century. Non-baroque pasts are either ignored (as in the case of nineteenth-century neoclassicism) or reimagined as baroque (as in Chiampi’s claim that the baroque first reappears in the 1890s with *modernismo*).

Third, the baroque has an identifiable political function, one that is generally contestatory, transgressive or otherwise disruptive—disruptive, that is, of structures of oppression, whether colonial, postcolonial, social, or gender-bound. True, critics recognize the potentially conservative tilt of most of the European seventeenth-century baroque, but this is inevitably contrasted with a privileged “minoritarian” form of transgression and resistance.

Finally, and most centrally, the baroque exists in tension with other versions of aesthetic modernity (whether these are the avant-garde, postmodernism, or something

else). While it is not identical to its European or North American analogues, the baroque is in an important sense on par with them. It becomes the very specificity of a Latin American or Hispanic modernity, what sets it apart from models of modernity created for Europe or the United States.

### **An equivocal modernity**

The preceding assumptions make up the boundaries of mainstream discourses on the baroque in Hispanic criticism. The undeniable advantage of the continuity thesis is that it seeks to describe a Latin American or Hispanic aesthetic modernity that is not reducible to preexisting European or North American frameworks. Parkinson Zamora's reminder is very valuable: late-twentieth-cultural production in Latin America should not merely be reduced to models of postmodernism elaborated elsewhere. The continuity thesis thus aims to account for the regional or cultural specificity of aesthetic modernity in the Hispanic world; this alone is an achievement not to be forgotten, and any critique of mainstream discourses on the baroque must start from a recognition of this initial insight.

Nevertheless, the continuity thesis—which one might also call, without insisting on the point, the ideology of the baroque—is also open to a number of objections. One of these I have already hinted at: the definition of the baroque hovers uncertainly between being a period term and a style, between broadly Western or proprietarily Hispanic; it floats above history yet remains deeply rooted in the New World soil. Its return is a paradoxical return of what was already there, as a sort of timeless essence. This continuity of the baroque is for much mainstream academic discourse the very sign of Latin America's or Spain's aesthetic modernity.

Continuity is thus the solution critics offer to one of the questions posed above: how is Latin America modern? What is specific or unique about Latin American aesthetic modernity? Its writers and artists are modern by continuing the centuries old tradition of resistance to colonizing structures: they are modern by being baroque, as they have always been. It is odd, not to say troubling, to equate the new and the timeless, to locate Latin America's modernity in the past. The baroque, invoked as *continuity*, is an equivocal figure for aesthetic modernity, for modernity necessarily implies a break. By its very definition modernity demarcates a before and an after, a past and present—it is, in the words of Octavio Paz, “la tradición de la ruptura,” the tradition of the break, or the tradition against itself.<sup>34</sup> I do not intend this as a controversial statement, but merely an observation: any notion of modernity implies some sort of difference between a present and a past.<sup>35</sup> My first objection to González Echevarría, Parkinson Zamora, and the others should now become clear: against the break that is the very hallmark of the modern, these critics paradoxically propose historical continuity as Latin America's modernity. This is their solution to the question posed earlier: how is Latin American modernity distinct?<sup>36</sup>

Certainly, the notion of rewriting the past is not incompatible with modernity or modernism—on the contrary, it is central of some of its most canonical figures (like Eliot or Joyce or Darío). But the continuity thesis goes further: it implies that neobaroque writers do not just rewrite the past but identify with it; they do not reimagine the baroque aesthetics but rather taken on a timeless baroque identity, or at least a timeless baroque condition of coloniality. The baroque thus locates Latin America at once inside and outside of history, as proof of Latin America's participation in the modern and a sign of its essential difference. This is the strange logic at work in the continuity thesis: Latin



America can only be modern by remaining true to what it is, to what it has always been, to what it was before “modernity” (wherever we locate it: the Enlightenment, independence, the twentieth century, etc.). In short, for the baroque continuity thesis, Latin America can only be modern by being unmodern.

Recently Jorge Luis Marzo has highlighted this strange fact, noting that “liberationist baroque discourse has always defined itself against the same thing: the modern.” For Marzo, who views the baroque as an ideological construct, the concept’s current popularity conceals a deeper conservatism: “The fanatical defense of a baroque American identity,” he argues, “has allowed a powerful conservative discourse to take hold in a large part of the American intelligentsia, though camouflaged beneath the fantasy of going against the grain of a modernity stuck in its own rationality.”<sup>37</sup> To champion an “antimodern” Hispanic or Latin American essence via the baroque, he claims, is to justify political and economic underdevelopment.

His criticism resonates with that of John Beverley, who also brings a welcome skepticism to the topic. Beverley finds the celebration of the baroque as a foundational identity suspect, because the baroque, historically, was a tool of colonial domination by a creole elite. If we understand baroque aesthetics to be a first expression of creole identity, then we should ask what was erased for that identity to be possible. In the baroque, writes Beverley, “a new, specifically ‘American’ *criollo-mestizo* sensibility begins to incubate and express itself,” the sensibility of the “colonial upper and middle classes [who] were by definition of a settler-colonial character.”<sup>38</sup> To take the expression of the creole oligarchy to be an inclusive or unproblematic *mestizaje* is to disavow the suppression and marginalization of subaltern voices, in the colonial period as well as today. “To posit the Baroque as the cultural signifier of Latin America as such,” Beverley concludes, “would be in a sense to place the force of decolonization in the continent, both in the past and the present, under essentially European auspices.”<sup>39</sup> Rather than complacently celebrate the origins of a nationalist ideology based on the silencing of nonwhite and nonmestizo identities, a truly decolonial criticism, he suggests, would seek to unveil that silencing.

Even this view does not go far enough, according to Alberto Moreiras. While Beverley’s critique first took aim at González Echevarría, and specifically at his chapter on Lunarejo in *Celestina’s Brood*, Moreiras sets out to critique González Echevarría and Beverley, both of whom he considers trapped within the confines of the local.<sup>40</sup> González Echevarría sees the baroque as the first expression of Latin American identity, while Beverley sees it as the suppression of other marginal identities. What Moreiras objects to is this identitarian lens through which both critics (as well as many others) tend to view cultural production: insistence on identity, he argues, be it through creole nationalism or the recuperation of an silenced subalternity, holds no radical potential. On the contrary, academic study that holds to the identitarian premises does nothing to oppose the broader marginalization of Latin America within a neoliberal capitalist order. “The identitarian politics of area studies,” he argues, “are not the interruption but the radical reaffirmation and consolidation of the sovereignty of capital over the region, the posited identity between capital and region.”<sup>41</sup> What he proposes to counter this marginalizing localism is a deconstructive and “de-localizing” theoretical practice, a practice that is regionally specific yet capable of disrupting the “region” as a conceptual category. Such a strategy would provide an alternative to

the dominant ideological paradigm in the history of Latin American modernity: the identitarian or locationalist paradigm which is still affecting, if in different ways, projects such as those of Beverley (a critic of transculturation in the name of subaltern identity) or González Echevarría (a disavower of subaltern identity for the sake of the self-constitution of the *criollista* critic as posited master of language).<sup>42</sup>

Moreiras advocates an alternative not just to a complacent celebration of Latin American identity, but to any critique of that celebration which accepts its identitarian premises. Though oddly Moreiras does not go into specifics about what such a “de-localizing” project would entail, he advances an extremely suggestive claim: contemporary Hispanism, by confining itself to identitarian arguments, may in fact marginalize the very cultures and cultural production it should be studying (and in a sense promoting). It is not difficult to see how the baroque would fit in to this line of argument: it is one of the paradigmatic emblems of that identity. A “Moreirian” critique would not merely ask what other possible Latin American identities have to be concealed for a baroque identity to be claimed; it would go further and ask how the baroque is used to confine discussions of cultural production to a narrow set of identitarian concerns. In short, it would ask how the baroque is used to reduce aesthetics to identity politics.

But this is not quite how he ties his critique to the baroque. Confusingly, the name he chooses for his alternative to the dominant, baroque-centered paradigm is...the neobaroque.<sup>43</sup> In other words, he somewhat arbitrarily defines the neobaroque as a radical theoretical practice capable of disrupting the identitarian logic of academic Hispanism (including work on the baroque). For present purposes, however, we can set aside his idiosyncratic use of the word and distinguish the substance of his critique from the surprising name he gives it.

For indeed, Moreiras’s critique opens up avenues for thinking beyond the continuity thesis. Earlier I stated that the key advantage to this thesis is that it seeks to account for the regional specificity of Latin America’s aesthetic modernity. This is undoubtedly valuable. But, following Moreiras, we might also see this advantage as a significant limitation. The twentieth-century baroque, as a manifestation of “advanced” art in whatever period it is said to appear (as avant-garde in the 1920s and 1930s, as an analogue to postmodernism in the 1970s and 1980s), purports to describe an aesthetic modernity that is *specifically* Latin American or Hispanic. That is, the baroque is used by critics to explain how this regional aesthetic modernity is distinct from a European or North American version. And this assumption, that Latin American modernity is necessarily different from its non-Hispanic counterparts, is questionable—or at least as questionable as it is unavoidable. It is no doubt laudable to avoid a presumption of sameness, as when Parkinson Zamora or others claim the neobaroque is not “the same” as postmodernism. But a presumption of difference is no less problematic. Not only because Latin America shares a cultural heritage with Europe—a heritage that is, of course, one among many—but more importantly, because the insistence on the regional or the local leads (as Moreiras points out) to marginalization within broader accounts of the modern. The question “What is distinctive or unique about Latin American modernity?” is almost tautological: Latin American modernity, unlike European modernity, is Latin American. Or rather, Latin American modernity is confined to a specific region while European or Western modernity is unmarked, universal—it is

modernity as such. Regional specificity here means deviation from the norm, a point made succinctly by Walter Mignolo: “any ‘alternative’ is derivative from the standard model of modernity.”<sup>44</sup> Attempts to theorize Latin American modernity thus lead to a kind of double-bind: one is left with a concept that is either not modern (because lacking or deviant) or not Latin American (because foreign and not locally grounded).

This peculiar double-bind continues to be a central issue in Latin American cultural debates. Ileana Rodríguez, surveying three decades of scholarship in cultural criticism, observes that scholars have long been engaged in defining the specificity of the continent’s modernity—that is, in pinpointing what distinguishes it from the standard or universal model. “What, then, is the nature of the Latin American modern?” she asks. For most critics,

[i]t is marked by a series of adjectives that underpin its specificity as a deviation from the model, as true deprivations or lacks. Thus Latin American modernity is deemed incomplete, unfinished, alternative, peripheral, deficit-ridden, a modernity that does not measure up, is not the same as the model, and the model is Western European and North American.<sup>45</sup>

Later she adds: “This is the effect of its colonial and postcolonial condition.”<sup>46</sup> By virtue of being merely regional and not universal, the peripheral modernity (aesthetic or otherwise) is both defined by and limited to the periphery. It should come as no surprise, then, when critics ground a regional aesthetic modernity in a regional identity. In a certain sense, they cannot avoid doing so, for it is an assumption implicit in the question they seek to answer (“how is Latin American modernity different?”). Nor should we be surprised when Latin American or Hispanic authors are deemed irrelevant to mainstream accounts of aesthetic modernity: this is not solely the result of biases among “mainstream” critics (for whom Hispanic and Latin American writers remain outside the bounds of modernity<sup>47</sup>), but also of the identitarian emphasis within academic Hispanism—and particularly within criticism on the baroque. As celebrated by the continuity thesis, Lezama, Carpentier, or Sarduy are Latin American first, and modern second. Their modernity is specific, not universal, almost as if it did not extend beyond the boundaries of continent. In subtle but real ways, an identitarian emphasis denies Latin American literature the possibility of being universal. And to the extent that the regionally modern is by definition derivative or lacking (that is to say, unmodern) such criticism also denies Latin American or Hispanic literature the possibility of being modern—even as it claims to do precisely the opposite.

Hence the equivocal modernity of the baroque: as a claim to modernity, it undermines itself. It posits a continuity with the past and at the same time, by emphasizing the distance between Latin America and the (rest of the) West, it draws a break across the map of the present. Both of these moves are antithetical to the definition of the modern as such, for modernity posits a break with the past and a sort of universality across space. To put it somewhat more schematically, where modernity implies historical rupture and geographic continuity (or at least the possibility of appearing anywhere), the baroque implies historical continuity and a geographic break. This observation suggests a criticism of the baroque as an organizing concept: a different approach is needed to theorizing modernity in Latin American and the Hispanic world.

Or rather, what is needed is an approach to theorizing modernity that functions within and for these areas.

Yet perhaps the problem is not just about the baroque's inability to get past the double-binds outlined above; perhaps the double-bind itself is inherent in the concept of aesthetic modernity, in the way it is theorized. Pinpointing the limitations of contemporary critical discourse on the baroque may, obliquely, shed some light on the discursive limitations of the concept of aesthetic modernity itself. Might those discursive limitations require that peripheral or regional claims to modernity fail or contradict themselves? Might this failure on the periphery be constitutive of aesthetic modernity?

### **The map of the modern**

This last point will have to be left as a suggestion. Yet we can briefly illustrate how the question might be developed by turning one recent book on the concept of modernity—namely, Fredric Jameson's *A Singular Modernity*. For Jameson, modernity is not some “thing” that we can locate in a watershed moment of the past, but rather the very act of marking a dividing line, a before and an after. When that separation occurs, or what it consists of, is all but irrelevant:

[A]ll themes generally appealed to as ways of identifying the modern—self-consciousness or reflexivity, greater attention to language or representation, a materiality of the painted surface, and so on and so forth—all these features are themselves mere pretexts for the rewriting operation and for securing the effect of astonishment and conviction appropriate to the registering of a paradigm shift.<sup>48</sup>

Modernity can be given almost any content, because it is essentially an rhetorical operation marking a break in history. Furthermore, to locate that modern break in certain events or historical figures is to endow them with a retrospective prescience: in them, the future reveals itself in advance. Hence, “to isolate this or that Renaissance painter as the sign of some first or nascent modernity is...to awaken a feeling of intensity and energy that is greatly in excess of the attention we generally bring to interesting events or monuments of the past.”<sup>49</sup> The label “modern” heightens the value of whatever it is applied to, for it suggests that the future is present in embryonic form. The conclusion Jameson draws from all this is that “[m]odernity is not a concept, philosophical or otherwise, but a narrative category.”<sup>50</sup> Regardless of what it consists of, it gives history a narrative shape: the shape of a divide.

Jameson makes a compelling point. It is nevertheless striking that, even as he endeavors to reveal the ideological underpinnings of the word “modernity,” he seems unwilling to move beyond its temporal or historical dimension. Any content that can be given to the “modern”—not only the aesthetic markers he mentions, but all of modernity's other conventional starting points, such as the Renaissance, the Cartesian *cogito*, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the avant-gardes, etc.—bear both a date and a location. When we discern an incipient modernity in some fifteenth-century painter, we do not merely draw attention to that painter or that century, but also, if only implicitly, to the country or region in which he lived; Florence (let us say) becomes not merely his incidental home but the very birthplace of the Renaissance. Or to take the paradigmatic literary example: to say that aesthetic modernity begins with Baudelaire is

to see foreshadowed in him the subsequent developments of modernism and the avant-gardes—but also, and crucially, to make a claim that modernity first appears in Paris.<sup>51</sup> It is to highlight the importance of the middle of the nineteenth century as the *moment* when aesthetic modernity begins—when a new kind of “modern” urban experience makes itself felt in the *Flowers of Evil*—as well as the importance of Paris as the *location* where modernity is first figured.

The point, of course, is not to deny the novelty of Baudelaire, nor necessarily to abandon the familiar narratives of aesthetic modernity, but rather to draw attention to their inherent geographic dimension. Any break with past is also a break with those regions of the present that have only partially or belatedly broken with the past; the modernity of Baudelaire defines itself against the “pastness” of Romanticism as well as the “backwardness” of Spain or Latin America, or almost anywhere else outside of metropolitan Europe. Jameson concludes that modernity is fundamentally narrative because it separates a “then” from a “now.” But that separation is always inscribed in the present, too, across the map, and one might even go so far as to suggest that modernity necessarily requires another (perhaps unavowed) break: between a “here” and a “there.” The difference it registers is inevitably temporal *and* spatial, historical *and* geographic. Of course, it could be objected that “modernity,” in identifying a break with the past, is simply mute about its own geographic distribution. But this is precisely the point: it is a temporal or narrative category that entails a tacit acknowledgement of a geographic difference. Its distribution across the map is always, even necessarily uneven. In this sense, modernity might be understood as a disavowal of place, the projection of a geopolitical divide onto a temporal narrative.

Discussions about the baroque as a Hispanic modernity, equivocal as they are, bring this fact sharply into focus: if the thought of a geographically rooted modernity strikes us as contradictory or illegitimate, it is perhaps because the very notion of modernity requires that we forget how geographically rooted it is. I hasten to add that this observation—in essence, that modernity is a covertly Eurocentric concept—is not new. What bears remarking, though, is how the concept’s purported universality and disavowal of place make the very idea of modernity on the periphery almost unthinkable, for a peripheral or regional modernity is by definition not fully modern. The double-bind I outlined earlier is then not just a failure of the baroque as a figure for Hispanic modernity, it is inherent in the problematic itself. What then can be done?

According to Walter D. Mignolo, peripheral, alternative, or local modernities are not the answer, for they do not challenge the universalism of European modernity but simply occupy a subordinate place in it. Mignolo’s solution is to propose a new concept, or rather to combine two familiar concepts to show that they are identical: “modernity/coloniality,” a combination of two concepts. “The thesis here,” says Mignolo, “is that *there is no modernity without coloniality; coloniality is constitutive of modernity and not derivative.*”<sup>52</sup> The content of modernity bound up with a history of imperial expansion and colonialism, and more importantly, the logic of modernity, in its claim to universality, is inseparably bound up with coloniality and marginalization:

The hegemonic idea of one-sided modernity generates parallel alternatives: peripheral modernity, subaltern modernity, alternative modernities, and so on. All of them leave untouched the very imperial logic sustaining the idea of modernity. Coloniality, instead, reveals its

darker side and opens up decolonial avenues of thinking, living, and acting—that there is a *singular modernity* (that singularity is not just modernity but *modernity/coloniality*), a singular modernity formed by a variegated histories of imperial/colonial relations. Therefore it is not necessary to invent alternative modernities, or peripherals, or posts, or subalterns, because that is what modernity/ coloniality is: the triumphal rhetoric of salvation (by convers[ion], civilization, development, and market democracy) that needs inevitably to unfold (and to hide) the logic of coloniality.”<sup>53</sup>

With his reference to a “singular modernity,” Mignolo is making a qualified criticism of Jameson, whose book by that title has little to say about colonialism or the non-European, non-North American world. Mignolo’s insight is compelling. His cumbersome term, however—which for him is nothing less than “the antidote to all previous debates”<sup>54</sup>—is limited. As the above passage makes clear, Mignolo is talking more about a sociological or economic condition than about aesthetic modernity per se, and while he apparently intends his proposals for the aesthetic sphere as well (he ends the article with a discussion of literature), it is not clear what an “aesthetic modernity/coloniality” would consist of. His suggestive proposal for “decolonial avenues of thinking” remains undeveloped (at least here). In any event, overcoming the impasse would require more than remembering that modernity inevitably has a darker side, and more than the observation that Latin America or Spain (or other peripheral regions) remain necessarily outside of the theorization of aesthetic modernity.

More compelling is Mignolo’s insistence that “modernity” is hopelessly tainted, coupled with his acknowledgement that we cannot dispense with the term altogether. (As Jameson says, “the notions that cluster around the word ‘modern’ are as unavoidable as they are unacceptable.”<sup>55</sup>) Modernity/coloniality does indeed open up possibilities for a de-colonial thought, but realizing them might mean moving beyond this ungainly concept. Taking a cue from Mignolo, and moving past his proposal, I suggest something both more conservative and more radical: moving beyond the baroque, and beyond Latin American or Hispanic “versions” of modernity, to work toward inserting Latin America and the Hispanic world into larger Western accounts of modernity. The importance of this task should not be understated, for modernity is an extraordinarily powerful concept. As Michael Iarocci has recently noted,

at the level of rhetoric, “modern” and “modernity” carry within them a series of important tacit ideas. Among them are the notion of historical agency (as opposed to the passive reception of “History”), an intense awareness of historical change (as opposed to the affirmation of unwavering tradition), and a dynamic sense of historical flux (as opposed to the image of historical stasis). As a trope, the modern can work to recover precisely those characteristics that the metageography of “modern Europe” had attempted to deny its exterior.<sup>56</sup>

But if this task is pressing, it is also daunting, given Hispanic literature’s marginal status within Western literature or literary modernity. This status is familiar to anyone working within the field: “As any Hispanist with comparative interests soon discovers,” writes

Iarocci, “the literary production of Spain’s eighteenth, nineteenth, and—with some exceptions—twentieth centuries has largely been either entirely absent from, or at best, utterly peripheral to, the constitution of the entity known as ‘modern European literature.’”<sup>57</sup> The same is true for Latin American authors within a more broadly conceived “Western literature” (notwithstanding several well-known exceptions, such as Borges, García Márquez, or more recently Bolaño). Addressing the question of marginalization requires moving beyond peripheral or regional modernities, as Moreiras and Mignolo have argued. I would add that it involves moving beyond the baroque—at least insofar as the baroque continues to be the figure of exclusion for the Hispanic world.

### **Beyond the baroque**

Above I suggested that understanding the baroque as a discursive construction that attempts to claim a peripheral modernity, however equivocally and contradictorily, might reveal some of the unacknowledged discursive limitations to which aesthetic modernity is subject. It might also remind us that aesthetic modernity itself is a discursive construction: like the baroque, it is not simply out there as an identifiable essence, but is discursively and reiteratively claimed. (This is part of what I take Jameson to mean when he calls it a trope and a narrative category.) Rather than focus solely on modernity’s “content”—when it begins, what it consists of and how it differs in the Hispanic world—we should attend to how our own critical practices fit in with this larger discursive construction. Of course, we can no more redefine and reinvent models of modernity than we can propose a wholly new definition of “baroque,” for we are not unconstrained by the past. And yet it may well be possible to reshape these models from within. In any case we are already operating within a discourse of aesthetic modernity, and we would do well to ask whether we are challenging or merely perpetuating an older, Eurocentric model. My view on the matter should be clear: I have argued that current criticism within Hispanic and Latin American studies, in particular what I have called the “continuity thesis,” has indirectly and counterintuitively helped marginalize Latin America and Iberia, because it figures its modernity as something regionally limited—and hence peripheral, derivative, non-essential, and ultimately irrelevant for theories of modernity generally. Irrelevant, that is, for aesthetic modernity as such. By claiming the baroque a regionally “different” version of the modern, a certain segment of Hispanist criticism inadvertently justifies the marginalization of its field and object of study—and thus perpetuates a traditionally Eurocentric discourse of aesthetic modernity.

A different critical practice could engage with this discourse more fruitfully. The most promising avenue lies, I think, in asserting the significance that Latin American or Iberian writers have for canonical formulations of modernity—whether this significance consists of confirming old formulations, modifying them, or radically challenging them. Instead of defining the how Latin American or Hispanic aesthetic modernity is different, such a practice would seek to define the place of Latin America or the Hispanic world within a more broadly Western aesthetic modernity. It would by no means deny the specificity of the regional, much less try to force Latin America’s cultural history into theoretical models that do not fit. On the contrary, it would show how incorporating the Hispanic and the Latin American into those models can make them less Eurocentric. It could even entail becoming more aware of geographic specificity, not less—especially of the unacknowledged geographic specificity of conventional accounts of modernity.

On a more concrete level, this might mean reminding ourselves that the *annus mirabilis* 1922—to take that hoariest of modernist chestnuts—was revolutionary not only because of the publication of *The Waste Land*, *Ulysses*, the *Duino Elegies* and *Jacob's Room*, but also because that year saw the appearance of *Trilce*, surely one of the most groundbreaking and astonishing books of poetry written in the twentieth century. Or, to focus on the authors under discussion here, this would mean not denying that Sarduy is “postmodern” (as Parkinson Zamora in effect does), but arguing that his theoretical and literary writings ought to occupy a central place in our understanding of the late-twentieth-century. Instead of downplaying Carpentier’s debt to the surrealism, it would mean insisting on his importance as a deeply engaged critic of avant-garde. Carpentier, of course, touted the regional specificity of his two major theoretical contributions, the “marvelous real” and the baroque, but his was not an exclusive specificity, and he was arguably more interested in how his aesthetic vision could supercede Europe’s exhausted avant-garde than how it could maintain itself separate from it. Similar arguments could be made for the other authors under study here: we should see them not as exponents of a Hispanic or Latin American regional modernity, parallel to but separated from a mainstream, but as writers whose aesthetic projects and theoretical claims still have much to say to the center.



## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Francisco Ortega, "History of a Phantom," *A Companion to Latin American Literature and Culture*, ed. Sara Castro-Klarén (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008).
  - <sup>2</sup> However, my use of Foucault's notion of discourse differs in three key respects. First, I do not study statements as impersonal utterances, nor do I rule out the possibility of certain statements being more important than others and having a lasting influence as a common reference point. Second, the discourse of the baroque is more recent and narrower than what Foucault studied: sexuality, man, etc. (The baroque's importance within Hispanist literary criticism does not necessarily mean that it occupies an important place outside intellectual spheres, in Latin America or anywhere else.) Third, and most significantly, I take the term "baroque" as my principle of unity; the unities of discourse that Foucault outlines rely neither on a shared object nor a shared term, but rather on a series of discursive regularities. Foucault, the definition and unity of a given discourse lie not in a shared object of study that statements refer to, nor in a designation they employ, but in the discursive regularities permitting how those statements can be formed. See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), especially pp. 21-76.
  - <sup>3</sup> For accounts of these debates, see Wellek, "The Concept of Baroque" (cited below); Frank J. Warnke, *Versions of Baroque* (cited above); Helmut Hatzfeld, *Estudios sobre el barroco* (Madrid: Gredos, 1964); or Harold B. Segel, *The Baroque Poem: A Comparative Study* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1974). A more recent but schematic discussion of the term's history can be found in Jaime Siles, *El barroco en la literatura española* (Pamplona: EUNSA, 2006). For an abbreviated and introductory summary of the term's fortunes in France, see Henriette Levillain, *Qu'est-ce que le baroque?* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2003). I will discuss the history of the term in more detail in the following chapter.
  - <sup>4</sup> Parkinson Zamora, *The Inordinate Eye*, p. 220.
  - <sup>5</sup> Ortega, "History of a Phantom," p. 188.
  - <sup>6</sup> René Wellek, "The Concept of Baroque in Literary Scholarship," *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 92. The essay was originally written in 1945 and appears in this book with a substantial postscript from 1962. Wellek was concerned with defining a literary historical period and placing it in a succession of other analogous terms (Renaissance, neoclassicism, Romanticism)—an undertaking that lies, to be sure, far from contemporary academic concerns. Yet in my view his criticism of the haphazard use of period terms remains valid.
  - <sup>7</sup> At the end of the 1962 postscript, Wellek gives an endorsement for the term's use: "It raises the problem of periodisation, of the analogies between the arts; it is the one term for the style between the Renaissance and classicism which is sufficiently general to override the local terms of schools; and it suggests the unity of a Western literary and artistic period" (p. 127).
  - <sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Le Plí* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1987), p. 47: "Il est pourtant étrange de nier l'existence du Baroque comme on nie les licornes ou les éléphants roses. Car dans ce cas le concept est donné, tandis que dans le cas du Baroque il s'agit de savoir si l'on peut inventer un concept capable (ou non) de lui donner l'existence. Les perles irrégulières existent, mais le Baroque n'a aucune raison d'exister sans un concept qui forme cette raison même. Il est facile de rendre le Baroque inexistant, il suffit de ne pas en proposer de concept."
  - <sup>9</sup> Parkinson Zamora, *The Inordinate Eye*, p. xvi.
  - <sup>10</sup> As noted earlier, and as we will see in what follows, the twentieth-century baroque is generally theorized as an exclusively and proprietarily Latin American (or Hispanic) phenomenon.
  - <sup>11</sup> Hernán Vidal, "Aesthetic Categories as Empire Administration," *Hispanic Baroques: Reading Cultures in Context*, ed. Nicholas Spadaccini and Luis Martín-Estudillo (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), p. 43. The following citation is from the same page.
  - <sup>12</sup> Beverley, *Essays on the Literary Baroque*, p. 136. Another skeptic is Leonardo Acosta, who notes the "subtly colonialist vision" implicit in the equation of the baroque and Latin America. See *Alejo en Tierra Firme: intertextualidad y encuentros fortuitos* (Havana: Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Cultura Cubana Juan Marinello, 2004), especially p. 14: "decir que todo en la América Latina es barroco y que el escritor latinoamericano deberá ser por fuerza un escritor barroco, me sigue pareciendo una exageración, hipérbole o simple manía exacerbada por el mimetismo, y nada más que eso."
  - <sup>13</sup> Walter Moser's "Du baroque européen et colonial au néobaroque américain et postcolonial," *Barrocos y modernos: nuevos caminos en la investigación del Barroco iberoamericano*, ed. Petra Schumm (Madrid/Frankfurt:

- Iberoamericana/Vervuert, 1998), p. 73. In the original: “L’étonnement...nous oblige à interroger et à questionner ce qui semble être devenu une évidence pour beaucoup: l’évidence de la continuité, du toujours-déjà-là du baroque.”
- <sup>14</sup> Beverley, *Essays on the Literary Baroque*, p. 4. While Beverley writes here and elsewhere about the problems of emphasizing the baroque’s “continuity” as a Latin American essence, he does not in fact use the term “continuity thesis.” His chief concern here are the problems of positing an uninterrupted baroque identity which ignores neoclassical reactions against baroque aesthetics.
- <sup>15</sup> Roberto González Echevarría, *Celestina’s Brood: Continuities of the Baroque in Spanish and Latin American Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993). He makes this argument most especially in his chapter “Poetics and Modernity in Juan de Espinosa Medrano, Known as *Lunarejo*,” where he asserts that “the modernity of *Lunarejo*’s poetics is that combination of resentment, alienation, and self-acceptance as a being that, [despite enjoying] the status of the new, suffers a congenital belatedness that condemns him to an anxious rummaging through the given in search for that which shapes him, for the source of the strangeness that he embodies” (p. 169). John Beverley mounts an important critique of Echevarría’s reading in “Sobre la supuesta modernidad del *Apologético* de Juan de Espinosa Medrano,” *Essays on the Literary Baroque*, pp. 123-135.
- <sup>16</sup> González Echevarría, *Celestina’s Brood*, p. 198.
- <sup>17</sup> González Echevarría does not attempt to show Guillén participated, from Cuba, in the 1927 celebration of the centenary of Góngora’s death. His “philological” evidence of the link between the two authors consists largely of the echoes he hears, in Guillén’s “que siga el son,” of Góngora’s famous refrain “y riase la gente.”
- <sup>18</sup> González Echevarría, *Celestina’s Brood*, p. 194.
- <sup>19</sup> While the idea of continuity was not new, most previous work on the neobaroque was focused on the twentieth century without establishing explicit comparisons with the historical baroque. See, for example, José Ortega, *La estética neobarroca en la narrativa hispanoamericana* (Madrid: Turanzas, 1984). Serge Gruzinski had tied the juxtaposed the colonial and the contemporary in a somewhat haphazard, eclectic way in “Del barroco al neobarroco: las fuentes coloniales de los tiempos posmodernos (el caso mexicano)” *El corazón sangrante / The Bleeding Heart*, ed. Olivier Debrouse et al. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), pp. 62-89. Sarduy had of course compared Góngora and Lezama in “El barroco y el neobarroco,” but he did not use any other seventeenth-century reference points, and in any case did not provide a sustained comparison. As for Carpentier, while he stated as early as the 1960s that the baroque was “the legitimate style of the American novelist,” he did not address that continuity as a comparative project. And Lezama Lima’s transhistorical poetic “banquet” with baroque and contemporary poets, in *La expresión americana*, is more imaginative than argumentative.
- <sup>20</sup> Chiampí, *Barroco e Modernidade*, p. 4. The essay, entitled “O Barroco no Ocaso da Modernidade,” was apparently first published in *Cadernos do Mestrado/Literatura* (Universidade de Rio de Janeiro) 1994, pp. 7-27. It appears in English translation in the forthcoming *Baroque New Worlds*, ed. Parkinson Zamora and Kaup.
- <sup>21</sup> Chiampí, *Barroco e Modernidade*, p. 4. In the original: “a continuidade do barroco revela o caráter contraditório dessa experiência moderna, que canibaliza a estética da ruptura produzida nos centros hegemônicos, ao mesmo tempo que restitui o incompleto e inacabado de sua própria tradição.”
- <sup>22</sup> Chiampí, *Barroco e Modernidade*, p. 13.
- <sup>23</sup> Parkinson Zamora also discusses the more traditional trio of Lezama, Sarduy and Carpentier. Her claim that Carpentier began to envision a baroque aesthetics as early as the 1920s is, as far as I know, unsupported by historical evidence: it was not until the 1960s, with *Tientos y diferencias* (cited above), that he first turned his attention seriously to the baroque.
- <sup>24</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora, *The Inordinate Eye*, pp. xvi-xvii.
- <sup>25</sup> Of course, postmodernism itself may no longer be “up to date,” but then Parkinson Zamora is mainly referring to writers active from the 1960s to the 1980s. It is worth noting that other recent commentators have spoken of an “ultrabaroque” that chronologically follows the neobaroque— hence the baroque is able to remain current even after postmodernism has lost its freshness. See, for example, the essays included in Spadaccini and Martín-Estudillo, eds., *Hispanic Baroques*. The name “ultrabaroque” comes from an exhibition held at the San Diego Museum of Modern Art in 2000. See Elizabeth Armstrong and Víctor Zamudio-Taylor, eds., *Ultra-Baroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art* (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000).

- <sup>26</sup> Mabel Moraña, “Baroque/Neobaroque/Ultrabaroque: Disruptive Readings of Modernity,” in *Hispanic Baroques: Reading Cultures in Context*, ed. Nicholas Spadaccini and Luis Martín-Estudillo (Nashville: Vanderbilt, 2005), pp. 241-81.
- <sup>27</sup> Moraña, “Baroque/Neobaroque/Ultrabaroque,” pp. 254, 255. Her emphasis.
- <sup>28</sup> Moraña, “Baroque/Neobaroque/Ultrabaroque,” p. 252.
- <sup>29</sup> Monika Kaup, “Becoming-Baroque: Folding European Forms into the New World Baroque with Alejo Carpentier,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 5:2 (2005), p. 108. Her use of “baroque reason” appears to be a reference to Christine Buci-Glucksmann’s book *La Raison baroque* (cited above).
- <sup>30</sup> William Egginton, “The Corporeal Image and the New World Baroque,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106:1 (2007), p. 108. A slightly different version of this article appears as chapter five of his *Theater of Truth*.
- <sup>31</sup> Kaup, “Becoming-Baroque,” p. 116.
- <sup>32</sup> According to Egginton, works that use the major strategy “function ultimately as lures for the production of docile consumers” while “[a]rt and literature that deploy minor strategy of the baroque cannot be co-opted by this commodification...because the very function of the strategy undermines the basis for identification necessary for mass commodification” (p. 122). I find his distinction unconvincing: for him *Spiderman* is merely crass and commodified while Almodóvar’s films are somehow resistant to or free from any vulgar commercialism. This is not fundamentally different from a familiar binary of high culture and low culture, despite his insistence to the contrary.
- <sup>33</sup> Oddly missing from most of these accounts are criteria that would actually permit one to identify a work as baroque. Perhaps a strict stylistic definition of what counts as baroque, and what should be placed into a different aesthetic or historical category, would seem like a throwback to an outdated literary classification of the kind that occupied Welck. Yet it seems clear that these critics do have some sort of criteria in mind, for by their own definition, not everyone is baroque, and the examples they choose of who *is* baroque are extremely varied (Guillén, Almodóvar, Carpentier, Kahlo, etc.)
- <sup>34</sup> Octavio Paz, *Los hijos del limo: del Romanticismo a la vanguardia* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1981). In the English version, *Children of the Mire: Modern Poetry from Romanticism to the Avant-Garde*, trans. Rachel Phillips (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974) this phrase is rendered as “the tradition against itself” (p. 1).
- <sup>35</sup> For a much lengthier unraveling of the uses of modernity, see Fredric Jameson’s *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), and specifically p. 28: “it has become clear that the terms ‘modern’ and ‘modernity’ always bring some form of periodizing logic with them, however implicit it may at first be.” On the following page Jameson concludes, in what is the first of his four “maxims” of modernity, that whatever objections we may raise against periodization, “[w]e cannot not periodize.”
- <sup>36</sup> To make the same point with a forced and drawn-out pun: the solution that González Echevarría and others propose to the problem of a Hispanic or Latin American modernity is continuity, i.e., the continuity of a longstanding baroque tradition. But this “continuity solution” is antithetical to any concept of modernity, which necessarily proposes a “solution of continuity” in the (now sadly archaic) sense of a rupture or break.
- <sup>37</sup> Jorge Luis Marzo, *La memoria administrada: el barroco y lo hispano* (Madrid: Katz, 2010), p. 218: “el discurso libertario barroco siempre se definió en contra de lo mismo: lo moderno.” Also p. 203: “La defensa a ultranza de la identidad barroca americana ha permitido que un potente discurso conservador se haya instalado en buena parte de la inteligencia americana, pero camuflado bajo la fantasía de ir a contracorriente de una modernidad enquistada en su propia racionalidad.”
- <sup>38</sup> Beverley, *Essays on the Literary Baroque*, p. 144.
- <sup>39</sup> Beverley, *Essays on the Literary Baroque*, p. 144.
- <sup>40</sup> As noted above, Beverley’s critique of González Echevarría is laid out most fully in “Sobre la supuesta modernidad del *Apológico* de Juan de Espinosa Medrano,” *Essays on the Literary Baroque*, pp. 123-135. The article first appeared in the *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 22:43-44 (1994), pp. 45-58.
- <sup>41</sup> Moreiras, “Mules and Snakes,” in Mabel Moraña, ed., *Ideologies of Hispanism (Hispanic Issues 30)* (Nashville: Vanderbilt, 2004), p. 222.
- <sup>42</sup> Moreiras, “Mules and Snakes,” p. 223.
- <sup>43</sup> Moreiras’s justifies his decision alleging that Lezama and Perlongher, among others, enact such a critique in their poetry.

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- <sup>44</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, "Preamble: The Historical Foundation of Modernity/Coloniality and the Emergence of Decolonial Thinking," *A Companion to Latin American Literature and Culture*, ed. Sara Castro-Klarén (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), p. 21. The same argument could of course be extended to a Hispanic or Iberian modernity. Any peripheral variant will necessarily be defective.
- <sup>45</sup> Ileana Rodríguez, "Postmodern Theory and Cultural Criticism in Spanish America and Brazil," *A Companion to Latin American Literature and Culture*, ed. Sara Castro-Klarén (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), p. 606.
- <sup>46</sup> Rodríguez, "Postmodern Theory," p. 616.
- <sup>47</sup> Michael Iarocci provides a detailed account of how European modernity has historically been constituted by excluding Spain. See his *Properties of Modernity: Romantic Spain, Modern Europe, and the Legacies of Empire* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006), especially pp. 4-21.
- <sup>48</sup> Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, p. 36.
- <sup>49</sup> Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, p. 35.
- <sup>50</sup> Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, p. 40.
- <sup>51</sup> The notion that aesthetic modernity begins with Baudelaire can be found in many key accounts of the topic, such as Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987); or Hans Robert Jauss, "Literarische Tradition und gegenwärtiges Bewusstsein der Modernität," *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974).
- <sup>52</sup> Mignolo, "Preamble," p. 22. His emphasis.
- <sup>53</sup> Mignolo, "Preamble," p. 19. "Conversion" (here in brackets) is "conversation" in the source text.
- <sup>54</sup> Mignolo, "Preamble," p. 19.
- <sup>55</sup> Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, p. 13.
- <sup>56</sup> Iarocci, *Properties of Modernity*, pp. 42-43.
- <sup>57</sup> Iarocci, *Properties of Modernity*, p. 26.

## Chapter Two

### When Spain and Latin America Became Baroque

“Baroque” derives, by way of French, from the Portuguese *barroco*, a jeweler’s name for an irregular pearl, which in turn may come from the Latin for wart (*verrūca*) or from an Arabic term for pebbly earth (*burāq*, plural of *burqah*); at some point the word may conceivably have combined with the scholastic term *baroco*, a mnemonic device for a certain type of syllogism thought to be of questionable validity.<sup>1</sup> One might say that from its inception the baroque suggested deviation, either from soundness of logic or the perfection of the sphere.

Not uninteresting in itself, this particular item of lexical trivia would be irrelevant for understanding the baroque today, were it not for the fact that generations of scholars have insisted on starting with just such an etymological detour—almost as though one could not speak of the style without first accounting for the origin of the name. Recourse to etymology is a harmless enough convention, but it makes little sense with a concept whose meaning has changed considerably over the last hundred or so years, and whose field of reference is disconcertingly vast. In discussions of the baroque, a preoccupation with etymology may indicate a more generalized assumption that the concept’s meaning resides in its origins. Many critics have in fact suggested that the excesses and distortions of baroque aesthetics are inscribed in the term itself; if the word once referred to an irregular pearl, or to a defective syllogism, then surely both are images for baroque aesthetics as a whole. It is now, as it has always been, a beautiful deformity, an alternate rationality. And its significance for Spanish or Latin American modernity becomes clear: like the baroque, aesthetic modernity in the Hispanic world—according to the dominant view outlined in the previous chapter—is perennially exceptional or deficient.<sup>2</sup>

But such an explanation of the baroque’s prominence in Spain and Latin America is ahistorical, for it disregards how the baroque came to acquire its current meanings. Discussions of the Hispanic baroque’s significance in the twentieth century seem to invoke a belief that the cultural present can be understood as the perpetual return of a foundational moment. Certainly, the concept’s past does weigh heavily on it—but its recent past, not its remote beginnings. Its etymological meaning is at best one among many, and it tells us virtually nothing about what the baroque means today, or why it has achieved such notoriety in Hispanism. For its current prominence was not foreordained: it came about rather as the result of a specific critical discourse that slowly and contingently developed over the last century. Understanding the baroque’s prevalence within contemporary Hispanic literary criticism requires reexamining this discourse—not returning to the word’s origins.

Art historian Pierre Charpentrat suggests a more useful approach to studying the baroque’s significance. In *Le mirage baroque* (1967), which ponders the term’s sudden ubiquity in the 1960s, he surveys its multiple meanings with a heavy dose of sarcasm. “That the word has ended up unburdened by any content, passing through the field of literature and then to every other field, returning after this circuit to contaminate art

criticism; that its users lose sight of the old logical axiom ‘A is not not-A,’ everyone can readily agree,” he writes. “The fact remains that it fulfills, or at least has fulfilled, a *function*.”<sup>3</sup> Following Charpentrat, one might try to understand what the term “does,” rather than what it means. In the previous chapter I took precisely this approach: studying the work of Roberto González Echevarría, Irlemar Chiampi, Lois Parkinson Zamora and others, I argued that what the baroque does in Hispanic and Latin American criticism is stake an equivocal claim for the aesthetic modernity of Spain, Latin America, or the Hispanic world more broadly. As a historical period or a contemporary strategy, a response to colonialism or an alternative to postmodernism, the baroque is imagined in its distance from metropolitan European models of modernity. It becomes not merely a moment in the cultural history of Spain and Latin America, but the very essence of the Hispanic as such. As John Beverley points out, this ahistorical and identitarian dimension is what allows critics to claim that the baroque “reappears” in the twentieth century:

For such an optic, the Baroque constitutes above all the prefiguration or prehistory of the present, not something that is valid in its own terms. Hence the impossibility of leaving the Baroque behind, consigning it to the past, because it remains as a kind of unerasable sign of the Latin American as such, with a constantly shifting, perpetually original referent: *barroco indígena, barroco de Indias, barroco criollo, mundonovismo, “lo real maravilloso,” neobarroco, barroco postmoderno, neobarroso, ultra-barroco...*<sup>4</sup>

Beverley makes a historicist case against the mainstream position; his larger point is that the baroque, in either its historical or contemporary incarnations, should not be complacently applauded as a force for liberation. But one can do more than look askance at the baroque’s function within Hispanism and Latin Americanism today. Beverley’s refreshing skepticism can be taken further: how, historically, did it become possible to envision the baroque as the specific modernity of a continent or a people?

In what follows I turn to the peculiar history that produced this discourse. I do so through a series of debates—debates about the scope and nature of the baroque, about how it is defined and, more tellingly, what it is defined against. Critics have seen the baroque variously as a historical period, a transhistorical style, an ideological mechanism, a national or ethnic expression, and finally, in its twentieth-century incarnation, an alternative to modernism or postmodernism. These five debates—about history, style, ideology, nationality and modernity—overlap and merge; taking them one by one will allow us to plot the development of what I have called baroque discourse. Some of the texts discussed below visibly influenced later work; others, however, merely illustrate a more general line of thought. A number of other texts have not found a place in this necessarily abbreviated account of the term and its fortunes throughout the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> While not exhaustive, though, this history does provide a context within which the many contradictory uses of “baroque” can be understood. In later chapters I examine more closely the key figures in this story: Gerardo Diego and the 1927 group, José Lezama Lima, and Severo Sarduy. But to properly appreciate their contribution, one must situate them in their respective historical intellectual milieux. For it is no coincidence that Sarduy, for example, began to promote the baroque in the 1960s and 1970s, just as the term was enjoying an enormous popularity as a sort of French (or

Western European) intellectual vogue; its growing identification with Latin America had much to do with its problematic status in France.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, while the baroque is often invoked as evidence of the Hispanic world's exceptional status or divergence from European models of aesthetic modernity, its conceptual genealogy reveals something quite different. It shows a concept whose current meanings arise from a transatlantic dialogue, from Spain and Latin America's intimate involvement in broader discussions about the period which sits at or near the origin of modernity. Many critics forget this fact, preferring to see a baroque whose difference or deviation is inscribed in its very etymology. Yet its current associations came about only very gradually and contingently, if not exactly by accident. Any number of other terms, other periods, could have been proposed in its place. One could conceivably find a different category to define the aesthetic production of Spain and Latin America, and could just as easily do without such an overarching, transhistorical label. After all, there is no self-evident reason why twentieth-century Spanish or Latin American art should be reduced to a single style, or understood by analogy with any period from the past. It now seems natural to link Latin America to the baroque—but this circumstance is itself highly unnatural. Indeed, if a term once reserved for the architectural extravagances of the seventeenth century can now be seen as synonymous with Hispanic or Latin American modernity—as it surely is in mainstream Hispanist criticism—then this fact ought to strike us as odd. If it does not, it is a perhaps testament to how thoroughly the baroque has permeated our critical consciousness: we assume that it has always been, as Moreiras puts it, “a certain cultural principle of modernity” in the Hispanic world.<sup>7</sup> A genealogy of the baroque will show just how recent, and how contingent, these developments are.

### **History: Renaissance and Baroque**

To begin with, the adjective “baroque” was not contemporary to the seventeenth-century art it describes: it came to the other European languages from French only in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, and did not become an established art-historical category until the 1890s. As a concept it is thus a little over a century old. (“Barroco” was not incorporated into the *Diccionario de la Real Academia* until 1914.) In the first decades of the twentieth century it enjoyed an immense popularity, and though it began as an architectural term, it grew to encompass painting, sculpture, and eventually literature. Its success was extraordinary: one art historian in the 1940s went so far as to claim that the baroque was one of the two most “outstanding problems of modern cultural scholarship.”<sup>8</sup> This success seems all the more remarkable when one considers its inauspicious origins.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the term meant something like “bizarre,” “grotesque,” or merely “in poor taste,” and though it was not limited to any specific field, it appears to have been applied particularly to architecture. One of the earliest definitions of *baroque* was given in 1788 by the *Encyclopédie méthodique*, which considered it “a nuance of the bizarre...the ridiculous carried to excess,” and cited Francesco Borromini and Guarino Guarini as notable examples.<sup>9</sup> In Spanish the term appeared as early as 1839 in reference to architecture, though by and large these uses describe a vaguely (and negatively) defined style, not a specific period.<sup>10</sup> Jacob Burckhardt's watershed guide to Italian art, the *Cicerone* (1855), discusses the “baroque style” in architecture, though the chapter begins with the frank admission that such architecture only occasionally rises above the level of vulgarity.<sup>11</sup> The baroque, it seems,

was slowly becoming a period term, and had not shed its negative connotations. In 1887 it became for the first time the subject of a book, Cornelius Gurlitt's *Geschichte des Barockstiles in Italien*, part of a multi-volume work published in collaboration with Burckhardt and others.<sup>12</sup>

But the person universally credited with inaugurating, or at least heralding, the surge of interest in the baroque around the turn of the twentieth century is the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin. His *Renaissance and Baroque* (1888), which seeks to describe the dramatic change in architectural style visible in the later half of the sixteenth century, is probably the first book to take up “baroque” as a neutral term and treat it as a period distinct from the Renaissance but equal in worth.<sup>13</sup> In *Principles of Art History* (1915), he broadened his study to include drawing, painting and sculpture, and he reduced the period shift to a powerful—if schematic—framework of five formal traits.<sup>14</sup> Whereas the Renaissance had been linear, planar, closed, multiple and “absolutely” clear, the baroque was “painterly,” recessed, open, unified and “relatively” clear. These five pairs of characteristics—painterly vs. linear, planar vs. recessed, etc.—can be summed up in the difference between being and becoming. The baroque, he claims,

in place of the perfect, the completed, gives the restless, the becoming; in place of the limited, the conceivable, gives the limitless, the colossal. The ideal of beautiful proportion vanishes, interest concentrates not on being, but on happening.<sup>15</sup>

Discrete formal innovations could thus be understood as part of a larger shift, in the late sixteenth century, in the conceptualization of art and beauty, and even in humanity's understanding of its place in the cosmos. This approach set the tone for later critics, who would link the baroque to the emergence of a modern consciousness or to the propagation of a Counter-Reformation ideology.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps even more influential was Wölfflin's formalism: by reducing the baroque to five stylistic traits, each of them readily transferable to different contexts, he cleared the way for the term's application to other, historically remote periods.<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, then, ideological interpretation, and on the other, formalization—much of the subsequent criticism on the baroque developed along these lines.

Wölfflin at first kept his analysis within narrow geographic and temporal bounds: in *Renaissance and Baroque*, he focused largely on Roman architecture of the mid- to late sixteenth century, and even went so far as to suggest that “we might not be far wrong in speaking of baroque as a purely Roman thing.”<sup>18</sup> By the time he published *Principles of Art History*, a quarter of a century later, the baroque seemed far more German than Italian.<sup>19</sup> In the intervening years, interest in the subject had grown by leaps and bounds, and art historians in Germany, Austria, Italy and England had adopted the term.<sup>20</sup> A territorial expansion soon followed, and the term came to describe not only the art of seventeenth-century Germany and Italy, but also that of Spain, Portugal, and their American (and even Asian) colonies—as well as Belgium, Holland and the countries of central Europe. In the span of a few decades, “baroque” succeeded in establishing itself as the dominant term for the century following the Renaissance in European art and architecture, and today it remains firmly entrenched as an art-historical period, one typically associated with Caravaggio, Bernini, Borromini, Velázquez, Rubens, Rembrandt, and Zurbarán,



among many others.<sup>21</sup> (Now, however, it is not said to follow the Renaissance directly, but a post-Renaissance period of “mannerism.”)

No less dramatic than its success in art history was its success in literature. René Wellek charts this success in his exhaustive, meticulously documented essay, “The Concept of Baroque in Literary Criticism,” first published in 1945 and later reprinted, with a substantial postscript, in *Concepts of Criticism* (1962). As he notes, “the enormous vogue of baroque as a literary term, arose in Germany only about 1921-22.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, it came relatively late to literary studies, and is even today not yet a century old. German scholars first applied it to their own country’s seventeenth-century literature, and then quickly extended it to other national contexts: Italy, Spain, and then, with more resistance, to France and England.

We can date its arrival in Hispanic studies with considerable precision. The first scholar to use it as a period term in Spanish literary history was Ludwig Pflandl, author of *Geschichte der Spanischen Nationalliteratur in ihrer Blütezeit* (1929); tellingly, in a very similar work published just five years earlier, he had made no mention of the term.<sup>23</sup> Earlier critics had of course used it, but as a vague stylistic description, not as a definite period. (Dámaso Alonso, in the introduction to his 1927 edition of the *Soledades*, speaks of Góngora’s *barroquismo* as simply one trait among many.<sup>24</sup>) It quickly caught on among Spanish and Latin American critics such as José Ortega y Gasset, Américo Castro and Mariano Picón Salas, presumably owing to its ready alignment with earlier frameworks and its ability to transcend narrower designations like *conceptismo* and *culteranismo*.<sup>25</sup> No doubt the revival of interest in Góngora around 1927, on the occasion of the third centenary of his death, further contributed to the term’s popularity. Yet Góngora was not at first celebrated as a baroque poet, for the simple reason

Yet it would be a mistake to conflate these two phenomena: Góngora was not initially celebrated as a baroque poet, for the simple reason that “baroque” had not yet become an operative literary category—in fact the word appears only very rarely in the publications marking the centenary. On the contrary, Góngora’s revival facilitated, rather than followed, the concept’s adoption in Spain, to such an extent that he, more than any other seventeenth-century figure, quickly came to define the Hispanic literary baroque. Within a decade the term had comfortably ensconced itself as the name of the period immediately following the Renaissance in Spanish and Spanish American letters.<sup>26</sup> Not only that: as I discuss below, a number of critics, such as Helmut Hatzfeld, began to view Spain as the home of the baroque.

Elsewhere, however, the term met with more resistance. England proved especially unwilling to call its seventeenth-century literature “baroque,” preferring the more local designations “metaphysical,” “Restoration,” etc., though of course British scholars of Spanish or German literature readily accepted it.<sup>27</sup> The same holds for the colonial literature of the United States. In France the situation appears rather more complicated: the traditional prestige of French classicism, and the equally traditional disregard for the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, were major obstacles; in 1945 Wellek called France “the one major country which has almost completely refused to adopt the term.”<sup>28</sup> In the 1950s, however, with the work of Jean Rousset in literature and Victor Tapié in art history, the idea of a French baroque began to gain ground—though both authors are careful to note that the baroque, as the opposite of classicism, is ultimately incompatible with the country’s essentially classical spirit.<sup>29</sup>

By the 1960s, inside and outside of France, the term had taken hold of the critical imagination. Its popularity both as a historical period and as an all-purpose adjective reached astonishing heights, as Charpentrat discusses in *Le mirage baroque*.<sup>30</sup> Today, of course, this popularity is largely forgotten. Yet in its heyday, the baroque was a major academic concern, and was widely considered one of the major innovations of twentieth-century literary scholarship. In 1974 one critic, Harold Segel, went so far as to claim that “[p]robably no area of literary study has evoked so much interest and controversy in recent years as the *Baroque*.”<sup>31</sup> Much of this controversy centered on periodization, for the term’s appeal lay largely in its ability to delineate a unique era on par with the Renaissance, Neoclassicism, and Romanticism. Scholars proposed dates, divisions, finer distinctions: German Hispanist Helmut Hatzfeld, for example, elaborated a fourfold distinction between Renaissance, Mannerism, Baroque and *Barroquismo*, and Wylie Sypher likewise saw the baroque as one of four stages of Renaissance style.<sup>32</sup> The term’s geographic, national and cultural limits also fueled endless debates: was it strictly a Catholic affair? Did England have a baroque? Did it arise from a mood of spiritual crisis or untroubled sensuality? Such questions might now seem sterile or rigidly schematic, and it is perhaps no coincidence that the term’s popularity, at least as a period term, began to wane just as “theory” arrived on the academic stage.<sup>33</sup>

Nonetheless, these largely forgotten debates provided the backdrop for the work of the authors who remain canonical: d’Ors, Maravall, Lezama, Carpentier, or Sarduy, not to mention Benjamin, Foucault, Lacan, Buci-Glucksmann, or Deleuze. Indeed, one could say that where the baroque retained its currency—notably in the Hispanic and French contexts—discussions of its importance took a decidedly more theoretical turn.<sup>34</sup> These writers did not gravitate toward the baroque out of some unconscious, unmediated affinity with a baroque spirit; rather, they responded to specific intellectual debates that arose in the 1930s and lasted until the 1970s. (Walter Benjamin’s book on *Trauerspiel*, for instance, belongs to the initial wave of baroque enthusiasm in Germany, even though it was not widely read until the 1970s or 1980s and for that reason remained marginal to the development of the concept.<sup>35</sup>) In short, the baroque could not have achieved its prominence as a theoretical object without first passing through debates about its historical and geographic scope.

What’s more, early and mid-century critics possessed a clear sense of their own historical moment: they saw the baroque as a recently created concept whose usefulness and precise definition stood open to question. It is no doubt telling that even in 1952 a literary critic could publish a book with the title *Wölfflin’s Principles in Spanish Drama*, and moreover feel the need to justify using the word “baroque” to refer to the theater.<sup>36</sup> No less telling is the fact that, as late as 1967, Theodor Adorno could deny the existence of the baroque as a musical period, dismissing any talk of the concept as “ideology in the precise sense of false consciousness.”<sup>37</sup>

Today, of course, the term is so thoroughly established that no one feels obliged to justify its use, at least not within Hispanic literary criticism. This acceptance is on the whole a good thing, for the term is useful. Still, in much recent criticism a sense of history seems missing, and some critics (certainly not all) seem to forget that the baroque is a scholarly creation, and not simply a fact of nature. Lois Parkinson Zamora, for example, offers the following typical account of the baroque’s “rediscovery” in *The Inordinate Eye* (2006):

For two hundred years the Baroque had been considered irrational and reactionary when compared to the “Enlightenment” that followed it, but by the 1920s, Enlightenment rationalism had itself become oppressive and, in some cases, totalitarian. The seventeenth-century Baroque had subverted Classical norms of reason and order, and now again, in the early twentieth century, it seemed possible that the Baroque might counter the sterile structures of Hegelian historicism and instrumental reason.<sup>38</sup>

The trouble with Parkinson Zamora’s account lies not in her opposition between a defiant baroque and an overweening rationalism, but in the suggestion that we can coherently ask what the eighteenth or nineteenth century thought of “the baroque.” Certainly, French or Spanish neoclassicists had anathematized much of the literature that preceded them, but they could hardly dismiss the baroque *tout court*, for the simple reason that, as a conceptual object, it did not yet exist. (Even today, the opposition between baroque and classical remains tenuous: many definitions, and not marginal ones, include classicism as a part of the baroque.<sup>39</sup>) And if Stendhal, Burckhardt, Menéndez Pelayo, Ruskin, or other nineteenth-century critics lavished more attention on the Renaissance than its successor, their neglect did not itself imply a well-defined notion of the baroque—nor, presumably, did it always imply an outright condemnation of an entire century. It is easy to overstate the extent to which twentieth-century writers “rehabilitated” their seventeenth forebears. Cervantes had probably never seriously fallen out of favor, in Spain or elsewhere; Lope and Calderón, who to some extent had, were recuperated in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>40</sup> The decade of the 1920s witnessed something quite different from the rediscovery of a long-maligned baroque: it saw the establishment of a literary-historical concept capable of grouping together Cervantes, Lope, Quevedo, Góngora, Calderón and others, distinguishing them from their sixteenth-century predecessors, and linking them to their contemporaries in other national contexts. The notion that Góngora was an important poet could hardly have been new.<sup>41</sup> What was new, however, was the suggestion that he belonged to a wider international trend, a trend which included Gryphius, Marino, Malherbe, Donne, and many others besides.

The baroque was not rediscovered, it was invented; it did not inertly “exist,” waiting only to be named, it came about as a historiographic creation. And without this very recent invention it could not have “returned” in the work of twentieth-century writers, nor could it be imagined as an alternative to metropolitan models of the aesthetic modernity. Nor, to quote Beverley again, could it “come to be thought of as a sort of episteme or ‘deep structure’ of Latin America as such.”<sup>42</sup> The baroque’s current prominence in Hispanic and Latin American literature begins not in the seventeenth century itself, but here, in the early twentieth, with its creation as a period in the history of culture.

### **Style: Classic and Baroque**

Questions of periodization dominated mainstream scholarship about the baroque in the first decades of the twentieth century, but another important current veered off quite early and took the baroque in a different direction, seeing it as a larger, transhistorical phenomenon, especially notable in the seventeenth century but repeated at different times throughout history. Oddly enough, this current flowed out of attempts to pinpoint what made the seventeenth century unique: once the baroque’s most distinctive

formal characteristics had been identified and defined as a set of abstract principles, it became easy to find those same principles elsewhere. If baroque poetry abounds in conceits, antitheses, metaphors, bombast, obsession with sensuality or mortality, then surely similar poetry in other centuries should also be called “baroque”? And if the conceits, antitheses, bombast, and so on, stem from a more general tendency toward exuberance and exaggeration, then couldn’t any exuberant expression be seen as an instantiation of an eternal baroque spirit? The problem is not unique to the baroque, of course: any literary period that is more than an arbitrary range of dates needs some sort of distinguishing features, be they stylistic, ideological, technical, etc.; but since no feature is wholly unique to one moment in history, any period’s style can be found, in some version, outside the period itself. In the case of the baroque, however, the tension between period and style grew especially acute.

No doubt this tension owes a great deal to Wölfflin’s schematic opposition between Renaissance and baroque, in which the latter is everything the former is not. Before Wölfflin, critics seem not to have drawn such sharp distinctions, seeing the baroque rather as the debasement of an earlier perfection. Burckhardt, for example, quipped that baroque architecture “speaks the same language as the Renaissance, but in a savage dialect.”<sup>43</sup> Wölfflin polarized the difference and reduced it to a series of discrete formal traits. And although he explicitly states, in *Renaissance and Baroque*, that “style is an *expression* of its age, and changes with the changes in human sensibility,” he also suggests that the ages themselves present a certain repetition. In fact, his original plans included an analysis of the “baroque” period in ancient architecture, and he even notes an affinity between the baroque and his own age, citing Wagner as proof.<sup>44</sup>

A number of early twentieth-century art critics developed this line of thought. In 1912 Wilhelm Worringer noted that Gothic shared many of the same formal principles as the baroque, and was separated only by the “intermezzo” of the Renaissance.<sup>45</sup> Oswald Spengler, Oskar Walzel and Benedetto Croce proposed similar definitions of a baroque that reappeared before or after the seventeenth century.<sup>46</sup> But it was Eugenio d’Ors who went furthest, by proposing that the history of culture could be seen as an alternation between two “eons,” or artistic constants: the classical and the baroque. He put forth this theory in his well-known book, *Lo barroco*, first published as *Du Baroque* in 1935 (translated by Agathe Rouart-Valéry, the poet’s daughter), and issued in Spanish only in 1944.<sup>47</sup> The Spanish title makes clear what the French does not: his concern is not *el barroco*, that is, a specific European historical period, but *lo barroco*, that which is baroque, regardless of where or when it appears.

D’Ors’s definition largely follows Wölfflin’s: *lo barroco* is characterized by painterliness, depth, dynamism, the crude incorporation of natural elements, and, “above all, that inclination to the theatrical, luxurious, convoluted, emphatic, which even the most untrained sensibility immediately recognizes in the Baroque.”<sup>48</sup> These words refer specifically to the “chapterhouse window” in the Convent of the Order of Christ, in Tomar, Portugal, and the fact that the window is from the early sixteenth century (and hence chronologically in the Renaissance) drives home his point: the baroque knows no historical or geographic bounds. It continually reappears, he maintains, in the most varied times and places. And while one eon may dominate certain periods or certain regions, examples of both can be found side by side: Voltaire, for example, he deems classical, while Rousseau is baroque. He sums up his theory as follows:

1. The Baroque is a historical constant repeatedly found in eras as distant from each other as Alexandrianism is from the Counter-Reformation, or the Counter-Reformation is from the *fin-de-siècle*.... 2. This phenomenon concerns not only art, but all of civilization.... 3. Its character is normal [i.e. not pathological or in poor taste].... 4. Far from proceeding from classical style, the Baroque opposes it even more fundamentally than does romanticism, which now, in turn, seems but an episode in the historical development of the baroque constant.<sup>49</sup>

Armed with this set of principles, d’Ors sets out to uncover manifestations of the baroque throughout history, giving a Latin taxonomical name to each “species” of the genus *Barocchus*: *Barocchus romanticus*, *Barocchus nordicus*, *Barocchus buddhicus*, *Barocchus finisaeularis*, even a *Barocchus posteabellicus*, which would seem to correspond to the interwar avant-gardes.

The problems with such an approach are readily apparent, as they were in d’Ors’s day: dividing literally all cultural production in human history into two categories gives simplification without illumination. If everything is baroque, then nothing is. Wellek, speaking of d’Ors’s “extravagant book,” complains that such overarching distinctions afford no historical insight.<sup>50</sup> Given d’Ors’s flair for overstatement, it can seem hard to know how seriously to take him. His taxonomy, in particular, seems somewhat tongue-in-cheek. But it would be a mistake not to take him at his word, for his understanding of the baroque is largely consonant with his earlier writing. And while today such a framework may strike us as outlandish, it is worth remembering that some version of the classical-baroque binary remains active in contemporary scholarship (as seen in Parkinson-Zamora’s treatment of the subject, above), albeit in a more attenuated and less schematic way. Furthermore, at least some later critics did endorse his theories more or less as he formulated them—the most notable in this regard is Carpentier, whose essays on the topic explicitly follow d’Ors. And perhaps surprisingly, even today some critics use d’Ors’s framework. Pedro Aullón de Haro has recently edited a massive book of essays along largely Orsian lines. Entitled simply *Barroco* (2004), the 1200-page volume includes articles on the Chinese baroque, Hellenistic baroque, and medieval Arabic baroque, among many other variants.<sup>51</sup>

In any case, d’Ors was not alone in his categorizing impulse. Many other critics had envisioned history as an endless oscillation between two competing aesthetic modes, and this dualism enjoyed a considerable popularity, not to say prestige: Ernst Robert Curtius, and after him Gustav Hocke and Arnold Hauser, also proposed frameworks along similar lines, though substituting term “mannerism” for baroque.<sup>52</sup> Often, in fact, such dichotomies did not include term “baroque” at all, especially in the early part of the century. The opposition between baroque and classical mapped itself onto the much older binary of the classical and the Romantic, which goes back at least to the early nineteenth century (and which Nietzsche reprises in his well-known distinction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian). For d’Ors, as for others, the baroque comes to replace Romanticism as the opposite of the classical. D’Ors is quite conscious of this fact, for in his earlier work, such as *Tres horas en el Museo del Prado* (1923), he uses this older division to categorize Western art. In *Lo barroco* he even seeks to justify his predilection for the new term: had his book been written earlier, he admits, “it is more than likely that the terms ‘baroque’ and ‘barroquismo’ would have been replaced by ‘romantic’ and ‘romanticism,’

more in line with a lengthy literary tradition and infinitely more popular in their use.”<sup>53</sup> He prefers “baroque” because it highlights an underlying principle, whereas “Romanticism” too easily evokes the recent past.

Whatever one thinks of d’Ors’s theory, his justifications and arguments make clear that the baroque is not “naturally” the opposite of the classical, that this distinction had to be made by writers like him. (Indeed, he happily takes credit for doing so.) And if today the baroque still invokes a transhistorical style in some sense opposed to classicism, then d’Ors is largely to thank. Such an abstraction was never a given. After all, most analogous period terms (Enlightenment, say) have no such connotations, nor do they form half of a larger all-encompassing binary. And as for the binary that already did exist—Romanticism vs. classicism—it had no need of a replacement term. In short, without the work of d’Ors and others, the “return of the baroque” would not have made sense as a critical paradigm, just as a “return of the Renaissance” would sound odd—for the Renaissance is still strictly a period designation. Turning the baroque into something transhistorical, a principle eternally opposed to the classical, made it possible (or at least easier) to identify a baroque aesthetics in the twentieth century.

Beyond allowing its twentieth-century “return,” the elevation of the concept to a transhistorical constant has two key consequences. First, it led to a dramatic simplification of what the baroque is, and second, it made it easy to give the term an ideological thrust. The first consequence is already apparent in d’Ors: paradoxically, the most extreme “formal” (non-historically bound) definitions do away with any concrete formal characteristics. Borges’s famous aperçu, that the baroque is simply “that style which exhausts (or seeks to exhaust) its possibilities and borders on its own caricature,” applies equally well to any anything overdone, regardless of how distant it is from a recognizable baroque style.<sup>54</sup> In a similar vein, Sarduy and Perlongher see the baroque largely as any distortion or subversion of a preestablished style; without the earlier polarization, this expansive definition might not have been possible.

The second consequence of polarization stems from the first. Once the baroque is taken as a kind of resistance to aesthetic authority, it can quite easily be given a radical ideological charge: it is not merely a freer style, but the style of liberation. The current understanding of the baroque as an inherently radical force arises from this earlier opposition to a conservative “classicism.” But this is a strange association, as it reverses the more traditional view linking the baroque to absolutism and the Counter-Reformation. In fact, the question of how the baroque became shorthand for a politics of resistance is more complicated, and takes us beyond d’Ors’s polarization to a distinct set of discussions.

### **Ideology: Counter-Reformation and Counterconquest**

What is strange about the baroque’s contemporary overtones of subversion, transgression, and resistance to authority is not, or not merely, the fact that an earlier criticism saw it as just the opposite. What is also odd is that a period or style of art should carry such a strong ideological identification. Probably the first critic to highlight this dimension of the baroque was German art historian Werner Weisbach. Weisbach describes the baroque as fundamentally conservative and Catholic in *Der Barock als Kunst der Gegenreformation* (1921), a book whose title neatly sums up its argument: the baroque is the “art of the Counter-Reformation.”<sup>55</sup> Wölfflin had already stressed the baroque’s Catholic affinities, and had pointed to the influence of Jesuit spirituality and, more

specifically, the Council of Trent's proclamations on the purpose of art. But Weisbach explored these connections more fully.

According to Weisbach, the art of the baroque "translates the ideas of the Counter-Reformation into images," turning away from the humanist spirit of the Renaissance toward a retrenchment in Catholic orthodoxy.<sup>56</sup> It goes without saying that the baroque, in his view, flourishes only in countries under the sway of the Counter-Reformation—in Italy and, most especially, in Spain. Responding to the challenge posed by Protestantism, the church seeks "to protect its prerogatives, to consolidate and enlarge its domain through a propaganda calculated for spirit and soul, eyes and ears."<sup>57</sup> But art enlisted for this purpose quickly loses its innocence and becomes calculated for its effect on the viewer:

What this art so wholly lacks is naivety. It can no longer remain as calm, even, certain, carefree, and self-assured as in earlier times.... Catholic art takes on something pointed, tendentious, propagandistic, which also finds expression in the relationship to the sacred and how it is represented. To encapsulate what gives this representation its essential character, we may call it a process of subjectivization and psychologization.<sup>58</sup>

As it takes on a propagandistic quality, baroque art makes a direct appeal to the viewer; it seeks to overwhelm and persuade—one could argue that this is the function of *trompe-l'œil* paintings or church ceilings that seem to open up onto the infinite.

Weisbach's thesis quickly gained wide acceptance. Helmut Hatzfeld's later arguments about the essentially Spanish character of the baroque (discussed below), grow more or less directly out of Weisbach. Croce, too, links the loss of classical beauty to the conservative backlash against Renaissance humanism. And Spanish historian José Antonio Maravall, whose landmark *La cultura del Barroco* (1975) remains a starting point for present-day scholars, takes Weisbach's basic insight and develops a much more nuanced model of the social role and effects of baroque cultural production.

Maravall, writing over half a century after Weisbach, argues that baroque art does not merely express or promote Catholic values, but in very subtle and indirect ways tries to inculcate a conservative ideology in the viewer and reader. The baroque in his argument is not just a kind of art but a whole period of history (particularly Spanish history), one characterized its *sociedad dirigida*, its guided society, in which the monarchy and the church ably used artistic products (he discusses literature especially) to shore up the authority of the ruling classes. "[A]ll of baroque art, from Lope's comedy to the novels of Mateo Alemán, to Zurbarán's paintings of saints, becomes a drama of the estates, the gesticulating submission of the individual to the confines of the social order."<sup>59</sup> The forces guiding the society, in Maravall's view, were not so much the Catholic church as the monarchy, which played an active role in promoting the arts through patronage and commissions; it did not respond solely to menace of Protestantism, but to the devastating economic and political crises of the seventeenth century. To neutralize threats to its authority, the monarchy needed methods of physical repression as well as subtler modes of social control, and it deployed baroque art as part of that strategy: "with its structured group of seigniors, bureaucrats, and soldiers, and with its group—more informal but not less efficient—of poets, playwrights, and painters, the monarchy put into play both possibilities."<sup>60</sup> Unlike Weisbach, Maravall sees baroque art as more than a return to

medieval orthodoxy: it is an increasingly sophisticated method of promoting the interests of the state. It is, in short, repression by other means. Quite subtly, it asked the viewer to identify with the dominant values:

To applaud Lope in his *Fuenteovejuna* was to be on the side of the monarchy with its vassals, freemen and plebs. To applaud Quevedo was the same, although there could arise cases of disagreement among those who formed the ruling group.... Not of course...because support for a system was advocated in the text, on the canvas or on stage, called, but because they helped prepared prepare the mentality that would serve as the system's base.<sup>61</sup>

Maravall admits, of course, that the vast array of cultural production in the seventeenth century did not univocally endorse a single view, but for him the fundamental orientation of literary and artistic works in that period is conservative and reactionary. His view represents the culmination of a line of thought that begins with Weisbach and continues to provoke debate. And even though his thesis is now often contested or accepted only with qualifications, it remains a touchstone for discussions of politics and culture in seventeenth-century Spain. Fernando Rodríguez de la Flor's *Barroco* (2002), for example, challenges Maravall's thesis by stressing the entropic forces at play in the cultural production of the period.<sup>62</sup>

A very different response to Weisbach came two decades before Maravall's book, in the series of lectures given by José Lezama Lima in 1957 and later published as *La expresión americana*. While not directly contradicting Weisbach, Lezama turns his thesis on its head: "Repeating Weisbach's sentence, and adapting it to America, we can say that among us the baroque was an art of counterconquest."<sup>63</sup> Neither Weisbach nor Maravall discuss colonial America, and Lezama argues that the baroque took on a different character across the Atlantic. "Counterconquest" refers to both a resistance to colonial authority and an American "conquering" of European forms. Lezama finds the prime examples of this in the work of the Andean sculptor José Kondori, whose church façade in Potosí incorporates numerous Incan motifs, and in the work of the Afro-Brazilian sculptor Aleijadinho (Antônio Francisco Lisboa), whose striking, contorted statues adorn churches in Minas Gerais. Their work shows a synthesis of cultures from Iberia, America and Africa:

The Indian Kondori's art represented darkly and hieratically the synthesis of the Spanish and the Indian, of Hispanic theocracy of the great age with the solemn stony law of the Inca.... Aleijadinho's art represented the culmination of the American baroque, the union of a grand Hispanic form with African cultures.<sup>64</sup>

In Lezama's view, their achievement has political significance, for it is a sign that America has created something new, and is no longer culturally dependent on Europe. Significantly, Lezama situates the baroque in the eighteenth century, and declares it to be "a steadfast friend to the Enlightenment" and a cultural precursor to the wars of independence: it "lays the ground for the next century's rebellion, and is proof that America is ready for a break."<sup>65</sup> Thus Lezama gives the baroque a radically different



ideological orientation: no longer conservative or retrograde, it is the first expression of America's aesthetic independence and a foreshadowing of its political liberation.

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of this ideological reversal. The notion of "counterconquest" underlies much contemporary criticism, especially work that assumes the baroque to be contestatory or essentially resistant to political authority. One can in fact draw a direct line from Lezama to Sarduy, who envisioned the baroque as an aesthetic of revolution, or perhaps more correctly, aesthetics *as* revolution. In "El barroco y el neobarroco" (1972), Sarduy outlined what he saw as a recent trend in Latin American art: a "neobaroque" (the coinage is his) characterized by a highly self-conscious use of language that obscures its referent. It corresponds, in artistic terms, to the loss of epistemic grounding:

Baroque which, in its toppling over, in its fall, in its *paintery* and occasionally shrill, motley, chaotic language, metaphorizes defiance against the logocentric being that formerly structured it and us from its distance and its authority; baroque which rejects any establishment, metaphorizes the disputed order, the god put on trial, the law transgressed. Baroque of the Revolution.<sup>66</sup>

Sarduy's poststructuralist vocabulary (he speaks of a proliferation of signifiers with no signified) has little to do with Lezama's discussion of a "will to form." And, to be precise, Sarduy is primarily talking here about the twentieth-century (neo)baroque.<sup>67</sup> Yet the revolutionary thrust he gives the term relies on Lezama's earlier ideological reversal. Ultimately Lezama paves the way for the baroque to be the very opposite of what Weisbach (and, for that matter, Maravall) had claimed.

Today, critics who address the ideological valence of the historical baroque tend not to endorse either view wholly, or in any case recognize a coexistence of repressive or subversive elements. Nicholas Spadaccini and Luis Martín-Estudillo, for example, speak of a tension between "freedom and containment" in the baroque, and Mabel Moraña has spoken of the colonial baroque as a negotiation between ideologies of colonization and resistance.<sup>68</sup> Critics who discuss the twentieth-century baroque, on the other hand, almost invariably emphasize its potential for resistance. This fact should hardly come as a surprise: it is difficult to imagine a contemporary aesthetic that openly aligned itself with the Counter-Reformation, or wished to be identified as reactionary, orthodox or intolerant. Less obvious, however, is the fact that without the baroque's mid-century ideological reversal, it would not have been proposed as a contemporary aesthetic. Had Lezama not already found the seeds of revolution within the American baroque, Sarduy might well have chosen a different label for the revolutionary or advanced tendencies he discerned; similarly, later critics would likely not have spoken of a "return of the baroque" if this meant a return of the Spanish Inquisition. A revolutionary, contestatory notion of the baroque facilitated its return in the first place.

Lezama's ideological reversal served also as a national reversal: the baroque ceased to be Spanish or Hispanic and became additionally, even centrally, Latin American. Its shift in national identification forms the next critical movement in this genealogy.

## Identity: Hispanic Baroque

When Weisbach first aligned the baroque with the Counter-Reformation, he also implicitly aligned it with Spain: mysticism and Jesuitism, the two decisive influences on seventeenth-century religious sensibility, were both, as he argued, “a product of the Spanish spirit.”<sup>69</sup> Previous critics had drawn very different national affiliations. As noted above, Wölfflin initially limited his baroque to Rome, while Worringer, viewing it as a variant of Gothic, found it quintessentially German. And Croce, for his part—no fan of what he dismissed as “artistic ugliness” and “aesthetic sin”—noted sadly that the baroque was ultimately Italian.<sup>70</sup> After Weisbach, however, when critics identified the baroque with one country in particular (which they did not always do, of course), it was Spain.<sup>71</sup> And Spain, conversely, came to be seen as essentially baroque. No doubt the polarization of baroque and classical further facilitated this identification: if France’s *grand siècle* is synonymous with classicism and Spain’s *siglo de oro* is eminently baroque, then it becomes easy to elevate both terms from historical or stylistic designations to the status of transhistorical national identities.

In the 1920s Spain began to occupy an important place in baroque scholarship. Sacheverell Sitwell’s *Southern Baroque Art* (1924) studies the baroque in both Spain and Mexico, and may have been one of the first to draw attention to the prevalence of baroque architecture in Mexico.<sup>72</sup> In literature Helmut Hatzfeld, whose articles about the Spanish baroque date from the 1920s, stresses Spain’s importance with a remarkably ambitious claim: all manifestations of baroque art and writing, across seventeenth-century Europe, ultimately grew out of a powerful Spanish spirit.<sup>73</sup> As he argues in an article from the 1940s, even if Italy technically produced the first manifestations of baroque art, these came about as a result of Spain’s influence:

There existed in Spain a permanent, eternal baroque taste, which gave preference to the strange, the complicated and the divine over the earthly, the beautiful and the mundane. This taste resisted the classical Greco-Roman influence of the Italian Renaissance, modifying it “a la española,” and spread this modified Renaissance taste back to Italy itself. It was there, particularly in Naples and Rome, where the historical baroque originated.<sup>74</sup>

According to Hatzfeld, the baroque is less the art of the Counter-Reformation than simply the art of Spain. Yet these two views are hardly incompatible—indeed, another critic, Enrique Lafuente Ferrari, who translated and prefaced Weisbach’s book, sees the two as interchangeable. “If the baroque is the art of the Counter-Reformation,” he writes, “its purest and deepest manifestation is Spanish art.”<sup>75</sup> This baroque character outlasts the superficial rococo, Romantic, or symbolist influences from elsewhere in Europe, for “the life of great Spanish art is intimately tied to baroque art itself, and to the ideals it brought with it.”<sup>76</sup> These ideals are, of course, deeply conservative. And while Lafuente’s sunny view of the Counter-Reformation may strike us as surprising, he makes his position clear: he regards the backlash against humanistic learning as the height of Spanish achievement, and even attributes Spain’s seventeenth-century political decline to its heroic yet extenuating efforts to defend the church.<sup>77</sup>

Outside Francoist Spain, of course, the Counter-Reformation inspired less nostalgia. Critics often shared Lafuente’s main insight—that the baroque was essentially

Spanish and conservative—but they tended to lament its prevalence. Venezuelan writer Arturo Uslar Pietri, for example, mused in 1948 that it was “almost a condition of everything Hispanic.”<sup>78</sup> Mariano Picón Salas took a similarly dim view, noting in his expansive cultural history *De la conquista a la independencia* (1944) that south of the Pyrenees the baroque became “a national style,” one that was “anti-Renaissance and anti-Europe insofar as Spain was rejecting, or reenvisioning, the values of modern consciousness.”<sup>79</sup> This aesthetic spread to the American colonies, where it left a lasting imprint:

Despite nearly two centuries of Enlightenment and modern critique, in Spanish America we have not yet fully emerged from the baroque labyrinth. It weighs on our aesthetic sensibility and on many complicated forms of collective psychology.<sup>80</sup>

Picón Salas tempers this negative judgment with an acknowledgment that the baroque underwent a process of transculturation in the American colonies. The indigenous population adapted European forms for their own expressive ends, and “inscribed their own artistic will in the language of the Spanish Catholic baroque.”<sup>81</sup> He was not alone in this observation. Art historian Ángel Guido had studied cultural fusion in colonial architecture in 1925, as Pál Kelemen would again in 1951.<sup>82</sup> Recognition of how the baroque changed in its colonial encounter served as an important preliminary for what would come next: Lezama’s “counterconquest.” His ideological reversal not only changed the political orientation normally attributed to the baroque, it also—and perhaps more importantly—made it something that could be celebrated as specifically American. No longer dour and Spanish, the baroque could become rebellious and American.

A gradual slippage crops up in the baroque’s successive identifications: first, critics discovered a Spanish baroque, then they began to find Spain eternally baroque, and last, they saw the baroque as essentially Spanish. With regard to Latin America a similar progression is evident: Latin America is the product of a cultural syncretism; the primary example of this syncretism is the baroque; Latin America is baroque; the baroque is Latin American.

It hardly needs to be said that this identification with Latin America opened the door to the baroque’s resurrection as a twentieth-century aesthetic. Had the baroque not become Latin American (after first being Spanish and then being declared an expression of American rebellion) there would likely be no neobaroque, no twentieth-century return. Though Lezama did not actively promote the baroque as a term for contemporary art, his contemporary Alejo Carpentier did. As early as the 1960s he declared the baroque to be “the legitimate style of the American novelist,” suggesting that since the continent’s cultural origins lay in the baroque, it remained a vital style of expression.<sup>83</sup> A decade later he declared the continent essentially, eternally baroque: “America, continent of symbioses, continent of *mestizajes*, has always been baroque.”<sup>84</sup> Somewhat puzzlingly, this baroque identity predates even the arrival of European colonizers, although its main source lies in the blending of European and American cultural heritages. He goes on:

And why is Latin America the chosen land of the Baroque? Because every symbiosis, every *mestizaje*, gives rise to a baroque. The Latin American baroque [*el barroquismo criollo*] is heightened by the awareness that the American has of being something else, of being something new, of being a

symbiosis, of being Latin American; and the Latin American spirit is in and of itself a baroque spirit.<sup>85</sup>

The mixing of peoples and cultures, Carpentier claims, created an exuberance of forms, visible not only in the baroque art, architecture and literature of the colonial period, but in a lasting sense of Latin American identity. Carpentier's statement is perhaps the most extravagant attempt to equate baroque and Latin American. While few later critics have gone quite as far as Carpentier, the notion of the baroque as something Latin American or Hispanic lives on in subtle ways. When Sarduy, in the essay discussed above, first coins the term the neobaroque, he limits his scope to Latin American writing, even though he does not exclude the possibility of other neobarques.

To be sure, the baroque's increasing identification with Latin America did not erase its earlier attachments to Spain, and many critics continued (and continue) to view it as an especially Spanish phenomenon. Very likely the hesitation one still finds between "Hispanic" and "Latin American" in discussions of the baroque stems from these two ways of giving the baroque a national or regional identity. Jorge Luis Marzo, who brings a bracing and welcome skepticism to the topic, finds that the baroque functions as way of claiming a dubious transatlantic cultural affinity, a fictitious *hispanidad*.<sup>86</sup> And this ambiguity lies at the heart of the latest of the baroque's many conceptual transformations: its re-importation into Spain. Whereas the neobaroque (as opposed to the historical baroque) had long been considered a primarily, if not exclusively, Latin American affair, recently critics have applied the label "neobaroque" to peninsular figures such as Jenaro Talens or Pedro Almodóvar.<sup>87</sup> Many of the same arguments about the baroque's cultural specificity are made, but with the word Hispanic in place of Latin American. Thus, after becoming a Spanish sensibility in the 1920s and 1930s, and a Latin American expression in the 1960s and 1970s, the baroque now finds itself on both sides of the Atlantic, and, at various times and for various critics, Hispanic and/or Latin American.<sup>88</sup>

Just how important these questions are for contemporary baroque discourse should by now be clear. As I argued in the first chapter, the baroque, as a discursive construction, allows writers and critics to lay claim to a specifically Hispanic or Latin American form of aesthetic modernity, one that is paradoxically grounded in a timeless identity. This claim would not be possible had the baroque not first been identified as something deeply Spanish, Latin American, or Hispanic. And—not to belabor the point—this range of national identifications is not a self-evident historical fact waiting to be discovered, but a product of the baroque discourse I have been examining.

The final movement of this discourse involves how the baroque came to be understood as a central facet of modernity. Though this question is closely correlated to both the baroque's national and ideological character, it is reducible to neither, and forms a separate line of discourse. It is harder to isolate than the others, but a few key developments nevertheless stand out. A brief consideration of these developments will conclude the overview of how the baroque has functioned as a Hispanic engagement with aesthetic modernity.

### **Baroque as Modern**

The seventeenth century falls immediately after one conventional starting point of modernity (the Renaissance) and immediately before another (the Enlightenment), and it is home to any number of other sea-changes in which we might plausibly pinpoint the

origin of the modern world: the birth of Cartesian rationalism, the invention of Newtonian physics, the publication of the first modern novel, the rise of cities and preindustrial factory production, the creation of trading corporations, the establishment of the balance of powers and the primacy of the nation-state, and the dramatic expansion of commercial and colonial empires. Nevertheless, the baroque's place in all this depends on whether we take the term to be a relatively narrow artistic label or a name for the entire century. In other words, the baroque can be a relatively minor facet of literary and art history, or it can be an indispensable lens through which to view the origin of modernity itself. If outside Hispanic studies (in, say, philosophy or history) the former view seems to have become dominant, within Hispanic studies the latter view continues to gain ground.<sup>89</sup>

The reasons for this lie primarily, it seems to me, in the discussions outlined above. Tying the baroque to Counter-Reformation Spain or pre-revolutionary Latin America means giving it two very different places in a narrative of Western modernity. In the first interpretation, the baroque turns away from the modern and back toward a millennial Christian tradition that the Renaissance had merely interrupted. In the second, the baroque reaches forward to Enlightenment and revolution, revealing a cultural maturity that foreshadows political independence. As the baroque has come increasingly to signify political resistance and Latin American identity, it has begun to loom large in discussions of Latin American modernity.

However, other factors have played an important role. It is not insignificant that the rise of this concept I have been examining corresponds closely with the rise of the avant-gardes, or even with "modernism" writ large: we can detect hints of interest in the baroque in the 1850s, though the first serious critical attention comes toward the turn of the century; it surges in the interwar years, peaks after the war and finally begins to lose its novelty. However indirect the connections, the baroque's creation took place at the same time as art, and thought about art, underwent a major revolution. To understand how the baroque first became linked to "modernity" as such, one might look at what relationship it had to the avant-gardes. Why did the baroque suddenly elicit such interest in the 1900s, 1910s and 1920s?

A number of critics took up this question at the time. According to Walter Benjamin, the answer lies in the baroque's resonance with (then-contemporary) expressionist art. He states that "like expressionism, the baroque is not so much an age of genuine artistic achievement as an age possessed of an unremitting artistic will.... The reason for the relevance of the baroque after the collapse of German classical culture lies in this will."<sup>90</sup> In a similar vein (though not addressing the baroque per se) Dámaso Alonso wrote in 1927 that Góngora's appeal to the younger generations lay in his similar aesthetic sensibility. The lack of a plot in his *Soledades* made the poem feel strikingly close to contemporary tastes: "one need think only of the current breakdown of the novel, or, at the other extreme, the new paths—pure pleasure of forms—blazed by the painting of cubism and its derivations."<sup>91</sup> D'Ors also notes the baroque's affinity with the interwar avant-gardes, though he thought these represented a backsliding away from twentieth-century art's true "classical" vocation. And Wellek, too, considers that the baroque's popularity owed much to a perceived similarity between the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries. He adds, however, that this was partly the result of a "misunderstanding," in which twentieth-century critics mistakenly saw their own concerns reflected in the seventeenth century:

Baroque poetry was felt to be similar to the most recent German expressionism, to its turbulent, tense, torn diction and tragic view of the world induced by the aftermath of the war; part [of the reason for its popularity] was a genuine change of taste, a sudden comprehension for an art despised before because of its conventions, its supposedly tasteless metaphors, its violent contrasts and antitheses.<sup>92</sup>

Rightly or wrongly, the early twentieth-century critics who created the baroque did so at least partly in their own image—just as Lezama and Carpentier, a couple of decades later, would understand the baroque as the origin of their own modernity. The point is not that these critics misunderstood their object of study, but simply that their knowledge was filtered through their own concerns. This is, I suppose, an inevitable fact of all historical knowledge, though it seems to have been especially true of the baroque, whose definition stood so open to debate. Part of the baroque’s appeal lay in its ability to speak to the present; as a concept created in the early twentieth-century, it spoke an essentially modernist idiom.

Still, a small but decisive shift takes place when the baroque ceases to be a mode of art from the past that speaks to the sensibilities of the present and becomes a fundamentally contemporary—modern or postmodern—aesthetic practice. One can locate this moment in the early 1970s, when Sarduy published “El barroco y el neobarroco” (1972) and *Barroco* (1974).<sup>93</sup> Not only does he draw a parallel between contemporary literary and artistic production and the art of the baroque, he translates baroque aesthetic techniques into a post-structuralist critical vocabulary.<sup>94</sup> With Sarduy, the baroque becomes not only a moment of historical or originary modernity, but an aesthetic for and about the present. After him comes a line of criticism in Europe as well as Latin America that uses “baroque” and “neobaroque” as terms for the most contemporary, most up-to-date aesthetic and theoretical practice.

Christine Buci-Glucksmann gives the clearest example of this in *La raison baroque* (1984). She argues that the baroque is the “other” of reason, that which reason both excludes and requires to constitute itself; it is that which exists beyond language or logic (chiefly corporality and femininity, for her). “The baroque signifier proliferates beyond any signified, putting language in excess of corporality,” she writes.<sup>95</sup> Her language suggests she knew Sarduy’s work, even though she does not cite him. Either way, she is clearly following the line of discourse that he had first traced, a line which takes the baroque as the aesthetic correlate to poststructuralist theory.<sup>96</sup>

Omar Calabrese, who does cite Sarduy, takes his idea in a very different (and essentially structuralist) direction. In *Neobaroque* (1987), Calabrese analyzes a wide array of phenomena, from soap operas to scientific theories, to perform a sort of “semiotics of culture” and reveal the principles underlying the production of both knowledge and art.<sup>97</sup> While his analysis ultimately has little to do with Sarduy’s, Calabrese significantly equates neobaroque and postmodern. The neobaroque he describes reveals fragmentation, instability, disorder, and a number of other concepts normally associated with this term.

Buci-Glucksmann and Calabrese illustrate two key instances of how the baroque became synonymous with poststructuralism and postmodernity. They are important not because they founded new lines of thought outside Latin America; Buci-Glucksmann was influential in the 1980s, but Calabrese appears not to have had many followers. Rather,

they are important because these two associations, if not their exact formulations of them, have played a crucial role in the most recent moment of baroque discourse: the explicit thematization of the baroque's relationship to modernity. This holds for the twentieth-century (and now twenty-first-century) baroque, as well as for the historical baroque of the seventeenth century. A brief glance at titles from the last decades will suffice to make this point: in 1998 alone, three books appeared containing both words in their title: Bolívar Echeverría's *La modernidad de lo barroco*, Irleamar Chiampi's *Barroco e Modernidade*, and the edited volume *Barrocos y modernos*.<sup>98</sup> More recently William Egginton has even suggested that the baroque is the aesthetic counterpart to the problem of thought that underlies modernity writ large—to wit, the non-correspondence of appearance to reality.<sup>99</sup> And as discussed in the last chapter, modernity is a central concern in the work of González Echevarría, Parkinson Zamora, Moraña and others. In brief, the baroque, as a contemporary aesthetic or a historical period, is inevitably tied to a question of modernity—at least in Hispanic and Latin American criticism.

Perhaps the strangest development has come in response to the inevitable aging of stylistic terms for contemporary literature. The neobaroque, like postmodernism, is beginning to show its age; whatever differences one chooses to draw between postmodernism and the neobaroque, it seems clear that both terms evoke a moment of theoretical enthusiasm that has, perhaps, already passed. For better or for worse, both labels now sound slightly dated, evoking the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s more than the present. And even if one has good theoretical reasons for continuing to call today's cultural production "postmodern" or "neobaroque," the terms no longer suggest novelty as they once did. Perhaps in response to this situation, critics have put forth other variations on "baroque" that hold onto the theoretical arguments evoked by the word—an alternative, Hispanic form of aesthetic modernity—while presenting it as something newer. Around 2000, a handful of critics coined "ultrabaroque" as a term for "a very contemporary, postmodern, exuberant visual culture with inextricable ties to a historical period, style, and narrative."<sup>100</sup> And in 2009, Parkinson Zamora proposed the term "brut barroco" (bafflingly taken from a magazine advertisement for Freixenet cava) to refer to this next generation of baroque aesthetics. She writes that "[t]he brut barroco recycles the historical baroque, as does the neobaroque, but now with the neobaroque also recycled, its parodic energies [are] redoubled."<sup>101</sup> One might even expect to find soon a "metabaroque"—and one would not be disappointed, as a recent essay by Miguel Romero Esteo has proven.<sup>102</sup> What thankfully remains unproposed, so far as I am aware, is a "postbaroque," presumably because this would entail an attempt to leave the baroque behind, to grope toward something different, which is precisely the opposite of what this terminological multiplication does. For the seemingly endless series of terms (none of them as successful as neobaroque) allows the baroque constantly to return, in new guises and under new forms, always to be invoked as the most advanced aesthetic practices, the most recent theoretical insights, proof that Latin America or the Hispanic world is on par with, yet crucially apart from, Europe and North America.

### **A Forgotten Dialogue**

Overlapping, repeating, revisiting the same questions, the discussions examined here do not so much form five independent debates as a single discourse, which, in its evolution and slow accumulation of secondary meanings, persists today. Approaching each discussion separately merely highlights how much conceptual work went into

creating what we now understand as the baroque. It is this gradually changing discourse, and not the recycled references to irregular pearls or defective syllogisms, that constitutes the proper history of the baroque. And as a corrective to the story of the baroque's etymology, we can now offer the following summary of its genealogy:

"Baroque" arose in the late eighteenth century as a pejorative term for certain post-Renaissance building in Rome, and over the nineteenth came to designate a whole period of Italian architecture. By the first decades of the twentieth century it had shed its negative connotations and grown to include music, painting, and eventually literature; and it had also expanded to include other countries: Germany, Holland, Spain, eventually Latin America, and finally, with significant reservations, France. As its defining characteristics (emotional intensity, formal freedom, etc., depending on the critic) could be detected in other periods, around the 1930s some scholars began to see it as an eternally recurring aesthetic mode, complementing and opposing an equally eternal classicism. Others, more concerned with the historical period, linked it to Catholicism, and particularly to the Catholic country that had most enthusiastically embraced the Counter-Reformation: Spain. Spanish and Latin American critics in the 1940s began to see it as profoundly, preeminently Hispanic, a cultural legacy that emanated from Iberia to its overseas colonies. Once applied to Latin America, however, the concept quickly underwent an ideological reversal. Pointing to its New World transformation into something novel and hybrid, critics in the 1960s claimed the baroque as an expression of anticolonial resistance and a dawning American consciousness; it no longer looked back toward submission and orthodoxy, but forward to independence and modernity. This reversal freed the baroque to return in the present, for if it had given Latin America its first authentic voice in the seventeenth century, it could do so again in the twentieth. And with the baroque's perceived opposition to classicism—and hence to rationalism, order, and authority—it became possible, in the 1970s, to conceive of a "neobaroque": a Latin American aesthetics opposed to the tyranny of instrumental reason, commodity culture or bourgeois modernity. (This baroque found an echo in France, where it enjoyed a brief intellectual vogue as an aesthetics of otherness.) By the 1980s the notion of a Latin American "return of the baroque" had solidified in academic Hispanism, and around the turn of the twenty-first century critics began applying "neobaroque" to contemporary Spanish writing. With or without the prefix, the term ties aesthetic expression to a Hispanic experience of modernity.

Such a genealogical account, however compressed, shows the baroque to be something very different from the timeless figure of deviation or imperfection inscribed in term's etymology. It shows it to be the result of a series of very specific, and ultimately very contingent conceptual developments. By contingent I do not mean arbitrary: the critics and authors who turned their attention to the baroque had very solid reasons for seeing it as reactionary, revolutionary, Spanish, Latin American, etc. Yet in each case these associations were not merely inert historical facts, but the result of a process of invention, modification, and elaboration. One can see this point quite clearly by comparing the term's fortunes to those of the word "metaphysical," still preferred for the English poetry of the same period. The metaphysical poets (Donne, Herbert, Marvell and their contemporaries) undoubtedly benefited from the surge of interest in seventeenth-century writing that extended throughout Europe in the 1910s and 1920s; not unlike Góngora, they had until then occupied an ambiguous place in the canon. But "metaphysical" never became synonymous with Englishness, nor with an opposition to



classicism, nor with a transhistorical aesthetic mode—it remains a narrow stylistic-period designation.

Conversely, even if one assumes that “baroque” filled a necessary role, that some concept was needed to situate Hispanic culture in or against classical European models—and I stress one need not assume this—then “baroque” is hardly the most obvious choice. In the 1920s alone a number of viable contenders stand out: Valle Inclán’s *esperpento*, for example, or Bergamín’s *disparate*, or even Mañach’s *choteo*. Later, *lo real maravilloso* and magical realism perform a similar function with regard to Latin America, and it is surely no coincidence that the baroque’s rise to prominence in academic Hispanism closely follows magical realism’s loss of critical immediacy. One might be tempted to conclude that even as the terms change, the key ideological function—arguing for Hispanic cultural exceptionalism—remains the same.

Here we return to the set of problems examined in the first chapter, and are now in a position to evaluate some of these claims historically. Pedro Lange-Churión’s essay, “Neobaroque: Latin America’s Postmodernity?” (2001) will serve as a helpful example of a fairly common position. To equate the neobaroque with postmodernism, argues Lange-Churión, is to ignore its roots in Latin American history:

If the cultural products of Latin America (ostensibly its literature) display effects of pluralism, fragmentation, dissemination, pastiche, and self-referentiality, it is not because they are postmodern, or ahistorically neobaroque, which is the same thing. Rather it is because these effects are neobaroque in as much as the neobaroque is historically rooted in the Latin American baroque. This historicity is disregarded by the North American and European postmodern theorizations.<sup>103</sup>

According to Lange-Churión, one cannot call European culture “neobaroque,” nor can one properly call Latin American literature “postmodern”; he sees them as opposed, just as, centuries earlier, baroque literature opposed philosophical rationalism. For a European critic to use the word neobaroque outside a Latin American context (as do Calabrese or Buci-Glucksmann, both of whom he criticizes) is either colonialist or ahistorical, or both. Similarly, to call Sarduy “postmodern” would be to ignore the Latin American roots of his aesthetic practice.

This claim (some version of which can be found in much neobaroque scholarship) stands open to a number of criticisms. In the first place, the suggestion that neobaroque writers primarily drew upon their historical Latin American roots is questionable at best and at worst simply untrue: virtually all writers dubbed “neobaroque” acknowledged their debt to a wide array of non-baroque and non-Hispanic intellectual trends; when they did engage with baroque poets, these were largely from Spain (above all, Góngora and Quevedo). Second, and more important for our purposes—since it is a criticism the preceding genealogy allows us to make—is that Lange-Churión’s claim requires a certain conceptual amnesia. In emphasizing the “historical rootedness” of the neobaroque, he ignores the actual history of the term and concept, its origins in a baroque discourse shared by both Europe and Latin America.

What the history of the baroque reveals is not a Hispanic or Latin American world at odds with Europe and North America; it is not a Hispanic world remaining apart from or outside of a broader Western modernity. What it shows is just how

enmeshed Spain and Latin America are in European or Western discussions of aesthetics. For this reason, the baroque remains useful as a conceptual tool for understanding Hispanic modernity: though often cited as evidence of Hispanic exceptionalism, it could more properly be taken as proof of Spain and Latin America's engagement with the rest of the world, and of their central place in global narratives of aesthetic modernity.

Perhaps surprisingly, some of the most compelling models for seeing the Hispanic world in dialogue with its cultural neighbors come from the key figures discussed above. In the chapters that follow, a closer examination of the imaginative and theoretical writing of Gerardo Diego, José Lezama Lima, and Severo Sarduy will show how an aesthetic project rooted in Spain or Latin America—and even specifically in the baroque—can turn toward, rather than away from, the wider world.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora and Monika Kaup give a succinct overview of possible etymologies in *Baroque New Worlds: Representation, Transculturation, Counterconquest* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 2-3. This invaluable volume that contains translations and excerpts of many of the works discussed here; of particular interest is their introductory overview of the term's various theoretical formulations. For a further discussion of the word's origins, see the entries *baroque* and *barroco* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*, both of which trace the term to the jeweler's term. The *Littré* supports the hypothesis that this word itself came from the scholastic mnemonic device *baroco*, though this once-popular view (first advanced by Karl Borinski and Benedetto Croce) has now generally been discredited. See René Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 69. Apparently Bruno Migliorini's article "Etimologia e Storia del Termine 'Barocco,'" in *Manierismo, Barocco, Rococò* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1962) conclusively settled the question in favor of the jewelry hypothesis. Helmut Hatzfeld rather fancifully suggests that we owe the word the Indian city Bharuch, where the Portuguese apparently established a pearl market in the 1500s. See his *Estudios sobre el Barroco* (Madrid: Gredos, 1964), p. 418.
- <sup>2</sup> Mabel Moraña, for example, begins her article "Baroque, Neobaroque, Ultrabaroque" with a long meditation on the irregular pearl as a figure for Latin American colonial culture. Nicholas Spadaccini and Luis Martín-Estudillo, eds., *Hispanic Baroques: Reading Cultures in Context (Hispanic Issues 31)* (Nashville: Vanderbilt, 2005), pp. 241-42. Roberto González Echevarría similarly claims the baroque as an aesthetics of otherness in his discussion of Lunarejo in *Celestina's Brood* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).
- <sup>3</sup> Pierre Charpentrat, *Le Mirage baroque* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967), p. 123: "Que le mot ait fini par se délester de tout contenu en passant dans le domaine littéraire puis dans tous les domaines, et en revenant, après ce circuit, contaminer la critique artistique, que ses utilisateurs perdent de vue le vieil axiome logique 'A n'est pas non-A,' chacun en convient aisément. Reste qu'il remplit, ou du moins a rempli, une fonction."
- <sup>4</sup> John Beverley, *Essays on the Literary Baroque* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Tamesis, 2008), p. 16.
- <sup>5</sup> Among the most important figures who absent or nearly absent from this account are Bolívar Echeverría, Aurora Egido, Angela Ndalianis, Serge Gruzinski, Carlos Rincón, Erwin Panofsky, and Luciano Anceschi. However, their work largely fits in with the lines of thought identified here.
- <sup>6</sup> The best book about the baroque's popularity in 1960s France is Charpentrat's *Le Mirage baroque*, cited above. An excellent contemporary discussion of the baroque's status in France can be found in the "Présentation," to Jean Serroy's *Poètes français de l'âge baroque* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale Éditions, 1999), pp. 7-37, especially pp. 15-19. See also Jean-Pierre Chauveau, *Lire le Baroque* (Paris: Dunod, 1997), pp. 1-9, or Henriette's didactically oriented *Qu'est-ce le baroque?* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2003).
- <sup>7</sup> Alberto Moreiras, "Mules and Snakes: On the Neo-Baroque Principle of De-Localization," in Mabel Moraña, ed., *Ideologies of Hispanism* (Nashville: Vanderbilt, 2004), p. 203.
- <sup>8</sup> Ernest C. Hassold, "The Baroque as a Basic Concept of Art," *College Art Journal* VI (1946), p. 3. The other "outstanding problem" was the notion of a "basic concept," present in the original title of Heinrich Wölfflin's 1915 work, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, discussed below.
- <sup>9</sup> *Encyclopédie méthodique* (Paris: Pankrouke, 1788), p. 210. The article reads as follows: "Le baroque est une nuance du bizarre. Il en est, si on veut, le raffinement ou, s'il était possible de le dire, l'abus. Ce que la sévérité est à la sagesse du goût, le baroque l'est au bizarre, c'est à dire qu'il en est le superlatif. L'idée du baroque entraîne avec soi celle du ridicule poussée à l'excès. Borromini a donné les plus grands modèles de bizarrerie et Guarini peut passer pour le maître du baroque." Wölfflin cites this passage, but mistakenly attributes it to Diderot (*Renaissance and Baroque*, p. 23).
- <sup>10</sup> Luis Monguió, "Contribución a la cronología de barroco y barroquismo en España," *PMLA* 64:5 (1949), pp. 1227-31. The examples Monguió finds from the early nineteenth century do not use "baroque" as a period term but as an adjective contrasted with "pure."
- <sup>11</sup> Jacob Burckhardt, *Der Cicerone: eine Anleitung zum Genuss der Kunstwerke Italiens* (Basel: Schweig-hauser'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1855), 3 vols. He states that baroque architecture offers many works of interest, but quickly qualifies this comment (vol. 3, p. 366): "However, even less than a judgment of general dismissal do we suggest a general approval." ("Noch weniger aber als ein allgemeines Verwerfungsurtheil liegt uns eine allgemeine Billigung nahe.") Curiously, Burckhardt reserves the term for architecture and sculpture, while in painting he refers to "mannerism"; only the volume on painting was translated into English.
- <sup>12</sup> Cornelius Gurlitt, *Geschichte des Barockstiles in Italien* (Stuttgart: Ebner & Seubert, 1887). It was volume five of the series *Geschichte der neuen Baukunst*, and included volumes by Burckhardt and others.

- <sup>13</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque*, trans. Kathrin Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1977), originally published as *Renaissance und Barock: eine Untersuchung über Wesen und Entstehung des Barockstils in Italien* (München: Ackermann, 1888).
- <sup>14</sup> Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. M. D. Hottinger (New York: Dover, n.d.), originally published as *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe: das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst* (München: Bruckmann, 1915). “Painterly” corresponds to the German word *malerisch*, which can also mean “picturesque.” Wölfflin uses it to refer to a style in which lines do not predominate. See p. 3, n. 2.
- <sup>15</sup> Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, p. 10.
- <sup>16</sup> Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, p. 229: “The idea of reality has changed as much as the idea of beauty.” In *Renaissance and Baroque*, he hints at a changed sensibility, even going so far as to mention the religious fervor prompted by the growing strength of the Jesuit order. Ultimately, however, he emphasizes the “new conception of form” (p. 79).
- <sup>17</sup> As Wölfflin notes in the preface, *Renaissance and Baroque* was initially to include a study of the baroque in classical antiquity, which suggests a more malleable definition of the term than his book ultimately presented. In *Principles of Art History*, he devotes a brief section of the conclusion to discussion the periodicity of artistic development (pp. 231-32), although he concludes that artistic styles should be understood as “conveying new emotional values,” and are hence perhaps not strictly cyclical.
- <sup>18</sup> Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque*, p. 16.
- <sup>19</sup> See Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, pp. 29-32 and 235-37.
- <sup>20</sup> René Wellek, “The Concept of Baroque,” (cited below), p. 71, provides a brief overview of this work, citing Alois Riegl, Georg Dehio, Jean Cassou, Eugenio d’Ors and others.
- <sup>21</sup> In the 1940s and 1950s, another term, “mannerism” achieved prominence as a designation for the period between the Renaissance and the baroque proper, “baroque” now being reserved for the period beginning around 1580. In fact, much of what Wölfflin first called “baroque”—late sixteenth-century Roman architecture—is now generally considered “mannerist.” See Peter Murray, “Introduction” to Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque*, pp. 9-12, or John Rupert Martin, *Baroque* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977). A number of critics in the mid-century sought to make mannerism a literary term, either for the years between the Renaissance and the baroque, or as simply an alternative to the term baroque. Despite some initial popularity, it did not succeed in establishing itself in literary studies.
- <sup>22</sup> René Wellek, “The Concept of Baroque in Literary Scholarship,” in *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 75. Wellek also notes a handful of isolated instances in the pre-war years.
- <sup>23</sup> Ludwig Pfandl, *Geschichte der Spanischen Nationalliteratur in ihrer Blütezeit* (Freiburg im Breisgau, Herder & Co., 1929); in Spanish: *Historia de la literatura nacional española en la Edad de Oro*, trans. Jorge Rubió Balaguer (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1952). Pfandl draws attention to his use of the term in the preface (pp. vii-x in the Spanish edition). The earlier book is *Spanische Kultur und Sitte des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts* (Kempten: Kösel & Pustet, 1924). in Spanish: *Cultura y costumbres del pueblo español del siglo XVI y XVII* (Barcelona: Araluce, 1929).
- <sup>24</sup> Dámaso Alonso, “Introducción” to Góngora, *Soledades* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1927), pp. 28-30. He also handles the word carefully, stating that “Tanto se ha zarandeado en los últimos años esta palabra, barroco, que corre peligro de llegar a no decir nada.” He then clarifies that his use is an architectural analogy.
- <sup>25</sup> See Auorora Egido, *El barroco de los modernos* (Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid, 2008), for an exhaustive account of the term’s fortunes in Spain during the first half of the twentieth century. As Wellek notes, Spain showed itself to be particularly amenable to the new term, “since Gongorism and conceptism presented clearly parallel phenomena which had but to be christened baroque” (*Concepts of Criticism*, p. 76). José Ortega y Gasset, “Góngora. 1627-1927,” in *Obras completas IV (1926-1931)* (Madrid: Taurus, 2005), pp. 175-82; Américo Castro, “Las complicaciones del arte barroco,” *Tierra Firme I* (1936), pp. 161-68.
- <sup>26</sup> The following chapter tells this story in more depth. Regarding the baroque’s acceptance, see Gabriel Núñez Ruiz and Mar Campos Fernández Figares, *Cómo nos enseñaron a leer: manuales de literatura en España 1850-1960* (Madrid: Akal, 2005), p. 184.
- <sup>27</sup> See Wellek, “The Concept of Baroque,” pp. 121-22, as well as pp. 85-88.
- <sup>28</sup> Wellek, “The Concept of Baroque,” p. 83.
- <sup>29</sup> Jean Rousset, *La Littérature de l’âge baroque en France: Circé et le Paon* (Paris: José Corti, 1953), especially pp. 242-50, and Victor Tapié, *Baroque et Classicisme* (Paris: Plon, 1957). Tapié, for example (p. 12), speaks of the conflict between the classicism of France and the baroque of Italy, Germany, and the Slavic countries: “Ces

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exemples...peuvent symboliser le conflit durable entre notre goût classique (ou ce que nous appelons notre goût classique) et les formes d'art baroques de l'Italie, plus encore, des pays d'Europe germanique et slave.”) Oddly, many of its proponents in France were Swiss, including Rousset and Marcel Raymond; when to these we add their compatriots Burckhardt and Wölfflin, the baroque begins to seem like a curiously Swiss creation.

<sup>30</sup> See n. 5 above.

<sup>31</sup> Harold B. Segel, *The Baroque Poem: A Comparative Study* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1974), p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> Helmut Hatzfeld, “Los estilos generacionales de la época barroca: Manierismo, Barroco, Barroquismo,” in his *Estudios sobre el Barroco* (Madrid: Gredos, 1963), pp. 51-72.

<sup>33</sup> Regarding the notion that theory began to replace periodization as an academic concern, we can see something like this in the preface to Stanley Fish’s *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972). Fish claims to set aside debates about the baroque (among other things) in order to ask theoretically more compelling questions.

<sup>34</sup> This is the case, for example, with Sarduy’s *Barroco*, José Antonio Maravall’s *La cultura del barroco*, Michel Foucault’s *Les Mots et les choses*, Gérard Genette’s “D’un récit baroque,” Jacques Lacan’s “Du baroque,” Christine Buci-Glucksmann’s *La raison baroque*, or Gilles Deleuze’s *Le Plí*.

<sup>35</sup> Given his current ubiquity, this assertion may appear surprising. However, few scholars seem to have read or known of Benjamin’s *Habilitationsschrift* until it was republished posthumously, and even then it seems to have escaped the attention of most baroque critics. In Spanish and English, at least, it is not widely cited until the 1970s or 1980s. The first edition is Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1928); it was later republished by Suhrkamp in 1963. The first English edition is *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977).

<sup>36</sup> Daniel H. Roaten and F. Sánchez y Escribano, *Wölfflin’s Principles in Spanish Drama, 1500-1700* (New York: Hispanic Institute, 1952), especially pp. 4-6.

<sup>37</sup> Theodor Adorno, “Der mißbrauchte Barock,” *Ohne Leitbild: Parva Aesthetica* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967), p. 136: “Die allgemeine Rede vom Barock ist Ideologie im genauen Sinn falschen Bewußtseins, gewalttätige Vereinfachung der Phänomene, deren Propaganda sie besorgt.”

<sup>38</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora, *The Inordinate Eye*, p. 286. See also the anthology she co-edited *Baroque New Worlds* with Monika Kaup.

<sup>39</sup> John Rupert Martin, for example, in *Baroque*, includes “classicism” as one of the defining characteristics of the baroque, stating that any definition not capacious enough to include a figure like Poussin is deficient. In a very different vein, Helmut Hatzfeld claims as baroque the two most eminent French classicists, Racine and Corneille, in chapters 3 and 6 of his *Estudios sobre el Barroco*, trans. Ángela Figuera et al. (Madrid: Gredos, 1964).

<sup>40</sup> Dámaso Alonso provides a very useful summary of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century critical views on the Golden Age in his article “Góngora entre sus dos centenarios (1927-1961),” collected in *Cuatro poetas españoles: Garcilaso, Góngora, Maragall, Antonio Machado* (Madrid: Greos, 1969), especially pp. 53-55.

<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, as Luis Cernuda notes in “Góngora y el gongorismo” (1937), before 1927 Góngora’s greatness consisted in his notoriety, as the poet critics loved to hate: “Góngora es el único caso de una gloria al revés en nuestra historia. Todos saben, de oídas, que Cervantes es un gran escritor.... Pero a Góngora se le conoce por muchos precisamente por no ser un buen escritor.” *Prosa completa*, ed. Derek Harris and Luis Maristany (Barcelona: Barral, 1975), p. 1423.

<sup>42</sup> Beverley, *Essays on the Literary Baroque*, p. 14.

<sup>43</sup> Burckhardt, *Cicerone*, p. 368: “Die Barockbaukunst spricht dieselbe Sprache, wie die Renaissance, aber einen verwilderten Dialekt davon.”

<sup>44</sup> Wölfflin, *Renaissance and Baroque*, p. 74 (quotation), p. xi (on his initial plans) and p. 87 (on Wagner).

<sup>45</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, *Form in Gothic*, trans. Herbert Reed (London: Alec Tiranti, 1957), p. 116; first published as *Formprobleme der Gotik* (Munich: R. Piper & Co., 1912).

<sup>46</sup> Wellek, “The Concept of Baroque,” p. 90. Croce’s estimation of the baroque, incidentally, was unremittingly negative. And while he recognizes its universality (it is “universal and eternal like all human sins”) he also stresses the usefulness of reserving the word for the distinctive art of the seventeenth century. *Storia della Età barocca in Italia: Pensiero, Poesia e letteratura, Vita morale* (Bari: Laterza, 1946), pp. 32-33. The first edition is from 1929: “È un peccato estetico, ma anche umano, e universale e perpetuo come tutti i peccati umani.... [M]a assai più utile mi sembra...intendere per barocco quella perversione artistica, dominata dal stupore, che si osserva in Europa, a un dipresso, dagli ultimi decenni del cinquecento alla fine del seicento.”

- <sup>47</sup> Eugenio d'Ors, *Du Baroque*, trans. Agathe Rouarte-Valéry (Paris: Gallimard, 1935/6); in Spanish, *Lo barroco* (Madrid: Tecnos, 1993).
- <sup>48</sup> D'Ors, *Lo barroco*, p. 71. What Wölfflin's definition does not include is the incorporation of natural elements. What I have translated as "painterliness" is *lo pintoresco* in the original. Here is the cited passage: "Y, por encima de todo, aquella propensión a lo teatral, lujoso, retorcido, enfático, que la sensibilidad menos ejercitada advierte inmediatamente en lo Barroco."
- <sup>49</sup> D'Ors, *Lo barroco*, p. 66. Earlier versions of this passage first appeared in his writings in 1927 and 1928, such as *Las ideas y las formas* (Madrid: Caro Raggio, 1928). The complete original quote reads as follows: "1º. El Barroco es una constante histórica que se vuelve a encontrar en épocas tan recíprocamente lejanas como el Alejandrino lo está de la Contra-Reforma o esta del período «Fin-de-Sig»; es decir, del fin del XIX, y que se ha manifestado en Oriente como en Occidente. 2º. Este fenómeno interesa no sólo al arte, sino a la civilización entera y hasta, por extensión, a la morfología natural (el mismo Croce, cuya opinión negativa acaba de citarse, ¿no ha acabado por publicar un libro que se titula: *Historia de la edad barroca en Italia?*) 3º. Su carácter es normal; y, si cabe hablar aquí de enfermedad, será en el mismo sentido dentro del cual Michelet decía que 'la mujer es una eterna enferma.' 4º. Lejos de proceder del estilo clásico, el Barroco se opone a él de manera más fundamental todavía que el romanticismo; el cual, por su parte, no parece ya más que un episodio en el desenvolvimiento histórico de la constante barroca."
- <sup>50</sup> Wellek, pp. 82, 92.
- <sup>51</sup> Pedro Aullón de Haro, ed., *Barroco* (Madrid: Verbum, 2004). He outlines his method in the preface, pp. 15-19.
- <sup>52</sup> Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. William Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953); the German edition is from five years earlier: *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter* (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1948). In the chapter on "mannerism," Curtius gives a short justification for why he prefers this word over "baroque." For a short discussion of Hauser and Hocke, as well as Curtius, see Wellek, p. 125.
- <sup>53</sup> D'Ors, *Lo barroco*, p. 64: "Si estos últimos ejemplos de constancia histórica hubieran sido presentados por un autor de algún tiempo atrás, es más que probable que los términos 'barroco' y 'barroquismo' se hubieran visto reemplazados por los de 'romántico' y 'romanticismo,' más acordes con una tradición literaria extendida y de empleo infinitamente más popular." An earlier work, *Tres horas en el Museo del Prado: itinerario estético* (Madrid: Raggio, 1923), made the same binary distinction, but using the term "Romantic"; later editions include a footnote in which d'Ors stated that he now preferred the term "baroque."
- <sup>54</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Historia Universal de la infamia* (Madrid: Alianza, 1997), p. 9: "barroco es aquel estilo que agota (o quiere agotar) sus posibilidades y linda con su propia caricatura." The quote is from the preface to the 1954 edition.
- <sup>55</sup> Werner Weisbach, *Der Barock als Kunst der Gegenreformation* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1921). It was published in Spanish as *El barroco, arte de la Contrarreforma*, trans. Enrique Lafuente Ferrari (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1942).
- <sup>56</sup> Weisbach, *Der Barock*, p. 60. The full sentence reads as follows: "Es kommt für uns darauf an: wie die Kunst in ihrer autonomen Sphäre mit der Summe von Darstellungsmitteln, über die sie in ihrem augenblicklichen Entwicklungsstadium verfügt, die gegenreformatorischen Ideen in Anschauungsbilder umsetzt und was für Wege die künstlerische Formung einschlägt, um zu den gewollten Ergebnissen zu gelangen."
- <sup>57</sup> Weisbach, *Der Barock*, p. 37: "Innerhalb dieser fluktuierenden Bewegung ging der Katholizismus darauf aus, seine Prärogativen zu wahren, sein Herrschaftsbereich durch eine auf Seele und Geiste, auf Auge und Ohr berechnete Propaganda zu festigen und zu erweitern, indem er aus der seelischen Formation der Zeit alles heranzog und aufgriff, was ihm für seine Zwecke nützlich und geeignet schien, suggestive Massenwirkungen auszuüben."
- <sup>58</sup> Weisbach, *Der Barock*, p. 222. The translation is somewhat free; Lafuente Ferrari translates the last words as "un proceso de subjetivación psicológica." In the original: "Was dieser Kunst so ganz fehlt, ist Naivität. Sie vermochte sich nicht mehr so ruhig, gleichmäßig, zweifelsfrei, unbekümmert und selbstsicher auszuleben wie in früheren Zeiten.... [I]n die katholische Kunst [ist] etwas bewußt Zugespitztes, Tendenziöses, Propagandistisches gekommen, das auch in dem Verhältnis zu dem Heiligen und der Art seiner Verbildlichung Ausdruck findet. Will man das, was dieser Verbildlichung ein wesentliches Gepräge gibt, kurz bezeichnen, so ist es der Subjektivierungs- und Psychologisierungprozeß."
- <sup>59</sup> José Antonio Maravall, *La cultura del barroco: análisis de una estructura histórica* (Barcelona: Ariel, 1975), p. 90. Here and below I have cited the U.S. edition, *Culture of the Baroque: Analysis of a Historical Structure*, trans. Terry Cochran (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 35.

- <sup>60</sup> Maravall, *Culture of the Baroque*, p. 46 (p. 113 in the original).
- <sup>61</sup> Maravall, *Culture of the Baroque*, p. 89. I have slightly altered the translation. In the original: “Aplaudir a Lope, en su *Fuenteovejuna*, era estar junto a la monarquía, con sus vasallos, sus libres y pecheros. Aplaudir a Quevedo era también lo mismo, aunque pudiera surgir el caso de una discrepancia, mayor o menor, entre los que formaban el grupo dirigente. Gozar de Góngora, de Villamediana, de Arguijo, etc., también lo mismo. No, claro está...porque se propusiera en el texto o en el lienzo o en el escenario la adhesión a un sistema, sino porque se ayudaba a preparar la mentalidad que había de servir a ello de base.” Maravall, *Cultura del barroco*, pp. 195-196.
- <sup>62</sup> See also Nicholas Spadaccini and Luis Martín-Estudillo’s introduction to *Hispanic Issues* 31, which they edited: “The Baroque and the Cultures of Crisis,” *Hispanic Baroque: Reading Cultures in Crisis* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005), especially pp. xiv-xv.
- <sup>63</sup> José Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, ed. Irlemar Chiampi (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993), p. 80: “Repitiendo la frase de Weisbach, adaptándola a lo americano, podemos decir que entre nosotros el barroco fue un arte de la contraconquista. Representa un triunfo de la ciudad y un americano allí instalado con fruición y estilo normal de vida y muerte.”
- <sup>64</sup> Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, pp. 105-106: “El arte del indio Kondori representaba en una forma oculta y hierática la síntesis del español y del indio, de la teocracia hispánica de la gran época con el solemne ordenamiento pétreo de lo incaico... El arte del Aleijadinho representa la culminación del barroco americano, la unión en una forma grandiosa de lo hispánico con las culturas africanas.” One likely source of Lezama’s knowledge of Kondori and Aleijadinho is Pál Kelemen’s *Baroque and Rococo in Latin America* (New York: Macmillan, 1951); another possibility is Ángel Guido’s *Redescubrimiento de América en el arte* (Rosario: Universidad Nacional del Litoral, 1940). As Parkinson Zamora points out, Guido apparently coined the term *indiátide*, which Lezama uses to refer to the caryatid columns with indigenous figures.
- <sup>65</sup> Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, pp. 84, 104: “Ese barroco nuestro, que situamos a finales del XVII y a lo largo del XVIII, se muestra firmemente amistoso de la Ilustración” (84); “El barroco como estilo ha logrado ya en la América del siglo XVIII, el pacto de familia del indio Kondori, y el triunfo prodigioso del Aleijadinho, que prepara ya la rebelión del próximo siglo, es la prueba de que se está maduro ya para una ruptura” (104).
- <sup>66</sup> Severo Sarduy, “El barroco y el neobarroco,” in *América Latina en su literatura*, ed. César Fernández Moreno (Mexico: UNESCO: Siglo XX), p. 184: “Barroco que en su acción de bascular, en su caída, en su lenguaje *pinturero*, a veces estridente, abigarrado y caótico, metaforiza la impugnación de la entidad logocéntrica que hasta entonces lo y nos estructuraba desde su lejanía y su autoridad; barroco que recusa toda instauración, que metaforiza al orden discutido, al dios juzgado, a la ley transgredida. Barroco de la Revolución.” *Pinturero*, as Sarduy subtly notes, is a Lezamian version of Wölfflin’s *malerisch* (“painterly”), typically translated as *pictórico*.
- <sup>67</sup> A certain ambiguity in my use of the two words is inevitable, for it seems no two critics use them a consistent way. Even in Sarduy’s essay, the only important difference is a very vague one: the baroque reflects a de-centered (but ultimately stable) world, whereas the neobaroque reflects a world with no epistemic grounding at all.
- <sup>68</sup> See, among other texts, Mabel Moraña, “Para una relectura del barroco hispanoamericano: problemas críticos e historiográficos,” *Revista de Crítica Literaria Latinoamericana* 15:29 (1989), pp. 219-31. The article was subsequently included in her *Viaje al silencio: exploraciones del discurso barroco* (México: UNAM, 1998).
- <sup>69</sup> Weisbach, *Der Barock als Kunst der Gegenreformation*, p. 16. In the original. “Die Mystik...war ein Erzeugnis spanischen Geistes.” He also notes that Jesuitism strongly opposed mysticism.
- <sup>70</sup> Croce, *Storia della Età barocca in Italia*, pp. 24, 32 and 37: “il barocco è una sorta di brutto artistico, e, come tale, non è niente di artistico, ma anzi, al contrario, qualcosa di diverso dall’arte, di cui ha mentito l’aspetto e il nome, e nel cui luogo si è introdotto o si è sostituito” (24).
- <sup>71</sup> This assertion needs considerable qualification. Today, in art history, the baroque is perhaps equally associated with Italy, Holland, Spain and a handful of other countries. In literary criticism, the baroque’s national or regional identification seems to vary by field. In Hispanic criticism it is frequently discussed as something Hispanic; in French criticism it seems to be discussed as something that is simply *not* French; in German it seems to be discussed as something as a period in German literary history, but not uniquely German or un-German.
- <sup>72</sup> Cited in Hatzfeld, *Estudios sobre el barroco*, p. 18. Hatzfeld says that Sitwell “threw down the gauntlet” in the dispute about the baroque’s essentially Spanishness. The full citation is: Sacheverell Sitwell, *Southern Baroque*

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*Art: A Study of Painting, Architecture and Music in the Italy and Spain of the 17th & 18th Centuries* (New York: Knopf, 1924).

- <sup>73</sup> See, for example, Helmut Hatzfeld, “El predominio del espíritu español en la literatura europea del siglo XVII,” *Revista de Filología Hispánica* 3 (1941), pp. 9-23.
- <sup>74</sup> Hatzfeld, *Estudios sobre el barroco*, p. 29. The chapter is entitled “Examen crítico del desarrollo de las teorías del Barroco,” and appears to be an updated (in 1964) version of an earlier article: “A Critical Survey of the Recent Baroque Theories,” *Boletín del Instituto Caro y Cuervo* 4 (1948), pp. 3-33. I have translated it back into English from the Spanish, which reads: “Existía en España un gusto barroco permanente y eterno, que daba preferencia a lo raro, a lo complicado y a lo divino sobre lo terrestre, bello y mundano. Este gusto resistió la influencia clásica greco-romana del renacimiento italiano, modificándola ‘a la española,’ y propagó este gusto renacentista modificado a la propia Italia. Fue allí, entonces, en Nápoles y en Roma particularmente, donde se originó el barroco histórico.”
- <sup>75</sup> Enrique Lafuente Ferrari, “La interpretación del barroco y sus valores españoles,” introduction to Weisbach, *El barroco, arte de la Contrarreforma* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1942), p. 47. In the original: “Si el barroco es el arte de la contrarreforma, y ésta encarna en la dirección espiritual que representan San Ignacio y la mística, Trento y la política austríaca, el más alto exponente de todo este espíritu, su más pura y honda manifestación es el arte español y en especial la literatura, la plástica y la pintura de nuestro país.”
- <sup>76</sup> Lafuente Ferrari, “La interpretación del barroco,” p. 43: “la vida del gran arte español queda estrechísimamente vinculada al arte barroco mismo y a los ideales que comportaba y que en nosotros suponían la conjunción feliz con nuestra vocación nacional.”
- <sup>77</sup> Lafuente Ferrari, “La interpretación del barroco,” p. 15. He claims that Spain’s defeat, and the “circumstantial” or contingent victory of Reformation countries, explains to the longstanding disdain aimed at the baroque. The fascinating passage is worth quoting in its entirety: “Esto [the baroque as a expression for religious values] nos interesa especialmente a los españoles por dos motivos fundamentales. Primero, porque todo estudio serio de lo que la contrarreforma ha representado en el mundo moderno nos afecta directamente, ya que nuestra historia está ligada a la lucha por los valores que la contrarreforma propugnó. En segundo lugar, porque estos valores, los que España representa en esta lucha, los del arte barroco en particular, han sido encarnizadamente negados, desconocidos o menospreciados durante una larga época, precisamente aquella en que la decadencia política española, producida sin duda por su agotamiento en un esfuerzo sobrehumano en defensa de esos valores, y la circunstancial victoria de los países de la reforma en el mundo contemporáneo, favoreció una actitud de ciega incompreensión respecto de todo lo que la contrarreforma significaba.”
- <sup>78</sup> Arturo Uslar Pietri, *Letras y hombres de Venezuela* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1948), p. 27. In the original: “[El barroco] es casi una condición de lo hispánico.”
- <sup>79</sup> Mariano Picón Salas, *De la conquista a la independencia: Tres siglos de historia cultural latinoamericana* [1944] (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1958), p. 99: [El barroco era] “anti-Renacimiento y anti-Europa en cuanto España estaba negando, o planteando de otra manera, aquellos valores de la conciencia moderna.”
- <sup>80</sup> Picón Salas, *De la conquista a la independencia*,” p. 101: “A pesar de casi dos siglos de enciclopedismo y crítica moderna, los hispanoamericanos no nos evadimos enteramente aún del laberinto barroco. Pesa en nuestra sensibilidad estética y en muchas formas complicadas de psicología colectiva.”
- <sup>81</sup> Picón Salas, *De la conquista a la independencia*,” p. 108: “en la obra participa profusamente la multitud que...inscribe, en el lenguaje del barroco católico español su propia voluntad artística.”
- <sup>82</sup> Ángel Guido, *Fusión hispano-indígena en la arquitectura colonial* (Rosario: Casa del Libro, 1925); Pál Kelemen, *Baroque and Rococo in Latin America* (New York: Macmillan, 1951).
- <sup>83</sup> Alejo Carpentier, *Tientos y diferencias* (Montevideo: Arca, 1967), p. 41. First published in 1964. In the original: “[El barroco es] el legítimo estilo del novelista latinoamericano.”
- <sup>84</sup> Alejo Carpentier, *Razón de ser* (Caracas: Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1976), p. 61. In the original: “América, continente de simbiosis, de mutaciones, de vibraciones, de mestizajes, fue barroca desde siempre.” I am unsure to which “vibrations” he is referring.
- <sup>85</sup> Carpentier, *Razón de ser*, p. 64. As there is not a ready equivalent to *criollo* (here meaning, essentially, from the Americas as opposed to Europe), I have translated it as simply “Latin American.” In the original: “¿Y por qué es América Latina la tierra de elección del Barroco? Porque toda simbiosis, todo mestizaje, engendra un barroquismo. El barroquismo criollo se acrece...con la conciencia que cobra el hombre



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americano...de ser otra cosa, de ser una cosa nueva, de ser una simbiosis, de ser un criollo; y el espíritu criollo de por sí, es un espíritu barroco.”

- <sup>86</sup> Jorge Luis Marzo, *La memoria administrada: el barroco y lo hispano* (Madrid: Katz, 2010), pp. 10-11.
- <sup>87</sup> See, for example, Luis Martín-Estudillo, *La mirada elíptica: el trasfondo barroco de la poesía española contemporánea* (Madrid: Visor, 2007); Óscar Cornago Bernal, “El barroco de la segunda mitad del siglo XX en España,” in *Barroco*, ed. Pedro Aullón de Haro (Madrid: Verbum, 2004); and William Egginton, *The Theater of Truth: The Ideology of (Neo)baroque Aesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).
- <sup>88</sup> Along with the slippage between “Hispanic” and “Latin American,” there is confusion between “baroque” and “neobaroque.” Often they are used interchangeably, though sometimes they are used to distinguish Lezama’s and Carpentier’s work from Sarduy’s and Perlongher’s—an odd distinction, because Sarduy coins the term “neobaroque” to refer precisely to Lezama Lima. In any case, I have thus far strived to maintain precision while avoiding cumbersome expressions such as “the twentieth- or twenty-first-century Hispanic or Spanish American or Latin American baroque or neobaroque.”
- <sup>89</sup> While literary critics and art historians have used the baroque as a all-encompassing period term (Peter Skrine, for example, or more recently Robert Harbison), the word seems to never have caught on in history, at least in English. Significantly, the *Oxford History of the Seventeenth Century* hardly mentions the word.
- <sup>90</sup> Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 55.
- <sup>91</sup> Alonso, “Claridad y belleza de las Soledades,” p. 29: “Es éste uno de los mayores aciertos de Góngora y uno de los que más le aproximan al gusto de nuestros días: basta pensar en el desmoronamiento actual de la novela, o, en otro orden, en los nuevos caminos—puro placer de las formas—que han abierto a la pintura el cubismo y sus derivaciones.”
- <sup>92</sup> Wellek, “The Concept of Baroque,” p. 76.
- <sup>93</sup> I have noted that Carpentier was the first to propose the baroque as the “legitimate style of the Latin American novelist.” However, this vague stylistic suggestion—which appears above all to be lexical—is but one aspect of his response to the “Problems of the Contemporary Latin American Novel” (to quote the essay’s title). The main suggestion, a more-or-less realist narration of epic political struggles, seems in retrospect like an aesthetic dead-end. See Carpentier, “Problemática de la actual novela latinoamericana,” *Tientos y diferencias* (Montevideo: Arca, 1967).
- <sup>94</sup> For example: “Otro mecanismo de artificialización del barroco consiste en obliterar el significante de un significado dado pero no remplazándolo por otro, por distante que éste se encuentre del primero, sino por una cadena de significantes que progresa metonímicamente y que termina circunscribiendo al significante ausente, trazando una órbita alrededor de él, órbita de cuya lectura—que llamaríamos lectura radial—podemos inferirlo” (*Obra completa*, p. 1389). This is actually an illuminating description of both Góngora and Lezama; the point is not that Sarduy radically misreads the baroque, only that parallels he draws emphasis those aspects of the baroque that can most readily be seen in the present. The process he describes here, for example, might equally apply to (say) Gerardo Diego’s “creationist” poetry, which is generally not discussed as baroque.
- <sup>95</sup> Christine Buci Glucksmann, *La raison baroque: de Baudelaire à Benjamin* (Paris: Galilée, 1984), p. 184. In the original: “Le significant baroque prolifère au-delà de tout signifié, mettant la langue en excès de corporéité.”
- <sup>96</sup> Sarduy most likely provided, by way of Lacan and Barthes, the stimulus for the interest in the baroque among French intellectuals in the 1970s. See François Wahl, “Severo de la rue Jacob,” in Severo Sarduy, *Obra completa*, vol. 2, edited by Gustavo Guerrero and François Wahl (Paris: Archivos / ALLCA XX, 1999), especially p. 1453.
- <sup>97</sup> Omar Calabrese, *Neobaroque: A Sign of the Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), first published as *L’Età neobarocca* (Rome-Baris: Laterza, 1987). In describing his rejection of the term “postmodern,” which he admits would be the obvious choice for his analysis, he states: “This term has by now lost its original meaning and has become a slogan or label for a wide variety of different creative operations. The term, in fact, is simultaneously equivocal and generic” (p. 12).
- <sup>98</sup> Bolívar Echeverría, *La modernidad de lo barroco* (México: Era, 1998), especially pp. 32-56 and 83-100. Irlemar Chiami, *Barroco e Modernidade: Ensaios sobre Literatura Latino-americana* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1998); and Petra Schumm, ed., *Barrocos y Modernos: nuevos caminos en la investigación del Barroco iberoamericano* (Madrid/Frankfurt: Iberoamericana/Vervuert, 1998).
- <sup>99</sup> William Egginton, “The Baroque as a Problem of Thought,” *PMLA* 124:1 (2009), pp. 143-155.

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- <sup>100</sup> Elizabeth Armstrong, "Impure Beauty / Belleza Impura," in *Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post Latin American Art*, ed. Elizabeth Armstrong and Victor Zamudio-Taylor (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000), p. 4. "Ultrabaroque" was the title of an exhibition.
- <sup>101</sup> Lois Parkinson Zamora, "New World Baroque, Neobaroque, Brut Barroco: Latin American Postcolonialisms," *PMLA* 124:1 (2009), p. 135.
- <sup>102</sup> Miguel Romero Esteo, "De lo barroco y lo metabarroco," in *Barroco*, ed. Pedro Aullón de Haro (Madrid: Verbum, 2004), pp. 1241-55.
- <sup>103</sup> Pedro Lange-Churión, "Neobaroque: Latin America's Postmodernity?" in *Latin America and Postmodernity: A Reader*, ed. Pedro Lange-Churión and Eduardo Mendieta (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2001), p. 270. Earlier in the essay he claims that the historical Latin American baroque is modernity's "other": "if philosophical discourse, armed with the categorical imperative of Reason, attempted to repress modernity's contingency[,] the other of modernity (Latin America) attempted to challenge philosophical repression by means of the marginalized other of philosophy: baroque literature" (p. 267).

## Chapter Three

### Gerardo Diego and the Taming of the Avant-Garde

Of all the celebrations in 1927 honoring Luis de Góngora on the three-hundredth anniversary of his death, none reached the outrageous extremes of Gerardo Diego's *auto de fe*, held in redress of centuries of institutional incomprehension and scorn. Góngora had been a scandalous figure since the seventeenth century, vilified for his dense and convoluted verse, so his commemoration took on a playfully contentious air. According to Diego's own somewhat imaginative account, on May 23rd, the eve of Góngora's death, three inquisitorial judges met in Madrid and tried, convicted and burned at the stake books by the poet's numerous enemies throughout history, from Quevedo and Luzán, to Galdós and Menéndez Pelayo, to Eugeni d'Ors and José Ortega y Gasset—not to mention "all *Bulletins* of every academy, *grammars* and *dictionaries*." The night continued with *juegos de agua* against the wall of the Real Academia Española—"harmonious garlands of ephemeral yellow jets," in Diego's words—and ended the next morning with a funeral mass for the poet's soul.<sup>1</sup>

May marked the beginning of a series of conferences and publications that would continue until the end of year. That same month, at least three literary journals fêted Góngora with special commemorative issues: *Verso y Prosa*, in Murcia, *La Rosa de los Vientos*, in Tenerife, and, most prominently, *La Gaceta Literaria*, in Madrid.<sup>2</sup> In October, the Málaga-based journal *Litoral* published a triple issue with poetry by Lorca, Aleixandre, Cernuda and many others—including a section of Diego's enigmatic long poem *Fábula de Equis y Zeda*—alongside drawings and prints by Picasso, Dalí and Juan Gris, and a musical score composed by Manuel de Falla. At the end of that year, Diego released his own pair of short-lived journals: a poetry review, *Carmen*, and its irreverent "friend and supplement" *Lola*, which published his account of the centenary activities.<sup>3</sup> More ambitiously, he also oversaw plans for a series of books by and about Góngora, and though most of the twelve titles never saw publication, the three that did achieved considerable success, especially Dámaso Alonso's now-classic edition of the *Soledades*.<sup>4</sup>

All these festivities culminated in December 1927 at the Ateneo of Seville, in a conference that would later become legendary. The roster of attendees includes many names that are now synonymous with modern Spanish literature: Gerardo Diego and Dámaso Alonso, as well as Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti, Jorge Guillén, Juan Chabás, and José Bergamín.<sup>5</sup> Held over the course of two and a half days, and attended by perhaps a few dozen people, the conference elicited respectable coverage from the regional press, which even reproduced many of the speeches. Poems were read, lectures given, toasts raised—and afterward, in a less official and more raucous tone, the festivities continued at the estate of the group's friend and patron, the celebrity bullfighter Ignacio Sánchez Mejías.

By all accounts, those days in Seville left a lasting impression. As Dámaso Alonso would recall some twenty years later, "my idea of the generation to which (in a supporting

role) I belong goes hand-in-hand with that trip to Seville.”<sup>6</sup> That generation, of course, is the group of eight or ten poets now collectively known as the Generation of 1927: Lorca, Alberti, Guillén, Alonso, and Diego, along with Vicente Aleixandre, Pedro Salinas, Luis Cernuda, Manuel Altolaguirre and Emilio Prados. (Chabás and Bergamín, who also took part in the commemoration, wrote mainly in prose.) The date and the label have acquired a mythic status, and even though critics have never found either one wholly satisfactory, both the year and its “generation” remain unavoidable referents in Hispanic literary historiography. Within a few years, the poets who had taken part in the commemoration went on to publish their own arrestingly original and now canonical books: Lorca’s *Romancero gitano* (1928), Guillén’s first *Cántico* (1928), Alberti’s *Sobre los ángeles* (1929), Cernuda’s *Los placeres prohibidos* (1931), Aleixandre’s *Espadas como labios* (1932) and Salinas’s *La voz a ti debida* (1933), to cite just a few. Devotion to Góngora, it appeared, had launched their literary careers. And when Guillén later asked, in a poem enshrining those days in Seville, “¿Aquel momento ya es una leyenda?”—is that moment now a legend?—the question needed no answer.<sup>7</sup> In retrospect, at least according to one particularly successful version of the story, modern Spanish poetry begins on or about December 1927.

At the time, however, the date’s transcendence was less apparent. The whole affair might easily have faded from memory, as another minor *efemérides*, or as just one more in a series of homages to Góngora held that year from Córdoba to Havana. What made the Seville event different was the playfully combative spirit of its protagonists, and their remarkable talent for promoting their own poetry along with that of the baroque.

To be precise, the poets who gathered in Seville did not discuss Góngora as a baroque poet, and the word hardly figures in their writings from the time. In fact, the notion that the term “baroque” could describe a literary figure at all had only just started to gain ground. But while the invention of the baroque and the commemoration of Góngora began as distinct phenomena, they quickly converged: within a few years Góngora would define the newly baptized period as the figure whose difficult, ornate style distilled the essence of an entire age. (In 1937, Ángel Valbuena Prat gave him pride of place in his influential *Historia de la literatura española*, in a marked shift from earlier scholarship.<sup>8</sup>) If today Góngora remains for us the epitome of the baroque, it is thanks largely to the work of Gerardo Diego, Dámaso Alonso and their companions.

It is curious that what began as a concerted effort to canonize a seventeenth-century poet has in retrospect come to canonize the avant-garde. This fact—that the poet who defines the baroque also provided the occasion that defines modern Spanish poetry—is more significant than is commonly acknowledged. Subtly, but undeniably, our understanding of the baroque leads back to the “generation” that helped construct it. Indeed, in ways that critics have not yet fully explored, the fate of the avant-garde remains bound up with the fate of the baroque.

By this I mean that in Spain, since at least the late 1920s, discussions about each subject have tended to coalesce around a common set of concerns: how the country’s cultural past should define its present and future, how it fits into a larger panorama of European aesthetic modernity. These concerns dominate not only the initial moment of Góngora’s centenary, when the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries became an avant-garde obsession, but also the postwar decades, when the recent and distant past were subject to a dramatic, and dramatically more conservative, reinterpretation. Within a few short decades, the baroque underwent a remarkable (but largely unremarked)

transformation, from a politically amorphous and strikingly innovative style to an art whose deep spirituality presented future generations with a “lección permanente,” as Emilio Orozco put it in 1951, an enduring lesson in mortality and salvation.<sup>9</sup> A similar process transformed a radical and cosmopolitan “young art” into an apolitical, traditionalist “Generation of 1927.” After the war, both the baroque and the avant-garde began to be regarded as significantly less modern and international than they had been in the 1920s; my purpose here is to recover the intensely innovative, cosmopolitan meaning that both had at the time of Góngora’s centenary. Below I will revisit (and qualify) these points; for now I would like to stress that traces of this Franco-era imperative to domesticate the most unruly aspects of Spain’s cultural heritage are still detectable in contemporary literary historiography. As Gregorio Morán has observed, “Many things, some of them still to be determined, were born with Francoism and did not die with it. This makes sense: it was the longest and harshest regime in modern Spanish history.”<sup>10</sup>

In this chapter I study how the baroque (or at least Góngora) and the avant-garde were understood in the decade running up to the Civil War. I do so by focusing on the poetry and criticism of Gerardo Diego. Not the most well-known or well-loved poet, he had until recent decades received scant critical attention.<sup>11</sup> Yet he occupies a especially intriguing—and central—place in the cultural panorama of 1920s and 1930s Spain. His criticism is incisive and thrilling, and his poetry comprises both a “classical” mode, with traditional verse patterns, and an explicitly “avant-garde” mode, closely aligned with Vicente Huidobro’s *creacionismo* and most often taking the form of unpunctuated free verse. And more than any of his peers, Diego consciously sought to define his cultural moment. As the centenary’s *enfant terrible*, in Elsa Dehennin’s words, he organized the centenary’s most scandalous activities (such as the inquisitorial bonfire) and served as the driving force for many of its publications.<sup>12</sup> Even more crucially, he went on to play a leading role in the canonization of the 1927 group: with his wildly successful (and polemical) book *Poesía española: Antología 1915-1931*, he almost single-handedly established the canon of modern Spanish poetry.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike most of his companions, Diego did not go into exile after the Spanish Civil War. The outbreak of the conflict found him vacationing in southern France with his wife; in 1937 he returned to his native Santander and sided with the nationalists, a decision that some years later would prompt Neruda to denounce him angrily in *Canto general*.<sup>14</sup> He settled in Madrid and devoted his energy to his teaching, his music (he was an accomplished pianist), his poetry and his criticism. Diego does not seem to have supported Franco with any great enthusiasm, and his writings from the 1920s and 1930s—indeed, throughout his career—are marked by a tolerant, worldly sophistication that would appear antithetical to the cultural autarky of the early Franco years. (According to Francisco Umbral, Diego said he had sided above all with the church.<sup>15</sup>) To be sure, critics do not often read him in terms of a nationalist political commitment, but they do treat him as apolitical—and this is unfortunate, because it misses what is most radical in his thought. Diego’s writings from the 1920s and 1930s offer a progressive and cosmopolitan vision of Spanish aesthetic modernity that even today has much to recommend it.

I have no interest in excusing Diego’s political choices during the war. But his cultural politics are not reducible to those choices, and indeed, the nuanced stances he took have been retrospectively distorted by what followed, unduly foreshortened by hindsight. The distinct but subtle implications of Góngora’s centenary do not map neatly

onto a left-right spectrum; after the polarizing war and the long years of Francoism they are harder to recognize. Indeed, the event aligns very ambiguously with the stark divisions of the late 1930s, a fact which no doubt explains why it is so often seen as detached or disengaged. Compared to the stridently political nature of poetry during and after the Civil War, a studious concern for the seventeenth century could only appear quaint or parochial.

This fact is ironic, however, because the questions at stake—whether Spain should remain on the margin of Europe, resisting its neighbors’ pernicious modernizing influences, or whether it belonged at the vanguard of art and culture—also underlie the Civil War. As Andrés Trapiello and others have shown, the conflicts of the 1930s made themselves felt in the cultural battles of the 1920s, even if the divisions were much messier, more shifting and unstable.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, examining how Diego and others answered those questions in the 1920s could be seen as part of the larger effort to recover (or construct) Spain’s historical memory. For the full potential of their responses remains, to a not insignificant extent, obscured by the war and its brutal aftermath. To put it more forcefully, the idea that Spain could be cosmopolitan and culturally modern fell victim to Franco’s forces—even if some of this idea’s most eloquent defenders (like Diego) did not. A decade earlier, in 1927, it was this idea that Góngora had come to represent.

Diego’s writing from the 1920s offers, I think, a highly compelling perspective on Spain’s place in the modern world. Uncovering that perspective means revisiting Diego’s thought, but also placing it in what he might have called *un nuevo escorzo*—a new angle. In “Un escorzo de Góngora” (1924), his first article about the poet, he takes stock of his own historical position, recognizing that he inhabits a different world from Góngora, but insisting that he cannot ignore the poet’s undeniable (if deceptive) parallels with the present. Diego makes this point with an anecdote about an anamorphic altarpiece by the fifteenth-century painter Pedro Berruguete. Initially meant to be seen from below and distorted to account for the viewer’s standpoint, the panel, when viewed head-on, in a museum, seems almost avant-garde:

Certainly, this brilliant Castilian image-maker, so truly modern in his own right, has no need of these oblique projections to appear dynamically alive and current before us, offering us masterful intimations in every detail. But why should we close our eyes to this vision—false if you wish, though “there it is” ...—which a happy chance provides?<sup>17</sup>

The analogy that Diego extends to Góngora I propose to extend to him. Like Berruguete, Diego needs no help from anyone to appear modern, but the aspects of his criticism and poetry that seem most suggestive today do not necessarily match what he considered most important. This is not an apology for ahistoricism; it is rather an acknowledgment that I bring contemporary concerns to a figure from the past. Elsewhere Diego writes that reading the classics with an eye to today still requires “understand[ing] them in what they meant without disfiguring them or inventing meanings for them.”<sup>18</sup> While seeking to understand figures from the past, one can legitimately ask which aspects of their thought speak most urgently to the concerns of the present. My *escorzo* highlights the possibilities that Diego’s thought opens for envisioning Spain’s place in aesthetic modernity.

### **The novelty of the past**

Diego began writing poetry and criticism in the late 1910s and by the early 1920s had begun to make a name for himself, publishing articles and poems in *Grecia*, *Cervantes*, *Revista General*, *Revista de Occidente* and other prominent journals. Through his school friend Juan Larrea, who had moved to Paris and begun writing poetry in French, Diego entered into contact with the Parisian literary and artistic avant-garde, and most crucially with Spanish painter Juan Gris and Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro. Huidobro's *creacionismo*, which would prove exceedingly influential for Diego, and indeed for all the Spanish and Latin American avant-gardes, advocated replacing the conventional mimetic notion of art—i.e., art as imitation of the world—with art consisting solely of the autonomous reality the artist has created (hence the name). Diego eagerly adopted and adapted Huidobro's ideas, composing his own “creationist” verse and promoting his doctrine of image-centered poetry. Diego in fact played an important mediating role between the Parisian and Spanish avant-gardes, a sort of isthmus or *istmo* linking the peninsula to the international *ismos*.<sup>19</sup>

Although his poetry took a decidedly avant-garde turn after his contact with France, Diego never forsook the classical verse structures he had used in his first books. In fact, just one year after his creationist masterpiece *Manual de espumas* (1924), he released the impeccably classical *Versos humanos* (1925), for which he won the Premio Nacional de Literatura (along with Rafael Alberti, for *Mar y tierra*). Thereafter Diego's poetry alternated between a classical or “relative” mode—so called because it “related” to the world—and a creationist or “absolute” mode, referring chiefly to its own created, poetic reality. This alternation obeyed his own eclectic tastes, which delighted in both new and old, as well as a very cogently thought out poetic program.<sup>20</sup> And the two modes ought to be understood in light of each other, as José Luis Bernal argues.<sup>21</sup> The highly accomplished free verse of *Manual de espumas* presents a novel, image-centered aesthetics, while the equally accomplished poems of *Versos humanos* defend the possibilities of traditional meter and verse forms. As an example of the first we might take his poem “Fuente”<sup>22</sup>:

Mecanismo de amor  
 Mi grifo versifica mejor que el  
 ruiseñor

Y eras tú y tu vestido  
 lo que todos los días he bebido

camino de la noche  
 junto al árbol real  
 mientras el viento espera  
 la hora de abrir el hospital

Pero tus ojos ya no vuelan  
 y las últimas ventanas están  
 muertas

El agua en el balcón  
 como un perro olvidado

Mi corazón y el baño se vacían  
 Puedes dormir tranquila  
No hay  
 cuidado<sup>1</sup>

Diego's poem presents a collage of metaphors, images and unconnected phrases that offer little condensable meaning and only tangentially invoke a recognizable world. Stanzas, regular meter, and semantic continuity have all fled (though the free verse consists almost entirely of traditional meters: hendecasyllables, heptasyllables, and alexandrines.) Any interpretations are thus necessarily tentative. The extended image of the waterworks, drainage and drying up might suggest the end of a relationship: the addressee, who once quenched the speaker's thirst, now shows only dead windows or closed eyes; the speaker's heart is safely drained, as if to tell the addressee not to worry that he still loves her.<sup>23</sup> More whimsically or prosaically, the speaker could be a fountain that the addressee no longer visits. Either way, Diego keeps any "story" at arm's length, preserving it in a realm of suggestion and ambiguity. The images are deliberately disjointed and nonnarrative; fragments combine to evoke a mood or situation but never resolve themselves into a logical proposition.

What does seem clear, though, is that Diego is deeply attuned to his historical moment. The faucet's superiority over the nightingale—"mi grifo versifica / mejor que el ruiseñor"—suggests a preference for the industrial over the natural that is typical of the early avant-gardes. More importantly, given the poem's collage-like arrangement, the line also points to an interest in the fragmentary and the discontinuous: the irregular, unmelodic dripping of a faucet now holds more aesthetic purchase than the continuous song of a nightingale. The first lines, as well as the poem as a whole, express a preference for a contemporary, "new" sensibility over conventional images of beauty or *modernista* tropes.

Diego's aims in *Versos humanos* are quite different, but reveal an equal historical attunement. Throughout the book he submits to the strictures of regular meters and stanzas, but does so not out of a sense of obligation but as a *return* to convention after having broken free from it. As he states in the opening poem,<sup>24</sup> such voluntary confinement is a "Servidumbre por cortesía / que es legítima libertad."<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere in the same text he writes:

*Regresa el pájaro a la jaula  
 abierta —se entiende— y teórica.  
 Y es grato renovar el aula  
 polvorienta de la vieja retórica*

*Y desde dentro ver volar*

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<sup>1</sup> Mechanism of love / My faucet versifies better than the nightingale / And it was you and your dress / that I've drunk every day / heading toward night / next to the royal tree / while the wind awaits / the hour for opening the hospital / But your eyes no longer fly / and the last windows are dead / The water on the balcony / like a forgotten dog / My heart and the bath are emptied / You can sleep soundly / There is nothing to worry about

<sup>2</sup> servitude out of courtesy / which is legitimate freedom



*y volar dentro ¿por qué no?  
Tiempo eterno, espacio estelar  
los mide el radio del reloj.*<sup>3</sup>

What's perhaps most crucial in these lines is the final statement: the eternal, the celestial, can be measured by the mechanical, the scientific. In a sense, it encapsulates his approach to poetry, which, as I will discuss below, entails a methodical attempt to reach something almost divine. For all its rigidity, a regular stanza can hold the infinite and the ethereal, just as a clock's physical "radius" can chart the boundless sweep of space and time.

In any event, Diego's choice of stanza and meter should not be seen as a kind of artistic conservatism. Rather, for him, the conscious choice to use traditional patterns *is* a form of avant-garde writing—as it is for Lorca, Guillén or Foix—for it springs from an acute sense of the historical moment. In "La vuelta a la estrofa" (1927), Diego writes that free verse does not mean freedom from traditional forms but merely from the obligation to use them. For his predecessors, "the stanza, the sonata, the grid were an obligation. Not for us. We have learned to be free." And just as "we will many times feel the free and beautiful urge to fly outside the cage, having calculated the weight, the engine power and the fuel not to get lost like a drifting cloud," at other times a poet may choose to return to an established model, for its structure, for its constraints, or even for the shock effect of combining an archaic form with a contemporary sensibility.<sup>25</sup> To be modern, in other words, does not mean rejecting the past, but freely making use of it.

This view of literary tradition—that the old can be new, that the past holds aesthetic potential for the present, or that the most exhilarating and unconventional writing might be found in the dustiest corners of the archive—lies at the heart of Góngora's revival. As Miguel Ángel García notes, "Góngora was more the consequence than the cause" of these new sensibilities.<sup>26</sup> Diego and others found in him a poet whose aesthetic goals seemed to match their own and differ strikingly from those of their predecessors. If a previous generation could not appreciate his genius, it was because they had a starkly different sense of what poetry should be. The "young poets" of the 1920s sought a radical poetic purity uncontaminated by the pedestrian business of communication—and Góngora, to them, seemed to provide a model of such purity. What seems odd in retrospect are the high political stakes that everyone, defenders and detractors alike, saw in the poet's revival.

### **Góngora and the politics of purity**

Any recuperation of Góngora would have raised eyebrows. Despite having written popular *letrillas* and *romances*, he owed his dubious reputation to his *culterano* poetry, marked by a liberal use of Latin syntax and vocabulary which rendered it—in the eyes of its detractors, at least—obscure, illegible, even inhuman.<sup>27</sup> His two long poems, the *Soledades* (1613) and the *Fábula de Polifemo y Galatea* (1612), elicited equal parts scandal and admiration among his contemporaries, and earned him a uniquely ignominious place in Spain's literary pantheon. As Luis Cernuda observed, "Góngora is the only case of an inverse glory in our history. Everyone knows, second-hand, that Cervantes is a great

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<sup>3</sup> The bird returns to its cage, / which is open—it's understood—and theoretical. / And it's satisfying to renovate the dusty / schoolroom of old rhetoric / And from within watch the flight, / and fly within, why not? / Endless time, astral space / are measured by the radius of the clock.

writer... But many know Góngora precisely for not being a good writer.”<sup>28</sup> His rehabilitation began some time before 1927, as isolated signs of interest in the poet appeared over the preceding decades: a verse of his cited by Verlaine (“a batallas de amor, campos de plumas”), a sonnet to him composed by Darío (part of “Trébol”), a survey of opinions about his poetry published in the first decade of the century by the journal *Helios*. More importantly, in the first decades of the century Raymond Foulché-Delbosc, Miguel de Artigas, and Alfonso Reyes, among others, began to turn serious scholarly attention to his work and to make it available in modern editions.<sup>29</sup>

Still, the enthusiasm of the poets of 1927 far outstripped the philological interest of their predecessors. They regarded Góngora almost as a contemporary, a poet who three centuries before them had pursued remarkably similar goals: the transformation of an exhausted literary idiom, the elimination of any human or “novelistic” content, the reduction of aesthetic pleasure to a “higher algebra of metaphors.” This last phrase, incidentally, is how Ortega y Gasset characterized contemporary poetry in his extremely influential essay *The Dehumanization of Art* (1925). But Ortega’s observations apply almost equally well to Góngora, and he said as much in his centennial essay in the *Gaceta Literaria*.<sup>30</sup> Like the most recent writing, Góngora’s verse is self-referential and intellectual, and therefore “essentially unpopular,” rejected by a majority who not only dislike it but also fail to understand it.

Whatever one thinks of Ortega’s account of the avant-garde—and many of his contemporaries, Diego among them, disagreed sharply with his diagnosis—in its broad outlines it remains central to how critics understand interwar poetry in Spain.<sup>31</sup> That account is of a shift from an initial moment of “dehumanized” or “pure” poetry toward a second moment of more human, communicative, and socially engaged work. “From a poetry that sprung from the individual, there was a turn to another that mainly reflected social fact,” summarizes Juan Cano Ballesta. “Pressures from the historical moment led to the general politicization of poetry and letters, as only a handful continued to defend the sharp distinction between poetry and politics.”<sup>32</sup>

In this narrative, Góngora plays an oddly ambiguous role. On one hand, he appears as a catalyst for innovation, presiding over one of the country’s most artistically fertile moments since the Golden Age. On the other hand, he ostensibly provided little lasting inspiration for the Generation that honored him: as many critics have noted, their “pure” poetry owes more to the contemporary movements of surrealism and *creacionismo*, and their later verse draws on different sources of Spanish tradition, like the mystics or the *romancero*. They all admired Góngora—indeed, nearly all of them wrote scholarly articles about him—but his poetry bore little relation to their own, and many of them later downplayed his importance. As Diego claimed in a lecture in 1928, “the homage to Góngora did not imply a total adherence to the principles of his poetics—that would be tantamount to declaring ourselves poetically dead—but a simple act of redress, a setting right of all the posthumous injustice that had been perpetrated on don Luis.”<sup>33</sup> Even today, critics of the period seem not to know quite what to do with Góngora, so foundational for the poets yet so incidental to their poetry, so hotly debated yet so serenely distant from the politics of the 1920s.

To be sure, the familiar account of a shift from an apolitical, “dehumanized” art to a committed, “human” verse is not wrong. But it strikes me as incomplete, for it downplays the distinct political valence that Góngora, as a topic of debate, took on in the 1920s. Interest in his “pure” poetry did not imply a corresponding disinclination to the

impure business of politics, nor did a shift toward more overt commitment in itself constitute evidence of an earlier aloofness.<sup>34</sup> As for Diego, his insistence that poetry eschew politics should itself be seen as a political stance. Not, or not quite, because he shared an Adornian conviction that art “resist[s], solely through artistic form, the course of the world,” but for the more prosaic reason that a pure, nonnarrative poetry provided an alternative to the tiresome national themes of an earlier generation.<sup>35</sup> Jorge Guillén expressed this sentiment most pointedly in a article from 1923: “I need to be *real* like an ordinary European” and not “lost in the unreality of a Spain all too often conceived of as a problem. The problem of Spain! Such tedium, such a bore!”<sup>36</sup> Being a Spanish poet did not mean that Guillén, Diego, Lorca, Aleixandre, or the others needed to restrict their concerns to the local, or forego aesthetic questions of broader import; as Góngora had proved, they could remain Spanish and write poetry that reached beyond the Iberian peninsula. In this sense, the centenary involved a struggle over the meaning of Spain’s past and its place in an international modernity—issues we today recognize as political.

Diego himself makes this apparent in his earliest writings on Góngora, which betray a distinctly polemical spirit. One of his first articles about the poet, published in *Alfar* in late 1924, took aim at Eugenio d’Ors, and found fault with an article d’Ors had written a year earlier on the difficulties of properly savoring such indigestible poetry. “I do not have the text before me,” writes Diego, “but I remember he used a culinary image” to liken Góngora to contemporary poets. D’Ors, recalled Diego, could not stomach “such a long display of hors d’œuvre and desserts, in a repast devoid of bread and short on solid courses. And this would be fair,” Diego goes on to say, “if it sought to nourish us. But its goal is very different.”<sup>37</sup> In Góngora, as in contemporary poetry, the point “is not the difficult and unavoidable moment of digestion but the ephemeral and sybaritic moment of sapid pleasure.” In effect, Diego advocates a non-utilitarian poetry, a poetry whose aim is not primarily to communicate. “*Gustar por gustar*,” he writes. “To taste for taste’s sake. This should be our motto. Taking the word *gustar* in its full sense: sensuality and intelligence in its seventeenth-century meaning, in the century of Góngora and Father Gracián.” A few lines later, changing metaphors, he quotes another poet of the same generation as d’Ors:

Antonio Machado has said, “With words we make music, painting, and a thousand other things; but above all we speak. This is a pedestrian truth that we were beginning to forget.” Certainly. But we also sing.

A song without music. The real song. The worst is when the song still “means” something, means to be useful, in addition to delighting by its melody alone.<sup>38</sup>

According to Diego, Góngora will inevitably disappoint if one looks only for moral or narrative content. But with him such content is only incidental, as it is with the new poets of the 1920s. Diego concludes: “As for bread, my dear Eugenio d’Ors, in my diet it is forbidden and I do not miss it even for nourishment. I only use it as a lever to keep the slice from falling off.”<sup>39</sup>

The article is an elegant and early statement of Diego’s avant-garde poetics. As it happened, though, Diego seriously misremembered d’Ors’s article, and promptly received an angry response. What d’Ors had actually written was that reading Góngora felt like having “a meal with no hors-d’œuvre and no bread...made up exclusively of

main courses, in which each course's delicacy is furthermore boneless."<sup>40</sup> The problem, in other words, lay not in the lack of solid fare but rather its excess. In fact, d'Ors writes in his reply to Diego,

what the most up-to-date sensibility—reacting against the impressionistic postwar tendencies, still fairly stubborn in Spain—finds missing in a whole range of poetry is not quite the substance, *but the bones*. It finds missing certain “opaque, hard, neutral” parts of literary expression. The minimum of conceptual framework that has always afforded literary creations of noble stock an upright position on the fields of glory. This the newcomers to poetry have once again begun to suspect. The keenest among them now act accordingly.<sup>41</sup>

Mortified by his error, Diego did not counter d'Ors's arguments but offered a lengthy apology in the next issue of *Alfar*. His response suggests the polemic amounted to nothing more than a misunderstanding, and that d'Ors did not in fact hold the views Diego had mocked with such relish. Diego, it seemed, had barked up the wrong tree. In fact, however, his initial mistake and subsequent embarrassment draw attention away from the very real disagreement he had with d'Ors—and later with many others. The issue was poetry's need (or not) for conceptual content, a question central to the attraction Diego and others felt to Góngora. Góngora's poems, after all, often seemed—at least to some of them—to dispense with communicative expression altogether, leaving only imagistic, noncommunicative metaphors. Earlier that year Diego had noted as much: “He should not be reproached for his continual metaphors. What disturbs us are the direct expressions, the truths that, in his verse, lurk in comforting minority.”<sup>42</sup>

While the exchange with d'Ors in 1924-25 ended amicably enough, by the time of the centenary a few years later, Diego's defense of Góngora provoked a very bitter controversy—especially among those who (unlike d'Ors) equated difficult poetry with political irresponsibility. Miguel de Unamuno, for example, saw nothing but intellectual mendacity in Góngora's verse, and political complacency in his champions. “This whole homage to Góngora,” he wrote in 1927, from his exile in Hendaye, “in the present state of my poor country, seems to me a tacit homage to servitude to tyranny, a servile act and, in some...an act of beggary. And all that poetry they celebrate is nothing more than lies. Lies, lies, lies...! Góngora himself was a liar.”<sup>43</sup> A liar, that is, in that his poetry avoids any expression of, or commitment to, an idea. Devotion to Góngora thus amounts to willful civic disengagement, and this, in Unamuno's eyes, lent implicit support to the politically retrograde dictatorship of Primo de Rivera.

Not dissimilarly, Ernesto Giménez Caballero, founder of *La Gaceta Literaria*, also ascribed an antiliberal thrust to the centenary. But he went a step further and claimed that Diego, in particular, had endorsed a reactionary political program. In the unambiguously titled article “Gerardo Diego, poeta fascista,” he writes that “the poetic return to the *décima*, the sonnet and the *silva*...is a return to old nationalism.... It is a reaction.”<sup>44</sup> Clearly, the celebration of Góngora and the “pure” poetry had very high stakes indeed.<sup>45</sup>

It is worth dwelling for a moment on Giménez Caballero's article, which provoked an angry reply from another writer, Ernesto López-Parra, and eventually a response to both of them from Diego himself. The episode sheds light, I think, both on

how the centenary fit—or did not fit—within the political questions of the day. For as I have suggested, it cannot be sufficiently understood along the left-right spectrum that later came to define the country during the Republic and the ghastly, fratricidal Civil War that followed.

In his article, Giménez Caballero lays out the political implications of Diego's proclamations; the tinge of irony does not belie his sincerity. Giménez Caballero equates the celebration of Góngora, and the return to traditional verse forms, with nothing less than political fascism. It is, in short,

what Mussolini has achieved in Italy. And what Maura prophetically foretold among us (Maura, avant-garde prophet): "revolution from above." That is to say: revolutionary wine in traditional wineskins. The pirouette within the order. Conservatism in direct action. Marvellously audacious poetic subjects in the archaic formality of a *décima*.

...To accept the written law...is to praise, as a daring revolution, the return to Góngora. To someone scandalous, who is, above all, unimpeachably Spanish. No more bolshevizing internationalisms. Let the scandals be of well-defined stock. With plenty of national colors. Hence the Góngora Committee's air of a Militia and Patriotic Council. That Committee...has performed acts of purely fascist character; of violent intransigence... No wonder, then, if people—hearing this Catholic, dictatorial, baroque, raptured, backward-looking proclamation—think they see in it a Maurist, reactionary poetry...<sup>46</sup>

He leaves no doubt about the political valence he sees in the return to Góngora. What may not come through clearly in the above passage is that, for Giménez Caballero—who would go on to become a key fascist ideologue in the 1930s—all this is a *good* thing. While the *Gaceta* that he directed tended to take a more ecumenical line in politics (and language), Giménez Caballero here throws enthusiastic support behind what he sees as a rising fascist tendency in poetry. Ernesto López-Parra's reply, from the left, unsurprisingly denounces the political positions that Giménez Caballero espouses. More surprising, however, is the fact that he largely agrees with his opponent's reading of Diego's aesthetics, and of the meaning of the resurgent interest in Góngora. He wonders whether the "labyrinthine, disjointed, meaningless prose" of Diego and his companions can even be called literature, and goes on, like Unamuno, to condemn it as reactionary obfuscation. For López-Parra, Diego and his companions are "nothing more than *señoritos luisés* with an overwhelming fondness for the 'sport' of letters. They never felt any civic stirrings nor discerned the responsibility of their calling."<sup>47</sup> By contrast, the true vanguard, which he claims to represent, has not abandoned its values, as this "rearguard" has.

A telling detail in López-Parra's article is his insistence on the provincial origins of Diego and others, perhaps in an attempt to suggest that their aesthetics, like their politics, is hopelessly passé. "All this has a whiff of the bourgeois vulgarity of provincial *señoritos*... Innovators indeed, those backward Maurist 'lads,' who in other times would have been provincial delegates or chairmen of some district committee!" Their confused and obscurantist verse, in short, goes hand in hand with their retrograde politics. His conclusion reinforces this point: "They purport to look toward Europe and probe with

their thought the spiritual dynamics of the world; but they haven't yet left their provinces."<sup>48</sup> Yearning for the metropole and stuck in the periphery, they are in a sense excessively and insufficiently provincial: trying to look toward Europe, they overlook the political realities of Spain.

Diego published his merciless (but scrupulously polite) response in 1928, as an open letter in *Lola*. He begins by denying outright Giménez Caballero's characterization of his politics. (Giménez Caballero presented his initial article as an interview, and López-Parra failed to notice, or pretended not to notice, its patently fictitious nature.) "Let me make clear," Diego states,

that I am not a fascist, neither in politics nor in art nor in anything else; that I am equally alien to any Maurism and any revolution, from above or from below; that "the pirouette in the order" has never been my motto, but just the opposite, when understood in a certain sense: "order in the pirouette."<sup>49</sup>

Just what "order in the pirouette" might mean is a question I will return to below. Diego's politics at this time were, in effect, conservative—neither revolutionary from the right nor from the left. In any event, he considered poetry to occupy a separate sphere from politics. Political differences, in other words, should not stand in the way of poetic affinities, and poetic affinities do not imply a rigidly shared program. The diversity of writers grouped around Góngora make that clear:

all of Spain's young poets and writers, even the most devoted to Góngora, have their own way of thinking and agree on no more than a certain minimal program, mostly of moral scruples and literary exclusions. My opinions, for example, are not entirely shared by anyone, and I spend my life quarrelling theoretically with my best friends.<sup>50</sup>

Against López-Parra's vision of poetry as leftist struggle, but also against Giménez Caballero's vision of poetry as fascist revolution, Diego insists on a sort of productive lack of definition. There is a political valence to this gesture, I think, but it does not easily fit on a spectrum of purity and commitment, nor in the stark separation that would tragically divide the country in the following decade. Diego's response to the charge of provincialism is especially revealing:

Some of us—we couldn't help it—are from the provinces. I admit, this is a pity. Congratulations on your Lavapiés or your Chamberí (if you are from one of those neighborhoods, as is to be believed). But there you have Giménez Caballero himself, for example, whose prose breathes—or inflicts—the plebian cadence typical of Madrid natives...

For the record...Góngora was a *señorito*, a volunteer aristocrat, a provincial, and—in the sense you mean—probably also a sterile, élite intellectual, an *elegante*.<sup>51</sup>

One would not go too far, I think, to read in this last sentence a concise statement about identity. Diego accepts López-Parra's assertions that he and the other "young poets"

come from the provinces—Diego was from Santander, and many of his companions came to Madrid from Andalusia to study and live at the Residencia de Estudiantes. He likewise concedes that they cultivate an intellectual curiosity, but he denies that either fact is a problem. Like Góngora, they are both provincial and *elegantes*—the two are not mutually exclusive and neither requires apology. (The word “sterile” may be a veiled reference to the homosexual overtones of some of Góngora’s verse,<sup>52</sup> or to the sexuality of the other members of the Generation of 1927.) Where López-Parra mocks provincial backwardness, Diego suggests that the periphery need not be any less up-to-date, any less modern, than the center.

Diego’s writing does not emphasize his Spanish identity, but that is precisely the point: he makes no apology about being both Spanish—provincially Spanish at that—and having aesthetic interests that extend past the geographic and political borders of the Iberian peninsula. This attitude is neatly summed up in the title of his journal, *Carmen*, a quintessentially Spanish name that means “song” in the universal language of Latin. Both Giménez Caballero and López-Parra demand that poetry show a strong national identity and a definite political alignment; Diego refuses both.

This is not to say that Diego evinced no interest in national questions. Quite the contrary, his approach to commemoration of Góngora (as well as later writings) shows a deep concern for Spain’s poetic life, past and present. He makes this clear in another open letter published in *Lola*, this time addressed to Antonio Marichalar, a fellow Gongorist. Part of his motivation in organizing the centenary and the provocative activities around it, lay, he says, in a frustration with the Spanish intellectual milieu:

And the fact is that in Spain...no one understands the innocent, festive, light-hearted, disinterested satire or joke; only the unjust, jealous, bitter, sectarian attack, looking out for number one.... I had long been embarrassed by the spectacle of the youth of Spain, from 20 to 35, fawning, flattering the *maestros*... [W]e’ve gone too far in our prudence, courtesy, and silence, if you can go too far in those things, which I think you can.<sup>53</sup>

Among the *maestros* he singles out for biting (but never malicious) criticism are Unamuno, Azorín and Juan Ramón Jiménez. Diego faults them for their lack of interest in Góngora, and by extension their limited view of what Spanish poetry is or should be. By contrast, his most successful contemporaries have avoided the trap of easy folklorism. “Alberti realized in time the danger posed by confinement to an exclusively Andalusian poetry,” he says in a lecture delivered in Buenos Aires a few months later, in 1928. But while Alberti, like Lorca, has found “a new course for his poetic talents, Spanish poetry is plagued by more or less Andalusian or sailor tunes, and by pseudogypsy ballads, just as it was a few years back by helicoidal and machine poems.”<sup>54</sup> Part of his impatience with this folklorism lies in its recent faddishness, of course—but it also stems from a resistance to being constrained by national themes.

Góngora’s significance in 1927 had less to do with his role in the Spanish canon than with his ability to transcend parochial national boundaries. And not just for Diego. Lorca, in a lecture given in 1926, imagined how Góngora, “tired of Castilians and ‘local color’...began to build a new tower of gems and made-up stones, which irritated the pride of the Castilians in their adobe palaces.”<sup>55</sup> Even more explicitly, Dámaso Alonso

argued in 1927 that Góngora gave the lie to the lamentably widespread view that Spain's literature was "linked to the ground, the earth, the locality, incapable of universal flights...a localist literature." Spanish critics had a responsibility to counter this view, he claimed, by highlighting "what is universal and select in Spain's literature."<sup>56</sup>

This last line, taken from the speech Alonso delivered at the Ateneo of Seville, can serve as a concise summary of the goals of the centennial rehabilitation of Góngora. Inseparable from Diego's and others' interest in radical images or shocking metaphors was a desire to challenge the nationalist and often folklorist obsessions of a previous generation. Their shared concern for Spain's place in European modernity thus takes an unexpected turn: instead of defining what is distinctive about Spain or a Hispanic tradition, they find in Góngora a claim to universality.

### **Order in the pirouette**

For Diego, poetry—or rather Poetry, with a capital P, as he often wrote—is by definition universal, a mysterious entity that exists outside any national tradition or even any given poem. Poets belong to an "unknown, suspected country" which they cannot visit but may nonetheless aspire to serve. "The poet should at most be a consul of Poetry. A prompt and humble bureaucrat for its celestial errands and passports," he states in the speech delivered at the Seville Ateneo in 1927. "Salute in him the flag—or the mast, because the flag only flies in rare festive, fluttering, creative moments—of that unmappable country."<sup>57</sup> Unmappable because impossibly distant, knowable only in its embassies abroad. Later in the essay Diego gives that unreachable quality a more sensual metaphor:

Poetry exists everywhere for the poet except in his own verses. It is the invisible object of pursuit who always arrives too early to the encounter, like those overly punctual friends who can't wait for us any longer. Poetry "has been" in every poem, but is no longer there. We feel the lingering warmth of her absence and the tepid impression left by her naked flesh.... Believing what we have never seen is Faith, they say. Believing what we shall never see: that is Poetry.<sup>58</sup>

Both metaphors suggest a mystical vision of poetry, of poetry as a religious or supernatural entity. And in fact the devoutly Catholic Diego did see poetry as an analogue for religion. But it would be wrong to see here a repetition of the *modernista* trope of the artist as high priest for an ethereal art. Even in these images, he tends toward the scientific or the technophilic: poetry's location may never be certain, its arrival never witnessed, but it leaves undeniable proof of its recent presence. Poetry, as an absolute essence, becomes a logical necessity, just as a chemically pure substance is unattainable in reality but indispensable in theory. Or, to use a celestial image he was fond of, it is a planet whose existence the astronomer posits to explain the movements of other, observable bodies. In an early essay entitled "Posibilidades creacionistas" (1919), Diego cites a line by Apollinaire about cubism—that it is to traditional painting what music is to literature. Rejecting the analogy as asymmetrical (since one can imagine cubist analogues to both music and literature) Diego proposes an alternative to describe cubism's literary equivalent. He states that "cubism is to traditional painting what X is to traditional



Poetry. Thus, *a priori*, we must conclude the possibility, the virtual existence of this X...let us seek it, then, as new Le Verriers for our Neptune.”<sup>59</sup>

What does this X consist of? The solution Diego goes on to outline casts a clarifying light on his later verse, or at least his “absolute” poetry written in the creationist mode. That solution is the image, which creationism sees “as the sole instrument, as the whole primordial cell” of poetry.<sup>60</sup> Images, of course, abound in even the most classical verse; the novelty of creationism consists in dispensing with their traditional communicative function. Diego sketches a classification of these images in order of their increasing complexity. Words are “direct images,” while “single images” involve a simple metaphor or comparison of the conventional kind, in which one thing is said to be, or be like, another. “Double images,” less frequent in traditional poetry but abundant in creationist verse, suggest two distinct interpretations, gaining in suggestive power what they lose in precision. Triple or quadruple images, etc., the next logical step, allow more interpretive possibilities and greater freedom for the poet, who “no longer makes disguised prose [but] begins to create for the pleasure of creating (poet-creator-child-god); he does not describe, he constructs; he does not evoke, he suggests.”<sup>61</sup> Hence the lines “Son sensibles al tacto las estrellas / No sé escribir a máquina sin ellas”<sup>4</sup> offer at least a few distinct interpretations: the stars seem close enough to touch with one’s fingertips, like keys on a typewriter; or the keys on a typewriter resemble stars, perhaps because each one reflects a point of light; or yet again, the (literal) stars provide a necessary poetic inspiration for the speaker, who cannot write without them, and who in turn “touches” them with the poetic transformation. “The keyboard is thus metaphorized into a miniature firmament,” sums up Susana Rivera, “but at the same time the firmament is imaginarily turned into an enormous cosmic keyboard.”<sup>62</sup> This kind of triple image, however, still means something specific (or rather, some specific things). The logical endpoint of this process would be a “multiple image,” which “does not explain anything [and] is untranslatable to prose. It is Poetry, in the purest sense of the word. It is also, exactly, Music, which is substantially the art of multiple images; all persuasive, scholastic, philosophical, anecdotal value is essentially alien to it.”<sup>63</sup>

What Diego attempts here, and in much of his most penetrating criticism, is a methodical approach to the theory and practice of writing poetry. Poetry may always flee the poem, leaving only a rapidly vanishing perfume; but with the right tools, the poet can amplify its lingering scent, rather than hastening its dissipation. And those tools can be identified and studied with almost scientific precision. This is, I think, what Diego means when he speaks (in the polemic with Giménez Caballero) of “order in the pirouette”: a rigorous and methodical approach to creating the spontaneous, organic, “human” experience of the poem. Composition requires an exacting effort to create images that transcend logical interpretation.

In practice, however, transcending logical interpretation does not mean doing away with any communicative meaning whatsoever, only with extended narrative or prosaic content. A typical line like “La verja del jardín se ha cruzado de brazos” (“The garden gate has crossed its arms”) could qualify as a simple image, and communicates an idea quite clearly: the gate is closed and now bars entrance to the garden. In fact the poem that this line comes from, “Novela,” published in *Manual de espumas* (1924), presents

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<sup>4</sup> The stars are sensitive to touch / I cannot type without them

a single extended conceit—a wintry nightfall as a crime scene, in which day has been robbed—through a series of related but independent images:

A cada paso del transeúnte  
la luz cede y el cielo se resiente

Henos por fin ante el ladrón

El reloj ingenuo canta el crimen

Y entre el llorar de las cortinas  
la luna estalla de pasión

La ciudad duerme en el sitio de costumbre

Y en el lugar del suceso  
el farol asustado contempla al árbol preso<sup>5</sup>

Not all of it conveys an easily interpretable meaning, but a good deal of it does: as a passerby walks down the street, light fades and the sky feels the ache of its loss. Even the images that do not make logical sense (the crying of curtains, for example) nevertheless suggest a mood, and are above all grammatically and lexically legible. This sort of “absolute poetry” presents very different, and ultimately more surmountable, obstacles than does Vallejo’s *Trilce*, for example, or the lexical fantasies of Huidobro’s *Altazor*. Diego’s early creationist poetry presents a physical reality transfigured through the poet’s metaphoric intuition. The basis for comparison can be a physical likeness or, much more frequently, an impressionistic moral likeness, not without a touch of humor: “El agua en el balcón / como un perro olvidado” suggests the almost pathetic quality of a balcony puddle.<sup>6</sup> (Images like these owe a great deal to Ramón Gómez de la Serna’s aphoristic *greguerías*.)

What this poetry lacks is any sort of phonic or rhythmic fireworks. “Novela,” above, employs a loose rhyme scheme punctuated by rhyming couplets of mismatched length (a technique for which Diego displayed a pronounced fondness: such couplets are his most recognizable trait), but it draws its power from the words’ connotative and denotative qualities, not their sonorous force. This may be surprising in a poet who defines poetry as that which transcends strictly rational meaning. But Diego finds this transcendence in images, and strenuously avoids the kind of musicality associated with Darío and the *modernistas*. And while he does, as quoted above, equate the “multiple image” with a kind of Music, he immediately clarifies that he does not mean “that stupid imitation, that competition in the merely organic pleasure, sought by the schools of sonorous, isochronous, danceable verse. To rival it”—music, that is—“we have to make use of our own means.”<sup>64</sup> These means are semantic. Poetry must signify—that is, must

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<sup>5</sup> With the passerby’s every step / the light yields and the sky suffers the effect / Here we are at last faced with the thief / The naive clock sings the crime / And amid the crying of curtains / the moon bursts with passion / The city sleeps in the usual place / And at the scene / the frightened streetlamp watches the imprisoned tree

<sup>6</sup> The water on the balcony / like a forgotten dog

be more than just sound—while still not “saying” anything. This paradoxical conviction lies at the heart of one of his most surprising statements, his “theorem” of pure poetry: “*the purity of a poem is inversely proportionate to its translatability to prose and directly proportionate to its translatability to another language.*”<sup>65</sup> To be sure, Diego does not say that the properly “rhetorical” or linguistic aspects of a poem will carry over to a new language, just that the most purely “poetic” elements will. But with its implied faith in meaning outside of language, the theorem is as good a reminder as any of the decades that separate Diego’s time from today.

What I would like to stress here is the paradox that underlies his theorem, that is, the notion that poetry can convey a kind of meaning inexpressible in prose. For this presents an unsolvable problem: how does one “mean” without “meaning” anything? How can a poem be more than music and less than prose? Diego’s recognition of the fundamental impossibility of poetry is a precise index of his historical awareness—or even of his modernity. What he said of his contemporaries applies doubly to himself:

To know that poetry is a problem and that it is a problem with no solution is to know two things our grandparents did not, and which our parents were beginning to suspect. The Spanish poets of the present know both truths, they possess them in mind and heart; and that being the case...they may be better or worse, clumsy or deft...but in no case frivolous, vain or irreverent.<sup>66</sup>

A sober recognition of the impossibility of the task, and a diligent investigation of the method to achieve it: this is what I take to be Diego’s “order within the pirouette.” And this is what, for Diego, marks the difference between his contemporaries and their immediate predecessors, especially Unamuno, the Machados, and Jiménez (whom he discusses in the essay the passage is taken from). These *maestros* did not recognize, or only partly recognized, the impasse: they still saw poetry either as communication or as musicality. Diego makes clear he holds them in high esteem—this, too, is part of his historical sensitivity—but insists that his generation faces a different poetic challenge.

Navigating between the Scylla of musicality and the Charybdis of communication is what Diego seeks to do—and does—in his best poems. And while the solutions he finds belongs wholly to his own historical moment, in his most sustained creationist poem—the 246-line *Fábula de Equis y Zeda*—he paradoxically takes a cue from Góngora.

### **What X is to traditional poetry**

The *Fábula de Equis y Zeda*, begun in 1926 and published in full in 1930 (part of it appeared in the centennial issue of *Litoral*), presents a rare combination of Diego’s “absolute,” imagistic poetry with a classical form. It is uniquely challenging, comparable to and arguably greater in difficulty than Góngora’s own *Fábula de Polifemo y Galatea*, which the title invokes.<sup>67</sup> Diego chose to use *sextinas reales*, six-line stanzas of hendecasyllables (similar to iambic pentameter), with each stanza ending in a rhyming couplet. Offsetting this classical verse structure are a series a dauntingly abstract images:

*La luna acecha esbelta sin remedio  
el cero ocho de los vendavales  
y con la muerte se equilibra el tedio*

*en la pureza de los dos pedales  
Pendiente sin opción pendiente en suma  
cruel como la conducta de la espuma*<sup>7</sup>

These lines offer no way in. And the lack of punctuation, typical in Diego's creationist verse, does not help. But the images are part of a constellation of elements that recur throughout the poem—the slope, the foam, the moon, the wind, the pedals of a bicycle, and even death itself, along with trees, a stag, harps and arpeggios, and the letters of the alphabet. This fact suggests they form part of a larger semantic network or meaningful whole that a reader might plausibly understand.

Diego's poem seems to tell the story of a suitor, Equis, who unsuccessfully pursues his beloved, Zeda. The names evoke Acis and Galatea, the lovers in Góngora's poem, but Equis and Zeda are of course also X and Z in Spanish; with the addition of the conjunction "y," the title literally means *Fable of XYZ*. It comprises three "tempos," like movements in a symphonic composition: an initial "Exposición," in which an architect musician, perhaps a figure for the poet, moves across a landscape of beaches and trees; a central piece entitled "Amor," in which Equis addresses Zeda (much as Polifemo addresses Galatea); and an apparently tragic "Desenlace" or dénouement, in which the architect's reappearance accompanies a meditation on death. Preceding all three is a short "Brindis" or toast, which serves as dedication. More than this cannot be stated with any certainty, and even this brief description overstates the poem's legibility. In fact, critics disagree about how the various images and objects fit together. Is the architect Equis, or a separate character? Who is the suitor, and who the beloved? If Equis and Zeda are a man and woman, which is which?

Diego freely conceded the charge of obscurity, but he also insisted his poem could be understood if read with attention and patience. Late in life, prefacing the poem for his anthology *Versos escogidos* (1970), he noted not without sadness that in the preceding forty years "some of the critics, even the kindest and furthermore sharpest, have not understood my poem."<sup>68</sup> I suspect he specifically means Dámaso Alonso, who had dismissed the *Fábula* as a "delightful sort of pastiche" in which "pure verbal and imaginative pleasure had triumphed over the story. Nothing more than that, or very little more."<sup>69</sup> Critics with a less dismissive view also hesitate to offer an interpretation. Andrés Sánchez Robayna, for example, calls it "an irreplaceable piece in the history of Spanish avant-garde poetry...of no less importance than such decisive texts as Vicente Huidobro's *Altazor*."<sup>70</sup> But he does not try to make sense of it—and indeed, only a handful of critics ever have.<sup>71</sup> It seems the poem is regarded as an avant-garde curiosity, an admirable but ultimately unreadable experiment in recreating the baroque.

Difficulty notwithstanding, I think it is worth examining the poem, if only to locate exactly where the meaning slips away, and how. From the beginning the poem holds itself tantalizingly out of reach, hinting that there is, if not a logical, proselike narration, then at least some recoverable sense:

*Sobre el amor del delantal planchado  
que en coincidir limítrofe se obstina*

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<sup>7</sup> The hopelessly slender moon stalks / the zero eight of the gales / and with death tedium balances out / in the purity of two pedals / Slope without option slope in short / cruel like the behavior of foam

*cerca del valle donde un puente ha inflado  
el lomo del calor que se avecina  
una torre graduada se levanta  
orientada al arbitrio del que canta*

*Torre virtual que medra al simple tacto  
y se deja inclinar si alguno piensa  
gentil distribuidora del abstracto  
óvalo verde de la recompensa  
una tarde de esas en que sube  
el caracol hermano de la nube<sup>8</sup>*

The opening stanzas seem to set a scene: a tower rises near a valley with a bridge; the approaching heat suggests it is early summer. The “snail, brother to the cloud,” might suggest curling smoke from a chimney, or mist, or simply a snail, whose shell evokes the form of a cloud. Similarly, the tower could be either a literal tower or a tree, since it distributes “abstract / green oval of reward.” Elsa Dehennin sees in it a laurel tree, whose leaves traditionally form crowns, though an olive tree, whose “rewards” are more distinctly oval-shaped, is a likelier possibility.<sup>72</sup> But none of these interpretations is strongly endorsed by the poem.

Part of the peculiar difficulty lies in the fact that many of the verbs and expressions seem incomplete or grammatically ambiguous, lacking the few words needed to resolve the thought into a parsable logical proposition. The love that “lying adjacent, persists” ought to lie adjacent *to something* and ought to persist *in doing something*, though we may not notice at first that the prepositional phrases are missing. And whether the bridge has inflated the “back of the approaching heat,” or vice versa, is not clear. Neither reading is especially understandable.

These difficulties continue throughout the exposition and the rest of the poem. After setting an ambiguous scene, the poem introduces an architect who measures or surveys, and then unleashes a “rayo”—a ray, or a bolt, or the spoke of a wheel.

*De punta a punta un arquitecto  
recorriendo su playa infatigable  
calculaba el perímetro perfecto  
a puro arpeggio de oro venerable  
y obtenido el nivel luego al soslayo  
—metro plegable— desplegaba el rayo<sup>9</sup>*

Oddly, the architect is also a musician, and his planning or construction is at the same time a musical performance. Diego insisted on the musical nature of his composition. “In

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<sup>8</sup> On ironed-apron love / which lying adjacent persists / near the valley where a bridge has inflated / the back of the approaching heat / a graduated tower rises / turned to the will of him who sings // Virtual tower that grows upon simple contact / and lets itself lean over if any thinks / gracious distributor of the abstract / green oval of reward / one of those afternoons in which / the snail rises brother of the cloud

<sup>9</sup> From end to end an architect / tirelessly crisscrossing his beach / calculated the perfect perimeter / by pure arpeggio of venerable gold / and having gained the level obliquely / —foldable yardstick— he unfolded the spoke

the end,” he wrote later about the poem, “what I was doing was the same thing that Ravel, Stravinsky or Falla were doing in those years.”<sup>73</sup> Diego seems to combine two opposing approaches to poetry in his poem, or to arrive at the nonsignifying “music” of creationism through the solidity of his classical verse. These approaches meet in the terrain of geometry (blueprints resembling a score, perhaps) with a series of terms taken from a geometrical vocabulary: planes, dihedrons, slopes—and of course X, Y and Z.

As the architect makes a surreal exit, sailing away in his own beard (“su barba el arquitecto abre y bifurca / y a bordo de ella costas de arpa surca”<sup>10</sup>), the poem turns next to a feminine character and a suitor who unsuccessfully pleads his case before her. In one of the few Gongorine touches in the whole poem, the section opens with a distant echo of the first verse of the *Soledades*:

*Era el mes que aplicaba sus teorías  
cada vez que un amor nacía en torno  
cediendo dócil peso y calorías  
cuándo por caridad ya para adorno  
en beneficio de esos amadores  
que hurtan siempre relámpagos y flores*

*Ella llevaba por vestido combo  
un proyecto de arcángel en relieve  
Del hombro al pie su línea exacta un rombo  
que a armonizar con el clavel se atreve  
A su paso en dos lunas o en dos frutos  
se abrían los espacios absolutos<sup>11</sup>*

If the “Exposición” suggests the early spring, “Amor” seems to take place in the autumn, for the month “yields weight and calories,” as trees lose leaves and temperatures fall. The feminine character seems to be Zeda, since the rhombus formed by her body recalls a “Z” shape. She is found washing, “equiparando en jabón tierno / globos que nunca han visto las espumas”<sup>12</sup> though her actions also allow her to draw out her “su porvenir listado en subjuntivo”—an odd image that I will return to in a moment.

Meanwhile, the suitor, presumably Equis, looks for his beloved, walking “por calles que huelen a pintura / siempre buscando a ella en cuadratura,”<sup>13</sup> a line which hints that finding her will be as difficult as squaring the circle. His love song, addressed to Zeda, takes up the rest of the “Amor” section:

*“A ti la bella entre las iniciales  
la más genuina en tinta verde impresa*

<sup>10</sup> the architect opens and bifurcates his beard / and aboard it plies coasts of harps

<sup>11</sup> It was the month that applied its theories / each time a love was born nearby / gently yields weight and calories / now for charity now for decoration / for the sake of those lovers / who always pilfer lightning and flowers // She wore as bulging dress / a blueprint for an archangel in relief / from shoulder to foot her exact line a rhombus / daring to harmonize with carnation / As she passed in two moons or in two fruits / the absolute spaces opened up

<sup>12</sup> equalling in tender soap / globes that the foam never saw

<sup>13</sup> down streets smelling of paint / always looking for her in quadrature

*a ti imposible y lenta cuando sales  
tangente cuando el céfiro regresa  
a ti envió mi amada caravana  
larga como el amor por la mañana*<sup>14</sup>

Zeda is immediately identified as a letter, and the “most beautiful among the initials” at that. Once more she is described as impossible, perhaps because the Z occurs only occasionally in writing and sometimes only as a sort of tangent ghost—as in “céfiro,” once spelled as “zéfiro.” Furthermore, her statuesque appearance (she wears “un proyecto de arcángel”) recalls the other mythical Galatea, the statue that comes alive for Pygmalion. Pointedly, though, Zeda does not come alive or even speak. Indeed, she is hardly a character at all, and both times her name is mentioned, it is uncapitalized. It is easy to see Equis as an artist who desperately wants to give life to his creation.<sup>74</sup>

His song finished, Equis slides away on a whim— “y abandonado al humo del capricho / se dejó resbalar por los rieles”<sup>15</sup>—and begins the descent which occupies the “Desenlace.” A tragic sense pervades the end of the poem, where loss and decline darken the last few stanzas, most vividly through the geometrical image of a downward slope leading to inconstancy and death. We lose track of the architect and of Zeda—the poetic voice asks where they have gone—while Equis continues a descent increasingly envisioned as a bicycle racing toward disaster.<sup>75</sup>

This is the poem’s story, such as it is. Ricardo Gullón admits frankly that “attempting a ‘logical’ reading of the poem would make no sense,” and I am inclined to agree.<sup>76</sup> Diego himself thought the general failure to understand the poem was due the misleading nod to Góngora: the central section bears the heading “Góngora 1927” and appeared in the commemorative issue of *Litoral*. “But I have to say,” he writes in 1970, “that the Gongorism of the *Fábula* is only on the façade. Inside it is a poem absolutely of our century, and its poetics owe nothing to don Luis, not even his rhetoric or syntax.”<sup>77</sup> But if Góngora is indeed just a façade, then why invoke him at all? The question gets at the heart of what he meant for 1927, and how a look back at the baroque could simultaneously be a look toward the future.

As seen above, the poem’s images, syntax and vocabulary are distinctly modern, and only the stanza structure recalls the baroque. (In this sense Diego’s *Fábula* differs markedly from Alberti’s *Soledad tercera*, which impressively mimics Góngora’s style.) Diego is neither recreating the seventeenth century nor updating it for the twentieth. He does, however, face a technical challenge not unlike the one Góngora faced when composing the *Soledades*. Lorca claims that Góngora sought to “make a grand lyric poem to counter the grand epic poems numbering in the dozens.” But the endeavor proved uniquely difficult:

how to maintain a lyric tension throughout lengthy squadrons of verses?  
And how to do so without narration? If he gave the narration, the story, its  
full importance, it would turn into epic at the slightest misstep. And if he

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<sup>14</sup> To you beautiful among the initials / the most genuine one printed in green ink / to you impossible and slow when you emerge / tangential when the zephyr returns / to you I send my beloved caravan / long like love in the morning

<sup>15</sup> and left to the spoke of a whim / he let himself slide down the rails

didn't narrate anything, the poem would break into a thousand disconnected, meaningless pieces.<sup>78</sup>

Góngora solves the dilemma, Lorca says, by wrapping his minimal narrative thread in images, in intricate, interwoven metaphors that hold the poem lyrically taut. Diego, however, needs a different solution, because the single or double images that Góngora employs allow for just one, or at most two, readings: a typically Gongorine phrase like “cuadrado pino” (square pine) can mean *only* “table,” not a Cubist vision of a forest. Góngora’s poetry, as Salinas put it, remains an “exaltation of reality”—a far cry from the consciously and artistically created reality that Diego proposes.

Diego therefore faced a much greater challenge: how to take the momentary convergence of meanings in a multiple image and extend it throughout a long but nevertheless unified composition? For it seems clear that the poem cannot be “unlocked” by the sort of visual decoding that Góngora’s commentators, from Salcedo Coronel to Dámaso Alonso to John Beverley, have used to make sense of the *Soledades*. Diego’s images are of course visual, but they do not depend primarily on a visual or material likeness. Rather, they rely on musical repetition, which, echoing throughout the poem’s metrical architecture, harmonize and form recognizable themes. Diego later said of his poem, “Music was my guide. Its three tempos...are interwoven with their themes, developments and correspondences, and even with music’s own characteristic ineffability.” The real genius of the *Fábula* is that over the course of the poem the images harken back to each other, building on each other to converge as multiple lines of meaning in a single composition. What crops up in one stanza as an enigmatic metaphor often finds resonance elsewhere. Thus a “tower that distributes the abstract / green oval of reward” may not by itself suggest “olive” or “laurel”—the resemblance is too weak—but when similar language is repeated throughout the poem (“Duchaba el sauce el beneficio verde,” “los capiteles / que pliegan sus follajes convecinos,” etc.) it begins strongly to identify buildings as trees. The system of correspondences is not unidirectional (as it is in much of Góngora), for Diego’s images point in multiple directions. Perhaps the best analogy—given how prominently bicycles figure in the poem—would be to a bicycle wheel, in whose hub a number of interpretative “spokes” (images, registers, semantic fields) intersect. For instance, the following stanza presents a few distinct possibilities:

*Flor de la brisa o fruta agraz del viento  
aquí y allá giraba en engranaje  
empujando con mutuo vaivén lento  
mecanismos del peine y del paisaje  
paisaje virginal que se desvela  
a la dócil caricia paralela<sup>16</sup>*

On the one hand, we see the wind or its effects recast as a gearworks. The wind is light—just a flower of a breeze, or the unripe fruit of wind—and combs gently across the landscape. At the same time, however, the stanza seems to describe a bicycle moving like

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<sup>16</sup> Flower of the breeze or unripe fruit of the wind / spun here and there in gearworks / pushing with slow mutual rocking / mechanisms of the comb and the landscape / virgin landscape unveiled / to the docile parallel caress



a light wind, the rider pushing each pedal in a “vaivén,” or rocking, coming-and-going motion, and giving the untrodden landscape a “parallel caress” with the two wheels. Here, perhaps, the evidence is not overwhelming for this interpretation. But this stanza resonates with, and continues, the carefully repeated bicycle vocabulary from the other stanzas.

In any case the interpretive possibilities never preclude each other. The composition suggests multiple, simultaneous readings, and Diego is careful never to privilege one interpretive line over another. Thus his solution to the poetic problem he faces is to superimpose three or four separate “fables” or minimally narrative elements in to interrupt any conventional narrative reading, while still conveying a sense of dramatic development—of tragedy. Diego’s poem, as he states, is “no joke, but a serious and at times tragic work.”<sup>79</sup> And in the “Desenlace,” that tragedy takes on a very physical character, as the final two stanzas read like a cubist description of a bicycle accident:

*Piedad de asfalto atardecer de lona  
sollozo sin pistola abandonado  
En mi ciudad trasciende una persona  
a imán entre violetas olvidado  
Todo el paisaje está si lo sacudes  
dulcemente podrido de laúdes*

*Es el juicio final de los lebreles  
deliberado al ras de la garganta  
Por el plano elegante en desniveles  
la bicicleta inmóvil gira y canta  
Oh cielo es para ti su rueda y rueda  
Equis canta la una la otra zeda<sup>17</sup>*

Asphalt pity is no pity at all, and the abandoned sob suggests both a solitary pain and a pain that has itself been “abandoned” in death. And while the “last judgment of the hounds” is especially obscure, it too suggests an end to life.

Still, sorrow is not the only note, for the tragic song seems to hold joy. The landscape is sweetly rotting with lutes, and the still-spinning bicycle wheels sing for heaven. The word “trasciende” can literally mean “gives off a scent,” but primarily suggests transcendence: the cyclist, Equis, forgotten like a magnet among violets—a compellingly strange image—transcends his solitary death. In the last line Equis is drawn to Zeda, in song if not in life.

When Diego rewrites Apollinaire’s formula in “Posibilidades creacionistas” (1919), he states that Cubism is to traditional painting what X is to traditional literature—and then argues that creationist verse, with its multiple images, is that X. It is tempting to think that he had this formula in mind when composing the *Fábula de Equis y Zeda*. But then what is Z? One response might be that if X is the creationist poem, Z is the always

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<sup>17</sup> Asphalt pity canvas evening / forsaken sob without a pistol / In my city someone gives off the scent / of a magnet forgotten among violets / The whole landscape is if you shake it / sweetly rotting with lutes // It’s the hounds’ last judgement / deliberated at throat level / Across the elegant uneven plane / the motionless bicycle spins and sings / Oh heaven for you is its wheel and wheel / Equis sings one the other zeda

absent Poetry, who has vanished from even the most successful works. Equis, the suitor, makes an impassioned plea for Zeda to stay, but she denies him the grace of her presence. The opening “Brindis” stanza dedicates the poem to a friend with the words “a ti ante el coto de la reina en veda / en tres tiempos te brindo equis y zeda”; on this reading the “forbidden queen” could be poetry itself, whose hunting grounds (“coto”) the poet may not enter.

Or, turning to the geometrical metaphors that dominate the poem, Z might be the third axis, the logically conceivable dimension that cannot be shown on the X-Y grid. Transcending writing, it is what writing points to; it is what separates the blueprint from the building, the score from the performance, representation and direct experience. It is a reminder perhaps that the pirouette is more than order, that even if one could determine what X is to traditional poetry, Z remains unknown.

In the final enigmatic line, the bicycle has stopped, but its two wheels still spin, singing for heaven: “Equis sings one, Zeda the other.” But the uncapitalized “zeda” also suggests a misspelled (but phonetically identical) “ceda,” the subjunctive of *ceder*, to yield or give up. The line may thus also be read: “Equis sings one, let the other yield,” or perhaps even “Equis sings one, let him surrender the other.” Is this Zeda’s “porvenir listado en subjuntivo,” encountered earlier? The beloved, the object of Equis’s fruitless pursuit, is by virtue of the very ambiguity of her name a renunciation, a yielding, a loss.

The poem is no mere allegory, nor is it reducible to an interpretable, logical meaning—yet neither is it meaningless. It is, I think, a dazzlingly sustained multiple image, in which the tragic note pervades each of the image’s facets. Remarkably, *Fábula* repeatedly suggests loss and absence without ever mentioning them directly. It speaks of the inadequacy of language, unrequited love, infidelity, and human mortality—and simultaneously “renounces” giving this loss a logical, narratable sense. Indeed, the poem enacts the loss of faith in language and representation that is the very hallmark of modernity.

Diego keenly felt and understood his aesthetic challenge—a challenge of an entirely different order than those faced by Unamuno, Jiménez, or the Machados—and his response was strikingly original. Taking a cue from Góngora, he created a poetry that shunned the merely proselike or narrative, while going beyond the merely sonorous or musical. But Diego never attempted to imitate Góngora, and his fable is entirely his own. Góngora’s importance, in effect, lay not in his particular poetic voice, his diction or his metaphors—these belonged to a different time. Rather, he provided a model for how one might push language to the limits of communication, how one could step beyond the limits of a narrowly defined, canonically sanctioned tradition. In other words, what Diego and others found in Góngora was a way out of tradition—but curiously this is quite different from the picture we have of the Generation of 1927.

### **On or about December 1927**

Diego’s enigmatic poem forms part of the myth of 1927, as do the *auto de fe*, the funeral mass, the literary polemics, and the journey to Seville. Some of these events acquired their mythic status more or less immediately, such as the bonfire (which, according to Dámaso Alonso, existed mainly in Diego’s fanciful recollection).<sup>80</sup> Most of them, however, became part of that story only later, evoked in retrospect after a traumatic experience of war and exile. For 1927 did not enter immediately into the

annals of Spanish literary history, and its canonization took place under the shadow of the Civil War.

The triumph of the Franco regime brought with it a drastic reorientation of Spanish intellectual life. Literature, particularly, took on an immense ideological significance, both in its teaching and its production. It was during this first decade, as Fernando Valls notes, that “the Francoist state most intensely *used* education to reproduce itself and consolidate itself ideologically.”<sup>81</sup> What before the war represented a conservative vision of Spain’s past or the uplifting purpose of literature had, by the 1940s, attained the status of semiofficial dogma; Menéndez Pelayo, whose criticism had done so much to discredit Góngora in the nineteenth century, became a ubiquitous point of reference. And even though the regime did not exactly endorse a monolithic view of history or aesthetics, the need to supplement military victory with cultural victory meant that any form of art or writing too closely associated with the Republic found itself automatically discredited. José María Castellet surely exaggerates when he writes that “culture was always, for the insurgents against the Republic, enemy terrain. As such it had to be militarily occupied, just as enemy forces had to be dismantled.”<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, it is worth emphasizing the violence and conflictiveness of cultural politics during these years of early Francoism. Literary pedagogy and literary history became war by other means—or at least a war for what Spain means. “The response to Spain’s intellectual isolation in 1945 is ‘Spanishness,’” writes Gregorio Morán, “an ersatz cultural imperialism that is nothing more than intellectual autarky.” He elaborates:

In some cases this means intellectual “recuperations”... In others there is a need to invent an intellectual past, hiding some facts and compounding others, to make the regime, born of a victory over the Republic, heir to timeless reactionary traditions. Thus it...instrumentalizes such complex periods as the Counter-Reformation, overvaluing the sixteenth century and part of the seventeenth, but also...the so-called “Generation of 98” and, years later, the poets the “27” group.<sup>83</sup>

In fact, many of these concepts date back to the first decades of the Franco regime. Those years cemented a view of Spain’s literary tradition—and of the baroque and the avant-garde in particular—that to significant extent persists, and therefore remains extremely relevant today.<sup>84</sup> This situation of “intellectual autarky” has special meaning for those figures who, like Góngora and his defenders, initially had no place in this officially sanctioned culture. Eventually they reentered the canon, of course—but first they had to be recuperated and redefined.

Gabriel Núñez and Mar Campos have recently shown how literary histories in the 1940s routinely denounced Góngora and the era he represented. One textbook they quote (*Literatura nacional y extranjera*, by Florentino García de Andoin) issues a shrill condemnation of the poet on both moral and aesthetic grounds:

All that was wholesome and vigorous in Spain’s literature set itself against Góngora as soon as they saw him plunge into the murkiness of the *Polifemo* and the *Soledades*, in a poem without a plot, without inner poetry, without feeling, without ideas, an appearance or shadow of a poem, wholly devoid of soul.<sup>85</sup>

Góngora receives the sharpest barbs, but the rest of the period gets its share, too: elsewhere the same book identifies the seventeenth century as the beginning of Spanish decadence, and another textbook they cite repudiates all “barroquismo literario,” as typified by Góngora and Quevedo.<sup>86</sup>

With a slightly different set of examples, however, the baroque could be praised as the art of the most orthodox Catholicism, the incarnation of eternal Spanish values. Indeed, these same years saw the rise of a very different version of the baroque. Werner Weisbach’s thesis, that the baroque was the “art of the Counter-Reformation,” took on new momentum after 1944, when his work first appeared in Spanish, with a lengthy preface by Enrique Lafuente Ferrari praising Spain’s heroic opposition to the secularizing impulse of the Renaissance. Emilio Orozco offered a more moderate but similarly moralizing view of the baroque’s spiritual import: the period provides twentieth-century Spain with a model of humble spirituality. His view even incorporates Góngora, whose “barroquismo” is celebrated as the most accomplished expression of the national soul.<sup>87</sup>

These two opposing views of the seventeenth century—heroically conservative in one, immorally empty in the other—present less of a contradiction than may first appear, because the same values underlie each vision. If the baroque meant empty intellectualism, then a certain Renaissance clarity, embodied by Garcilaso, provided the true artistic ideal for Spain; if, on the other hand, the Renaissance meant secularization and modernity, then the baroque signaled a return to an earlier orthodoxy. Either way, the baroque largely meant Góngora. And either way, the enemy remained the same: a certain soullessness or purposelessness in art, a threat that ultimately had less to do with the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries than with the 1920s and 1930s. In other words, the problem lay not in the baroque itself but in the aesthetic modernity it was imagined either to prefigure or to reject.

Which is to say, the real problem lay in the avant-garde. Not, to be sure, the fascist vanguardism of someone like Giménez Caballero (who went on to play a leading role for the writers grouped around the journal *Escorial*), but rather the avant-garde of pure poetry, dehumanization, and formal experimentation. This avant-garde became the target of attacks from the new cultural establishment, which denounced it as degenerate and anti-Spanish. In Pere Gimferrer’s succinct and unambiguous encapsulation, “to the extent that the avant-garde had associated itself with the Republic, the persecution of the Republican left was also a persecution of the literary avant-garde.”<sup>88</sup> Only toward the end of the 1940s did it become possible to recuperate avant-gardists—first of all the least objectionable ones, like Diego, and later the more radical figures. In Sultana Wahnón’s words, this recuperation meant “the simple acknowledgment of the existence and importance of literary currents and movements that Falangism had decided, in a gesture of historical violence, to consider ‘obsolete.’”<sup>89</sup> What Wahnón does not say, however, is that this involved more than an acceptance of the avant-garde, or of the unabashedly innovative aesthetic projects that Diego, Lorca and others espoused—it entailed the creation of a new concept that would domesticate the avant-garde and reimagine it as faithful successors to a timeless Spanish tradition. That concept is the Generation of 1927.

This concept is worth considering in some detail. In scholarship on Spanish poetry from the 1920s, it remains unsatisfactory and unavoidable in equal measure. Critics have long complained about the short roster of just eight or ten names—Guillén, Salinas, Lorca, Alberti, Aleixandre, Cernuda, Alonso, Diego, and usually Altolaguirre and

Prados—the exclusive emphasis on poetry, the arbitrarily chosen year, the outmoded (and Orteguian) notion of a historical or literary “generation.”<sup>90</sup> Not long ago José-Carlos Mainer remarked, “we do not even know how the name came about [or] how the year was chosen,” noting that several other years had more significant books and events, and could more plausibly serve as a generational referent.<sup>91</sup> Even more recently, Andrew Anderson has sought to uncover the origins of the concept by exhaustively cataloguing virtually every appearance of the grouping or the term. According to him, Diego’s immensely successful anthology, *Poesía española* (1932), went a long way to fixing the roster by including all ten standard members and relatively few others.<sup>92</sup> As for the term itself, Anderson finds that throughout the 1930s and 1940s several alternatives circulated, and only in the early 1950s did the label “Generation of 1927” begin to win out. “Gradually the label gained ground,” he reports, “dominating titles of anthologies and figuring in programs of study in Spanish secondary education. Soon thereafter it established itself in reading lists in Spanish departments in foreign universities.”<sup>93</sup> The key development is Dámaso Alonso’s important essay “Una generación poética (1920-1936),” published in the journal *Finisterre* in 1948.<sup>94</sup> Though Alonso never actually uses the term “Generation of 1927” in full, he unambiguously points to 1927 as the group’s defining moment.

Gregorio Morán considers this essay in *El maestro en el erial* (1998), and advances a very polemical argument about the “generation” Alonso helped invent: in Morán’s view, the concept is essentially a Francoist attempt to downplay the leftist politics of most of the group’s members. If Guillén, Salinas, Cernuda, Lorca and Alberti could not simply be ignored in the 1940s—their importance for Spanish letters had been clear since the 1930s—they could at least be reinvented, recast as something more palatable. No longer would they be the poets who reached the height of their creative talents under the Republic, nor the poets whose opposition to the military coup had forced them (or most of them) into exile. Dubious credit, says Morán, goes to Dámaso Alonso for conceiving an ingenious way to recuperate them:

With his indisputable authority as protagonist, he would invent a term that at first went unnoticed but in the long run would prove successful: “Generation of 1927.” No Republic, just Primo de Rivera’s dictatorship; no Lopes or Quevedos, nor populisms or commitment. [Just] Góngora, the poet’s poet *par excellence*.... It was such a felicitous invention that even today one marvels at such magnificent chicanery.<sup>95</sup>

According to Morán, Góngora held little if any importance for these poets, and the otherwise arbitrary year serves merely to distance them from the Republic and absolve them of their political errors. By portraying them as merely a group of friends free from political cares, Alonso implies they offered no serious opposition to the current regime, and thus “exonerates the most committed poetic generation of our literary history from any sin of politicization.”<sup>96</sup>

Morán is undoubtedly correct that the concept of the Generation of 1927 belongs to the legacy of Francoism, and that its inaugural definition (Alonso’s essay) smacks of political compromise. It does not follow, however, that Góngora was just a passing fancy; the polemics his revival generated, the enthusiasm he inspired among a group of poets, leave little doubt that 1927 *did* in fact have a pivotal, even era-defining importance. Nor does it follow that Alonso acted with malicious intent in this presenting such a distorted

image of that moment. He may well have seen no other alternative than to recast Lorca, Alberti, Cernuda and others as apolitical; his insistence on this point (“None of those poets worried then about what the others’ political ideas were; several of them even seemed unaware that there existed such a thing in the world”) suggests a carefully calibrated strategy.<sup>97</sup> In any event, it matters little whether Alonso acted out of good faith, shrewd caution, conspiratorial cynicism, or some combination of all three, for the term’s function remains the same. Today the Generation of 1927 continues to be seen as a group of friends untroubled by politics (at least at first) and united by a youthful enthusiasm for novelty.<sup>98</sup>

Apoliticism is one component of the myth of the Generation of 1927, but continuity plays an equally important role. Alonso links the generation to Góngora, to Jiménez, and to other pre-avant-garde predecessors (as well as, more subtly, to the poets of the present—that is, 1948). “The poets of my generation do not detest the already famous *maestros* (Unamuno, the Machado brothers, Juan Ramón Jiménez),” he writes. “Moreover, the filiation that the new group has, in part, with Juan Ramón Jiménez is apparent.”<sup>99</sup> Such emphasis on continuity is at the very least surprising, given how relentlessly Diego mocked Jiménez and Unamuno in his writings about the centenary. (Diego did, of course, admire these poets, and included them in his anthology, but as discussed above, he insisted then and earlier that they pursued different poetic goals.) Even more telling is how thoroughly Alonso contradicts his younger self. In an essay from 1927 he considered the gap between his generation and its predecessors to be “the most profound chasm that has separated...two concepts of literature since the Renaissance, and maybe even since the origins of the Greco-Roman tradition.”<sup>100</sup> By 1948, however, things looked different—or rather they looked the same: “there is no fundamental break,” he writes, “between the revolution of *modernismo* and the poetry of today, of 1948.”<sup>101</sup>

Continuity here serves a distinct purpose. By stressing the generation’s influence on the present (i.e., 1948), Alonso aligns them with Francoist poetic orthodoxy; by highlighting the importance of Unamuno and Jiménez—no favorites of the regime, to be sure—he downplays their affinities with the more stridently avant-garde positions of *ultraístas* of the late 1910s and 1920s. And by making Góngora’s centenary the defining moment of his generation, Alonso ties them to a much older Spanish literary tradition. True, he discounts Góngora’s importance as a model, but this paradoxical gesture allows him to have it both ways: he can assign his generation a reverential attitude toward the past—and especially toward the baroque, the nation’s most conservative, Catholic moment—while minimizing the formalist, avant-garde tendencies that the polyvalent Góngora still evoked.

Alonso thus nervously disavows the avant-garde, and more generally the radical innovation that avant-gardists like Diego had admired in Góngora and sought to achieve in their own work. Alonso does concede that the *ultraístas* had an early influence on his generation. “The difference between these two moments is, however, enormous,” he writes, because his generation, “while open to outside influences, is profoundly rooted in Spain’s national and literary soil; the *ultraísta* group wears premade clothes, and almost all them were made outside the home.”<sup>102</sup> On the one hand, then, stands a traditional, apolitical, and eminently Spanish Generation of 1927; and on the other, a rootless, radicalized, foreign avant-garde. This distinction, albeit in an attenuated form, still persists in academic Hispanism. No one denies that Diego, Lorca, Alexandre or the others participated in the avant-garde, of course, but vanguardism nearly always takes a

backseat to their generational affiliation: they are ambiguous renovators, touched in youth by an avant-garde fever but all the healthier for having recovered early. “The personal genius of each one and their own search for an original poetic idiom quickly moved them away from the shallowness of the first avant-garde,” writes Francisco Javier Díez de Revenga. “But their works retained the reflection of these childhood measles, soon honorably overcome.”<sup>103</sup> The critic’s emphasis, I think, falls on the final three words.

This emphasis on continuity all but precludes the sort of momentous break that Virginia Woolf referred to when she wrote, in a memorable line, that “on or about December 1910 human character changed.” That change (in essence a social change) required a new mode of representation, a break from the realist conventions of her immediate Edwardian predecessors. Such a proclamation of rupture, however tongue-in-cheek, is the quintessential modernist and avant-garde gesture, one that Diego, Lorca, and even a younger Alonso eagerly and repeatedly enacted, before, during and after Góngora’s centenary. But in the 1940s, around the time of Alonso’s essay, what begins to dominate much of Hispanic criticism is something quite different: the notion that those avant-garde poets had faithfully preserved and “renewed” a timeless national tradition. As an organizing concept, the Generation of 1927 replaces cosmopolitan, avant-garde rupture with a national, traditional continuity. And the celebration held in Seville that December, along with the publications, the centennial issues, the bonfire, and all the other commemorative activities, thus takes on a very different meaning. To state it more polemically: in conventional literary historiography, on or about December 1927, Spanish poetry remained the same.

Tradition as such was not, of course, anathema to the poets who commemorated Góngora—and least of all to Diego, who made a point of cultivating “traditional” poetry alongside his most boldly creationist verse. But as Gimferrer keenly notes, “the classicism-avant-garde dichotomy of someone like Gerardo Diego, which had a very precise meaning before the war, could be instrumentalized by reactionary criticism in the postwar.”<sup>104</sup> Diego’s fondness for classical verse, like his interest in Góngora, was not a throwback or return, but an aesthetic position arrived at after and *through* the avant-garde. Just as regular meter could give voice to unmistakably modern sensibilities, so too could Góngora point the way toward a radical innovation, toward a break with recent tradition and with the narrowly national concerns that had dominated it.

Certainly, the idea of an avant-garde rupture is itself a myth. I do not propose to discard one myth in favor of another, rejecting a spurious continuity in favor of an almost equally spurious break. Nor do I suggest reading 1920s Spain as just another instantiation of an avant-garde theorized elsewhere, with (say) surrealism or dada as its ideal type. But an insistence on literary continuity and national difference poses two serious problems. First, it stands starkly at odds with what Diego and others sought to do in the events marking the centenary, as I have argued. In Góngora they discovered a model for their own literary modernity, a figure who transcended his national boundaries and spoke urgently to the future—but they are remembered as doing the opposite, turning away from the world, toward Spain and its past. And second, the myth of a seamless continuity in a narrowly national tradition is one factor in Spain’s often lamented exclusion from debates about international modernism.<sup>105</sup> If Spain remains outside theoretical constructions of modern European culture, one of the reasons is surely that its literary historiography, with its generations and narrowly national context, encourages such an

exclusion. A theoretical framework that made a group of poets palatable to the Francoist intellectual establishment now serves, at least in part, to keep them outside a shared narrative of European aesthetic modernity.

What the foregoing shows is how thoroughly Diego and others engaged with their own historical moment, within and beyond Spain. The fact that overtly avant-garde poets found such inspiration and innovation in a figure from the baroque might complicate our picture of the international avant-garde—though such an interest in the past is hardly unique to Spain, or it is unique perhaps only in the intensity of its devotion to a single author. In any event, for Diego, Lorca, Alberti, and even the Alonso of 1927, what Góngora makes dramatically clear is that Spain, and Spain’s literary tradition, need not be marginal to the rest of Europe. Their commemoration offers a very different way of understanding Spain’s past—and above all the baroque. In their vision of Góngora, the baroque appears not as a Hispanic cultural exceptionalism, defiantly opposed to or divergent from European modernity. On the contrary, it serves as proof of Spain’s intellectual and aesthetic engagement beyond its borders.

Diego wrote, in 1924, “our generation loves Góngora, but demands the right to ‘its Góngora,’ which is not exactly the one we inherited.”<sup>106</sup> We might echo his words, demanding a Spanish avant-garde that is more than the traditionalist Generation we have inherited—and, for that matter, demanding a concept of the baroque that is not a myth of Hispanic exceptionalism, but a model of innovation, openness and engagement.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The quotation come from the “Crónica del centenario de Góngora,” published in *Lola* 1, the supplement to Diego’s journal *Carmen*. I have translated prose quotations. I have quoted poetry in the original Spanish and included a literal gloss as a footnote. As for the *auto de fe*, Diego’s own account suggests there was no literal bonfire.
- <sup>2</sup> Andrés Soria Olmedo gives an engagingly thorough account of these issues in “Góngora 1627-2007,” in *Una densa polimorfía de belleza: Góngora y el grupo del 27* (Málaga: Junta de Andalucía, 2007). See also Rafael Osuna, *Las revistas del 27: Litoral, Verso y Prosa, Carmen, Gallo* (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 1993), pp. 159-62 and pp. 171-78.
- <sup>3</sup> *Carmen* was cleverly subtitled “revista chica de poesía española,” and the first page of the inaugural issue of *Lola* introduced itself with the following verses: “Sin temor a los líos que la armen / desenvuelta, resuelta y española, / aquí tenéis a *Lola* / que dirá lo que debe callar *Carmen*. / No estaba bien—señores, no se alarmen— / una muchacha—la inocente—sola.”
- <sup>4</sup> The three books, published in 1927 by the Revista de Occidente, were Diego’s *Antología poética en honor de Góngora*, José María de Cossío’s edition of Góngora’s romances, and Alonso’s edition of the *Soledades*. Diego lists the planned books in his “Crónica” in *Lola* 1. Diego printed seven issues (or rather five, since two were double issues) in 1927 and 1928.
- <sup>5</sup> Rogelio Reyes gives a thorough account of the evenings in “‘Un buen azar que resultó destino’: el homenaje a Góngora en el Ateneo de Sevilla,” in *Una densa polimorfía de belleza: Góngora y el grupo del 27*, ed. Andrés Soria Olmedo (Sevilla: Junta de Andalucía, 2007), pp. 171-87.
- <sup>6</sup> Dámaso Alonso, “Una generación poética (1920-1936),” in *Poetas españoles contemporáneos*, 3rd ed., (Madrid: Gredos, 1969), p. 157. Alonso first published the essay in *Finisterre* in 1948. In the original: “mi idea de la generación a que (como segundón) pertenezco, va unida a esa excursión sevillana.”
- <sup>7</sup> The poem also provides the title for an exhibit held in 2010 in Madrid and Seville, accompanied by an excellent catalogue: Andrés Soria Olmedo, ed., *La generación del 27: ¿Aquel momento ya es una leyenda?* (Madrid: SECC/Junta de Andalucía/Residencia de Estudiantes, 2010).
- <sup>8</sup> See, for example, Gabriel Núñez Ruiz and Mar Campos Fernández Fígares, *Cómo nos enseñaron a leer: manuales de literatura en España 1850-1960* (Madrid: Akal, 2005), p. 184: “Y aquí reside una de las novedades más destacadas [del manual de Valbuena Prat]: la inclusión del término barroco de manera completamente natural...[como] una categoría más de la historia de la literatura que define principalmente el estilo de don Luis de Góngora.” Ángel Valbuena Prat’s *Historia de la literatura española*, vol. 2 (Barcelona: Gili, 1937) includes a chapter titled “Góngora y la lírica barroca,” pp. 137-68.
- <sup>9</sup> See Emilio Orozco, *Manierismo y barroco* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1975), which includes his 1951 lecture *Lección permanente del Barroco español*.
- <sup>10</sup> Gregorio Morán, *El maestro en el erial: Ortega y Gasset y la cultura del franquismo* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1998), p. 15: “Muchas cosas, algunas aún por determinar[,] nacieron con el franquismo y no murieron con él. Es lógico, fue el régimen más largo y más duro de la historia moderna de España; no iba a pasar eso a humo de pajas.”
- <sup>11</sup> Until the 1980s, it seems, he received far less attention than Lorca, Alberti, Aleixandre, Cernuda, Guillén, or Salinas. José-Carlos Mainer noted as late as 1980 that Gerardo Diego “no abunda en bibliografía.” José-Carlos Mainer, *La edad de plata (1902-1939): Ensayo de interpretación de un proceso cultural* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1999), p. 375. Broad-based works about the time or Generation of 1927 did however discuss him.
- <sup>12</sup> Elsa Dehennin, *La résurgence de Gongora et la Génération poétique de 1927* (Paris: Didier, 1962), p. 180. Aurora Egido likewise notes that Diego possessed “una clara conciencia de que formaba parte de la Historia de la Literatura.” *El Barroco de los modernos* (Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid, 2008), p. 190.
- <sup>13</sup> Gabriele Morelli has studied the impact of the book in *Historia y recepción de la Antología poética de Gerardo Diego* (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 1997). Cátedra recently reissued Diego’s 1932 anthology together with the much expanded 1934 edition under the title *Poesía española [Antologías]*, ed. José Teruel (Madrid: Cátedra, 2007).
- <sup>14</sup> Pablo Neruda, *Canto general* (Barcelona: DeBolsillo, 2003). In the poem “A Miguel Hernández, Asesinado en los presidios de España” (p. 352) Neruda writes: “Que sepan los malditos que hoy incluyen tu nombre / en sus libros, los Dámasos, los Gerardos, los hijos / de perra / silenciosos cómplices del verdugo, / que no será

- borrado tu martirio, y tu muerte / caerá sobre toda su luna de cobardes.” Andrés Trapiello devotes a few pages of *Las armas y las letras* (Barcelona: Destino, 2011) to Diego’s attitudes during the war, and in particular to Juan Larrea’s unsuccessful attempts to persuade him to side with the Republic (pp. 403-405). Diego’s biographers remain silent on the war years: see, for example, Arturo del Villar, *Gerardo Diego* (Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura, 1981), p. 46, or Antonio Gallego Morell, *Vida y poesía de Gerardo Diego* (Barcelona: Aedos, 1956), pp. 55-56.
- <sup>15</sup> Francisco Umbral, *Las palabras de la tribu (de Rubén Darío a Cela)* (Madrid: Planeta, 1994), p. 167. Umbral calls him “el único declaradamente franquista del 27, y eso lo llevaba como el pecado original.” He then reconstructs from memory a comment Diego made to him: “Yo sé, Umbral, que no se me estudia ni se me valora como a los otros, por razones políticas, pero yo elegí este bando porque soy católico ante todo y aquí estaban los católicos.”
- <sup>16</sup> Trapiello, *Las armas y las letras*. For example, about the *Gaceta Literaria* he writes (p. 41): “La primera parte de esa guerra civil en España tuvo lugar...en *La Gaceta Literaria*.” The fact that both communism and fascism could find vociferous support among the contributors to the journal, sometimes no doubt in the same person, points to a landscape that was confusing and confused, and anything but apolitical.
- <sup>17</sup> Gerardo Diego, “Un escorzo de Góngora,” in *Crítica y poesía* (Madrid: Júcar, 1984), pp. 99-100. In the original: “No necesita, de cierto, el genial imaginero castellano, tan verídicamente moderno por otra parte, de estas proyecciones sesgadas para aparecérsenos dinámicamente vivo y actual, brindándonos en cada detalle sugerencias magistrales. Pero ¿por qué cerrar los ojos a esa otra visión—falsa si queréis, aunque ‘allí está,’ pero abierta a deliciosas entrevisiones exactas—que una dichosa casualidad nos depara?” Perhaps the second “pero” in the second sentence is an error.
- <sup>18</sup> Gerardo Diego, “Nuevo escorzo de Góngora,” in *Crítica y poesía*, p. 114: “hay que entenderlos en lo que ellos quisieron decir sin inventarles sentidos ni desfigurarlos.”
- <sup>19</sup> The pun is Diego’s, but he only claims to have linked Larrea to the rest of the group: “Juan Larrea, por ejemplo, no pertenece, no se une a la península del 27 sino por un delgadísimo istmo que se llama Gerardo.” Gerardo Diego, “Del modernismo al Ultra, al Creacionismo y al Grupo Poético del 27,” [1975] in *Crítica y poesía*, p. 388:
- <sup>20</sup> In 1941 he writes: “Yo no soy responsable de que me atraigan simultáneamente el campo y la ciudad, la tradición y el futuro; de que me encante el arte nuevo y me extasie el viejo; de que me vuelva loco la retórica hecha, y me torne más loco el capricho de volver a hacérmela—nueva—para mi uso particular e intransferible.” Gerardo Diego, *Antología de sus versos (1918-1983)*, ed. Francisco Javier Díez de Revenga (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1996), p. 67.
- <sup>21</sup> José Luis Bernal, “Creacionismo y neogongorismo en la poesía ‘adrede’ de Gerardo Diego,” in *Gerardo Diego y la vanguardia hispánica*, ed. José Luis Bernal (Cáceres: Universidad de Extremadura, 1993), pp 44-45.
- <sup>22</sup> Gerardo Diego, *Manuel de espumas. Versos humanos*, ed. Milagros Arizmendi (Madrid: Cátedra, 1996), p. 84.
- <sup>23</sup> The faucet as “love mechanism” may also carry overtly sexual overtones, but such a reading strikes me as out of place for the normally chaste Diego.
- <sup>24</sup> Diego, *Manuel de espumas. Versos humanos*, p. 127.
- <sup>25</sup> Gerardo Diego, “La vuelta a la estrofa,” *Carmen* 1 (December 1927), and also in *Obras completas*, vol. 6, p. 183. In the original: “Para ellos, la estrofa, la sonata o la cuadrícula eran una obligación. Para nosotros, no. Hemos ya aprendido a ser libres. Sabemos que esto es un equilibrio, y nada más. Y es seguro que sentiremos muchas veces la bella y libre gana de volar fuera de la jaula, bien calculado el peso, el motor y la esencia para no perdernos como una nube a la deriva.”
- <sup>26</sup> Miguel Ángel García, *El Veintisiete en vanguardia: hacia una lectura de histórica de las poéticas moderna y contemporánea* (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2001), p. 17: “Góngora fue más la consecuencia que la causa del purismo.”
- <sup>27</sup> Consider for instance the following description of a diamond ring: “Prisión del nácar era articulado / de mi firmeza un émulo luciente, un diámante, ingeniosamente / en oro también él aprisionado.” Rearranged, the syntax becomes more transparent: “Un diamante (ingeniosamente en oro aprisionado) era un émulo luciente de mi firmeza, [y una] prisión del nácar articulado [i.e., el dedo].” Many of the images—the ring as prison for the diamond, the diamond as prison for the finger, the finger as “knuckled nacre,” the ring as competing with the speaker’s firmness—are conventional, but the density and intricacy of their combination is not.
- <sup>28</sup> Luis Cernuda, “Góngora y el gongorismo,” in *Prosa completa* (Barcelona: Barral, 1975), p. 1423. The text is dated 1937 and appears incomplete and unpublished. In the original: “Góngora es el único caso de una

- gloria al revés en nuestra historia. Todos saben, de oídas, que Cervantes es un gran escritor... Pero a Góngora se le conoce por muchos precisamente por no ser un buen escritor.”
- <sup>29</sup> Dámaso Alonso provides a useful summary of eighteenth and nineteenth critical appreciation of Góngora in “Góngora entre sus dos centenarios,” in *Cuatro poetas españoles* (Madrid: Gredos, 1962, pp. 49-77). For a more recent take on the topic, see Núñez and Campos, *Cómo nos enseñaron a leer*.
- <sup>30</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, “Ortega y Gasset y Góngora,” *La Gaceta Literaria* 1:13, p. 1.
- <sup>31</sup> For an excellent discussion of Ortega’s essay on dehumanization, see Andrés Soria Olmedo, *Vanguardismo y crítica literaria en España (1910-1930)* (Madrid: Istmo, 1988).
- <sup>32</sup> Juan Cano Ballesta, *La poesía española entre pureza y revolución (1920-1936)* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1996). The first edition is from 1972; I have removed italics in the quote: “De una poesía que brotaba de lo individual se buscó otra que reflejara el hecho social... Presiones del momento histórico arrastraron a la general politización de la poesía y de las letras, mientras sólo unos pocos seguían defendiendo la nítida distinción entre poesía y política.” For another account of this process, see Anthony L. Geist, *La poética de la generación del 27 y las revistas literarias: de la vanguardia al compromiso (1918-1936)* (Barcelona: Labor/Guadarrama, 1980).
- <sup>33</sup> Gerardo Diego, “La nueva arte poética española (I),” delivered as a lecture in Buenos Aires and published in *Verbum* 72 in 1929. *Obras completas*, vol. 6 (Madrid: Alfaguara, 2000), p. 202. Bergamín and Alberti also later downplayed the event’s importance.
- <sup>34</sup> Miguel Ángel García has made a compelling argument for reading Góngora and poetic purity as a part of an ideology of bourgeois modernization. See *El Veintisiete en vanguardia*, especially pp. 88-98.
- <sup>35</sup> The quotation comes from Theodor Adorno, “Commitment,” in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 80.
- <sup>36</sup> Jorge Guillén, “Valle-Inclán y el 98,” *La Pluma* 32 (1923), reprinted in Jorge Guillén, *Hacia Cántico: Escritos de los años 20*, ed. K. M. Sibbald (Barcelona: Ariel, 1980), p. 379; here quoted in García, *El Veintisiete en vanguardia*, p. 75. In the original: “Necesito ser *real* como un europeo cualquiera. No me place, hipotético, sentirme perdido, egregiamente perdido en la irrealidad de una España demasiado planteada como problema. ¡El problema de España! ¡Qué cansancio, qué fastidio!”
- <sup>37</sup> Gerardo Diego, “Minuta y poesía,” *Alfar* 4:24 (December 1924), p. 3: “No tengo presente el texto, pero recuerdo que utilizaba una imagen cu-linaria, comparando la poesía de aquellos hierofantes con la adoptada hoy por muchos jóvenes, y confesando el empalago que a un paladar metódico había de causar tan larga ostentación de entremeses y de postres, en una refacción ayuna de pan y escasa de sólidos manjares. Y esto sería justo si esa poesía pre-tendiera alimentarnos. Pero su propósito es muy otro.”
- <sup>38</sup> Diego, “Minuta y poesía,” p. 23: “Pero lo que interesa en este banquete—como en todos—no es la hora difícil e inevitable de la digestión sino la efímera y sibarita del placer sávido.... Gustar por gustar. Ese debe ser nuestro lema. Tomando la palabra “gustar” en su sentido pleno—sensualidad e inteligencia en su acepción del siglo XVII, del siglo de Góngora y del padre Gracián.... Ha dicho Antonio Machado: ‘Con la pala-bra se hace música, pintura y mil cosas más; pero, sobre todo, se habla. He aquí una verdad de Perogrullo que comenzábamos a olvidar.’ Cierito. Pero también se canta. Un canto sin música. El verdadero canto. Lo peor es cuando el canto todavía ‘quiere decir,’ quiere ser útil, además de deleitar por su sola melodía.”
- <sup>39</sup> Diego, “Minuta y poesía,” p. 23: “En cuanto al pan, querido Eugenio d’Ors, en mi régimen lo tengo prohibido no lo echo de menos ni aun para nutrirme. Lo utilizo solo como palanca para que la tajada no se escurra.”
- <sup>40</sup> Eugenio d’Ors, *Nuevo glosario*, vol. 1 (1920-1926) (Madrid: Aguilar, 1947), p. 774: “Un poema todo imágenes es una comida sin entremeses y sin pan. Una comida exclusivamente compuesta de platos fuertes y en que, además, el manjar de cada plato carece de huesos y espinas. Confuso resultará necesariamente el saboreo de un conjunto así; que no da, en verdad, la espina nuevo gusto al pescado; pero evita que el gusto del pescado se desvanezca, miserablemente perdido.”
- <sup>41</sup> D’Ors, *Nuevo glosario*, vol. 1, pp. 1003-04: “Pero lo que la sensibilidad más actual—reaccionando contra las tendencias impresionísticas de la trasguerra, todavía bastante tercas en España—encuentra a faltar en todo un orden de poesía no es precisamente la sustancia, *sino los huesos*. Encuentra a faltar ciertas partes ‘opacas, duras, neutras’ de la expresión literaria. El mínimo de armadura conceptual que ha permitido siempre a las creaciones literarias de gran estirpe una posición erecta sobre los campos de la gloria... Esto vuelven a sospechar los recién llegados a la poesía. Los más avisados, entre ellos, ya obran en consecuencia.”

- <sup>42</sup> Gerardo Diego, “Retórica y poesía,” *Revista de Occidente* 17 (November 1924), in *Obras Completas*, vol. 6, p. 177. In the original: “No se le han de reprochar las continuas metáforas. Las que nos estorban son las expresiones directas, las verdades que, en su verso, se agazapan en consoladora minoría.”
- <sup>43</sup> Miguel de Unamuno, *Cómo se hace una novela* (Buenos Aires: Alba, 1927), p. 112: “Todo ese homenaje a Góngora, por las circunstancias en que se ha rendido, por el estado actual de mi pobre patria, me parece un tácito homenaje de servidumbre a la tiranía, un acto servil y en algunos, no en todos ¡claro! un acto de pordiosería. Y toda esa poesía que celebran no es más que mentira. Mentira, mentira, mentira...! El mismo Góngora era un mentiroso.”
- <sup>44</sup> Ernesto Giménez Caballero, “Gerardo Diego, poeta fascista,” *El Sol*, July 26, 1927, p. 1; quoted in Gabriele Morelli, *Gerardo Diego y el III centenario de Góngora (correspondencia inédita)* (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 1997), p. 217. In the original: “la vuelta poemática a la décima, al soneto y a la silva...es un regreso al antiguo nacionalismo. Es una vuelta a los valores consuetudinarios. Es una reacción.”
- <sup>45</sup> Not only in Diego’s scuffles. Anthony Geist gives a very good account of the polemics of the 1920s in *De la vanguardia al compromiso*, especially pp. 119-42. See also Cano Ballesta, *La poesía española entre pureza y revolución*, pp. 169-91.
- <sup>46</sup> Giménez Caballero, “Gerardo Diego, poeta fascista,” p. 217. Antoni Maura i Montaner served as prime minister of Spain multiples times during the first decades of the century, and tried to institute a series of political reforms from above; he is also remembered for severely repressing the Barcelona revolts of 1909 known as the *Setmana Tràgica*. Here is Giménez Caballero’s text in the original: “[es] lo que Mussolini ha logrado en Italia. Y lo que proféticamente predecía Maura entre nosotros (Maura, profeta de vanguardia): ‘la revolución desde arriba.’ Es decir: el vino revolucionario en odres tradicionales. La Pirueta en el Orden. La acción directa en el conservadurismo. Los temas poéticos de audacia estupenda en la formalidad arcaica de una décima. [La] aceptación de la ley escrita...es exaltar como revolución osada la vuelta a Góngora. A un escandaloso, que es, sobre todo, un castizo. Nada ya de internacionalismos bolcheviques. Los escándalos, que sean de cepa definida. Con muchos colores nacionales. De ahí ese aire de Junta Patriótica y de Somatén que ha tenido el Comité gongorino. Ese Comité que ha realizado actos de puro corte fascista; de intransigencia violenta... No hay, pues, que extrañarse si la gente—ante ese pronunciamiento católico, dictatorial, barroco, arrebatado y pasadista—haya creído ver en él una poesía maurista, reaccionaria...”
- <sup>47</sup> Ernesto López-Parra, “Los innovadores,” *El Liberal*, July 31, 1927, p. 5; quoted in Morelli, *Gerardo Diego y el III centenario de Góngora*, p. 220. In the original: “no eran más que señoritos luises con aficiones irrefrenables al ‘deporte’ de las letras. No sintieron nunca la emoción ciudadana ni otearon la responsabilidad de su destino.”
- <sup>48</sup> López-Parra, “Los innovadores.” All quotations are from pp. 220-21: “Todo esto da un tufillo de vulgaridad burguesa de señoritos provincianos. ¡Buenos innovadores, estos rezagados ‘pollos’ mauristas, que en otros tiempos hubieran sido diputado provinciales o presidentes de algún comité de distrito.”
- <sup>49</sup> Diego, “El señorito Góngora, o una víctima del fascismo,” included in the second half of the “Crónica del centenario de Góngora,” *Lola 2* (January 1928); also quoted in Morelli, *Gerardo Diego y el III centenario de Góngora*, pp. 223-24. In the original: “Conste, pues, que no soy fascista, ni en política ni en arte ni en nada. Que soy igualmente ajeno a todo maurismo y toda revolución, desde arriba o desde abajo. Que ‘la pirueta en el orden’ no ha sido nunca mi lema, sino todo lo contrario, sabiendo entenderlo en cierto sentido: ‘el orden en la pirueta.’”
- <sup>50</sup> Diego, “El señorito Góngora,” p. 224: “cada uno de los jóvenes poetas y escritores de España, aun de los más amigos de Góngora, tienen su modo de pensar y no coinciden más que en cierto programa mínimo, más que nada de escrúpulos morales y de exclusiones literarias. Mis opiniones no las comparte totalmente nadie, y me paso la vida riñendo teóricamente con mis mejores amigos.”
- <sup>51</sup> Diego, “El señorito Góngora,” pp. 223-24: “Algunos—no lo pudimos evitar—somos de provincias. Reconozco que esto es una pena.... Pero ahí tiene usted, por ejmpelo al propio G.C. en cuya prosa se respira—o se padece—el característico tonillo plebeyo de los madriles.... Conste para terminar que Góngora fue un señorito, un voluntario de la aristocracia, un provinciano, y —en el sentido en que usted lo emplea—seguramente también un estéril y un selecto intelectual, un elegante.”
- <sup>52</sup> The first lines of the *Soledades* describe the shipwrecked youth’s beauty by comparing him to Ganymede, the handsome youth from Greek mythology whom Zeus ravished and made into the cup-bearer to the gods. Verses 34-41 are especially suggestive: “Desnudo el joven, cuanto ya el vestido / Oceano ha bebido, / restituir le hace a las arenas; / y al Sol lo extiende luego, / que lamiéndolo apenas / su dulce lengua de templado fuego, / lento lo embiste, y con süave estilo, / la menor onda chupa al menor hilo.”

- <sup>53</sup> Diego, “Carta a Marichalar,” *Lola 3-4* (February 1928); also quoted in Morelli, *Gerardo Diego y el III centenario de Góngora*, pp. 100-101: “Y es que en España, querido Marichalar, no se comprende la broma o la sátira inocente, festiva, alegre, desinteresada; sino el ataque injusto, envidioso, sectario, amargado y barriendo para casa. Y usted conoce bien algún caso de falsa interpretación de algún supuesto agravio. A mí me venía dando vergüenza el espectáculo de la juventud española, de entre los 20 y los 35, adulando, lisonjeando a los ‘maestros,’ posibles y, en algún caso, reales protectores de los susodichos decrepitos jóvenes aprovechados. Pero nosotros—algunos de nosotros—hemos pecado de demasiada prudencia, coretesía y silencio, si en esto cabe pecar, que yo creo que sí.”
- <sup>54</sup> Gerardo Diego, “La nueva poesía española (II),” in *Obras completas*, vol. 6, pp. 218-19: “Alberti se ha dado cuenta a tiempo del peligro que encerraba la limitación de una poesía exclusivamente andaluza, y mientras él—y Lorca por otros caminos—halla un nuevo rumbo para sus dotes poéticas, la poesía española se puebla de una plaga de cancioncillas más o menos marineras o andaluzas, y de romancesseudogitanos, como hace pocos años de poemas maquinísticos y helicoidales.”
- <sup>55</sup> Federico García Lorca, “Imagen poética de don Luis de Góngora,” in *Obras completas*, vol. 3, ed. Miguel García-Posada (Barcelona, Galaxia Gutenberg, 1996), p. 58: “Y cansado de castellanos y de ‘color local’ leía su Virgilio con una fruición de hombre sediento de elegancia. Vio el idioma castellano lleno de cojeras, de claros, y con su instinto estético [flagrante], empezó a construir una nueva torre de gemas y piedras inventadas, que irritó el orgullo de los castellanos en sus palacios de adobes.”
- <sup>56</sup> Dámaso Alonso, “Escila y Caribdis de la literatura española,” in *Estudios y ensayos gongorinos* (Madrid: Gredos, 1955), p. 15, 14. In the original. “Y por ser realista y popular quedaba consecuentemente ligada [la literatura española] al suelo, al terruño, a la localidad, e imposibilitada para vuelos universales: era un literatura localista.” The second quote: “debía haber exaltado lo universal y selecto de la literatura de España.” Alonso’s own solution, however, is only marginally less simplistic than the one he rails against: he claims Spain has two alternating tendencies, one popular and one sophisticated.
- <sup>57</sup> Gerardo Diego, “Defensa de la poesía,” *Carmen 5* (April 1928); also in *Obras completas*, vol. 6., p. 191: “El poeta todo lo más no debe ser más que un cónsul de la Poesía. Un sencillo y puntual burócrata de sus recados y pasaportes célicos. Salud en él a la bandera—o al asta, porque la bandera sólo se cuelga en los raros momentos festivos, ondeantes, creadores—de su país incartografiable.”
- <sup>58</sup> Diego, “Defensa de la poesía,” p. 187. In the original: “La Poesía existe para el poeta en todas partes, excepto en sus propios versos. Es la invisible perseguida que llega siempre demasiado pronto a la cita, como los amigos excesivamente puntuales que ya no nos pueden esperar. En todo poema ‘ha estado’ la Poesía, pero ya no está. Sentimos el calor reciente de su ausencia y el modelado tibio de su carne desnuda.... Creer lo que no vimos dicen que es la Fe. Creer lo que no veremos: esto es la Poesía.” These lines appeared in 1932 in Diego’s “Poética,” the declaration of poetics that preceded his poems in the anthology he edited (discussed below).
- <sup>59</sup> Gerardo Diego, “Posibilidades creacionistas,” *Cervantes* (October 1919); also in *Obras completas*, vol. 6, p. 168: “La nueva proporción sería esta: cubismo es a pintura tradicional lo que a la Poesía tradicional es X. Así, *a priori*, habíamos de concluir la posibilidad, la existencia virtual de esa X, o Poesía = Música; a buscarla, pues, nuevos Leverrièrs [*sic*] de nuestro Neptuno.” In the mid-nineteenth century Urbain Le Verrier correctly deduced the existence of Neptune before it had been observed.
- <sup>60</sup> Diego, “Posibilidades creacionistas,” p. 168: “El creacionismo había dado el paso decisivo purificando y extrayendo de la sucia mezcla retórica la imagen, como instrumento único, como célula primordial e íntegra.”
- <sup>61</sup> Diego, “Posibilidades creacionistas,” p. 169: “El creador de imágenes no hace ya prosa disfrazada; empieza a crear por el placer de crear (poeta-creador-niño-dios); no describe, construye; no evoca, sugiere.”
- <sup>62</sup> Susana Rivera, “Gerardo Diego: conservador del museo lingüístico y terrorista literario,” *Anales de la Literatura Española Contemporánea*, 24:1-2 (1999), p. 159. In the original: “El teclado queda así metaforizado en un diminuto firmamento; pero a la vez el firmamento se convierte imaginariamente en un inmenso teclado cósmico.”
- <sup>63</sup> Diego, “Posibilidades creacionistas,” p. 170: “No explica nada; es intraducible a la prosa. Es la Poesía, en el más puro sentido de la palabra. Es también, y exactamente, la Música, que es sustancialmente el arte de las imágenes múltiples; todo valor disuasivo, escolástico, filosófico, anecdótico, es esencialmente ajeno a ella.”
- <sup>64</sup> Diego, “Posibilidades creacionistas,” p. 170: “Por supuesto, estamos muy lejos de pretender esa imitación estúpida, esa competencia en el placer meramente orgánico, buscada por las escuelas del verso sonoro,

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isócrono y bailable. Para rivalizar con ella hemos de valernos de nuestros propios medios, si no queremos caer en el ridículo.”

- <sup>65</sup> Diego, “La nueva poesía española (II),” p. 219. Italics in the original: “*La pureza de una poesía está en razón inversa de su traductibilidad a la prosa y en razón directa de su traductibilidad a otro idioma.*”
- <sup>66</sup> Diego, “La nueva poesía española (I),” pp. 193-94. The last line may be a veiled barb aimed at Ortega, who characterized “young art” as frivolous and intranscendent. In the original: “Saber que la poesía es un problema y que es un problema sin solución es saber dos cosas que ignoraban nuestros abuelos, y que empezaban a sospechar nuestros padres. Ambas verdades las saben, las poseen de mente y de corazón los poetas españoles del presente; y por ser así...podrán ser mejores o peores, diestros o torpes...pero en ningún caso frívolos, vanos o irreverentes.”
- <sup>67</sup> Not only is it difficult to read, but for many years it was also difficult to find. The “Amor” section appeared in the centennial issue of *Litoral* (5-6-7) in 1927. It seems the first complete edition of the poem is from 1930, though it consisted of only twelve copies. I have quoted from a facsimile of this edition (Santander: Sociedad Menéndez Pelayo, 1996). The *Fábula* later saw light in Mexico, in the journal *Contemporáneos*, and was released there in 1932 in a limited run of 50 signed copies. It later appeared in the anthologies *Versos escogidos* (Madrid: Gredos, 1970) and in *Poemas mayores* (Madrid: Alianza, 1980), missing different stanzas each time. A number of critics seem to have quoted from an incomplete version.
- <sup>68</sup> Gerardo Diego, *Versos escogidos* (Madrid: Gredos, 1970), p. 67: “parte de la crítica, incluso de la más benévola y por otra parte aguda, no ha entendido mi poema.” He adds: “Váyase por otros, poetas o críticos, que me han halagado demostrando haber comprendido y valorado mi intención.” I do not know who this latter comment refers to; perhaps the critic Antonio Rodríguez Moñino, who in the 1940s wrote a fourth “tempo” for the poem (“Pasión y muerte del arquitecto”), which Diego claimed showed a careful understanding of his original work. See the documents collected in *Gerardo Diego, poeta mayor de Cantabria, y Fábula de Equis y Zeda: homenaje 1896-1996*, ed. Rafael Gómez Tudanca (Santander: Biblioteca Menéndez Pelayo, 1996).
- <sup>69</sup> Dámaso Alonso, “Gerardo Diego (desde la altura de su ‘alondra’),” in *Poetas españoles contemporáneos* (Madrid: Gredos, 1969), p. 239. The article is dated 1943. In the original: “Lo que hay de gongorismo en su poesía es sólo un delicioso casi *pastiche* (por lo que respecta al movimiento y al impulso rítmico); esa *Fábula de Equis y Zeda* [*sic*], que es como una de las muchas ‘metamorfosis’ de la poesía barroca, en la que sobre la anécdota hubiera triunfado el puro gozo verbal e imaginativo. Nada más que eso, o muy poco más.”
- <sup>70</sup> Andrés Sánchez Robayna, “Un poema insustituible,” *ABC* (October 4, 1986), p. 57.
- <sup>71</sup> Those that have included J. Bernardo Pérez, whose *Fases de la poesía creacionista de Gerardo Diego* (Valencia: Albatros, 1989) contains an excellent chapter analyzing the poem; José Luis Bernal, who discusses it at length in “Creacionismo y neogongorismo”; and Elsa Dehennin, who studies it in *La résurgence de Gongora*. See also Rafael Gómez Tudanca’s article in *Gerardo Diego, poeta mayor de Cantabria*; Susana Rivera, “Gerardo Diego: conservador del museo lingüístico y terrorista literario”; Reyes Lázaro Gurtubay, “Luis de Góngora en un poema fundamental de Gerardo Diego: *La fábula de Equis y Zeda*,” *Cincinnati Romance Review* 8 (1989), pp. 91-100; and more recently Carlos Peinado Elliot, “Entre el Barroco y la Vanguardia: *La fábula de Equis y Zeda* de G. Diego,” *Philologia Hispalensis* 20 (2006) pp. 175-204. Special mention should be made of Gaspar Garrote Bernal, who has attempted an ambitious line-by-line commentary of the sort that Diego hoped for: “Para la salcedocoronización de la *Fábula de Equis y Zeda*,” *Dicenda: Cuadernos de Filología Hispánica* 25 (2007), pp. 83-103.
- <sup>72</sup> Dehennin, *La résurgence de Gongora*, p. 190.
- <sup>73</sup> Diego, *Versos escogidos*, p. 68: “En el fondo, lo que yo hacía era lo mismo que [en] aquellos años hacían Ravel, Strawinski o Falla.” José Luis Bernal gives an account of Diego’s fondness for music and architecture as metaphors for poetry in “Creacionismo y neogongorismo,” p. 56.
- <sup>74</sup> This also suggests he is architect-musician from the “Exposición.” The poem never identifies the two, but Equis’s use of the geometrical-musical vocabulary signals this possibility: “Yo en fiel teorema de volumen rosa / te expondré el caso de la mandolina.”
- <sup>75</sup> Equis is also twice described as a “río en pie,” an upright river descending in a foaming rapids. In Góngora (and Ovid), Galatea’s lover Acis is crushed by the jealous Polyphemus and transformed into a river; in Diego’s tale, Equis seems to contain both Polyphemus and Acis, the spurned lover and the victim of a violent death.
- <sup>76</sup> Ricardo Gullón, “Gerardo Diego y el creacionismo,” *Ínsula* 354, p. 10: “Intentar una lectura ‘lógica’ del poema no tendría sentido.”

- <sup>77</sup> Diego, *Versos escogidos*, pp. 67-68: “Pero tengo que decir que el gongorismo de la *Fábula* es sólo de fachada. Por dentro es un poema absolutamente de nuestro siglo y su poética nada debe a la de don Luis, ni siquiera su retórica o sintaxis.” Further down he adds: “Ni en el primer tiempo ni en el último de esta sonata, compuesta con técnica de composición musical, ni en su imaginismo arbitrario y atrevidamente irracional y moderno[,] ni en ningún otro aspecto, se recuerda para nada a la poesía del XVII.”
- <sup>78</sup> Lorca, “Imagen poética de don Luis de Góngora,” p. 73: “Góngora tuvo un problema en su vida poética y lo resolvió. Hasta entonces la empresa se tenía por irrealizable. Y es: hacer un gran poema lírico para oponerlo a los grandes poemas épicos que se cuentan por docenas. Pero ¿cómo mantener una tensión lírica pura durante largos escuadrones de versos? ¿Y cómo hacerlo sin narración? Si le daba a la narración, a la anécdota toda su importancia, se le convertía en épica al menor descuido. Y si no narraba nada, el poema se rompía por mil partes sin unidad, ni sentido.”
- <sup>79</sup> Diego, *Versos escogidos*, p. 68: “Tampoco mi *Fábula* es ninguna broma, sino un trabajo serio y por momentos trágico.”
- <sup>80</sup> Dámaso Alonso, “Góngora entre sus dos centenarios,” in *Cuatro poetas españoles* (Madrid: Gredos, 1962), p. 64: “[E]s preciso que el lector [of Diego’s account] distinga hechos que tuvieron una realidad objetiva y hechos pensados sólo de una manera poética por Gerardo Diego. La quema de libros antigongorinos, de que allí se habla, no tuvo más que una realidad simbólico-intencional.”
- <sup>81</sup> Fernand Valls, *La enseñanza de la literatura en el franquismo (1936-1951)* (Barcelona: Bosch, 1983), p. 3: “Son los años en los que el Estado franquista utiliza más íntegramente la educación para reproducirse y afianzarse ideológicamente.” See also Núñez and Campos, p. 192.
- <sup>82</sup> José María Castellet, “¿Existe hoy una cultura española?” in Carlos Castilla del Pino, ed., *La cultura bajo el franquismo* (Barcelona: DeBolsillo, 1977), p. 12: “la cultura fue, desde siempre, para los sublevados contra la República, terreno enemigo. Como tal tenía que ser militarmente ocupado, del mismo modo que tenían que ser desmantelados los efectivos enemigos.”
- <sup>83</sup> Morán, *El maestro en el exilio*, p. 97: “Ante el aislamiento intelectual de la España de 1945 la respuesta va a ser ‘españolidad’; un remedo de imperialismo cultural que no será otra cosa que la autarquía intelectual. [§] En unos casos se tratará de ‘recuperaciones’ intelectuales... En otros habrá necesidad de inventarse un pasado intelectual, ocultando unos datos y amalgamando otros, para hacer del régimen, nacido de la victoria sobre la República, el heredero de unas seculares tradiciones reaccionarias. Así, llegarán a instrumentalizarse períodos tan complejos como el de la Contrarreforma, sobrevalorando los siglos XVI y parte del XVII, pero también, como veremos, con movimientos mucho más cercanos en el tiempo, como el de la denominada ‘generación del 98’ y, años más tarde, el grupo poético ‘del 27.’”
- <sup>84</sup> Elsewhere (p. 15) Morán states: “A la corriente de opinión que considera absolutamente inane desde un punto de vista intelectual el periodo franquista, conviene refrescarle la memoria. El concepto de generación del 98 con el que trabajamos nació ahí. Un determinado sesgo para interpretar entre otros a Antonio Machado, también. El vaciado de un conjunto de poetas que alguien inmortalizó bajo el lema de ‘generación del 27,’ también. Una idea del catolicismo como forma de existencia, también. Cierta desdén por el exilio intelectual, es obvio que también.”
- <sup>85</sup> Florentino García de Andoin, *Literatura nacional y extranjera* (Madrid: Editorial Bibliográfica Española, 1943), quoted in Núñez and Campos, *Cómo nos enseñaron a leer*, p. 193: “Cuanto había de literatura sana y vigorosa en España se puso enfrente de Góngora apenas le vieron despeñarse en las tenebrosidades del *Polifemo* y *Las Soledades* con un poema sin asunto, sin poesía interior, sin afectos, sin ideas, una apariencia o sombra de poema enteramente privado de alma.”
- <sup>86</sup> Núñez and Campos, *Cómo nos enseñaron a leer*, p. 194. Textbooks from the 1940s apparently never missed an opportunity to condemn Góngora and Quevedo in the most overwrought terms, as Fernando Valls also shows in *La enseñanza de la literatura en el franquismo (1936-1951)* (Madrid: Bosch, 1983). Valls writes (p. 130): “No parece que los jesuitas, dominadores de una importante parcela en la educación española, tuvieran excesivo aprecio por el culteranismo y el conceptismo.... El P. Cayuela [one Jesuit author] se refiere a ambos conceptos calificándolos de ‘alarde pedantesco de erudición indigesta’ y achacándoles su ‘falta de seriedad y de sensatez y de equilibrio en el gusto público, más aficionado a lo raro y rebuscado, a lo charro y churrigueresco, que a lo puramente clásico.’ Para el citado jesuita el culteranismo era ‘un fenómeno de muerte’ que apareció en España a la vez que ‘otro de vida’: la transformación de la poesía popular en manos de Lope.”
- <sup>87</sup> Orozco Díaz, *Introducción a Góngora* [1951] (Barcelona: Crítica, 1984). See, for example, this paragraph (p. 14) about Góngora’s dualism as national expression: “Su postura de hombre y su visión de poeta siempre le

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llevará a ofrecérselo todo en planos violentamente contrapuestos.... Estos dualismos, tan dentro del sentido de lucha de contrarios que entraña el barroquismo, y tan dentro de los constantes dualismos del alma nacional, explican bien por qué los españoles—como decía Vossler—‘se encuentran mejor y se expresan más libremente en el Barroco.’”

<sup>88</sup> Pere Gimferrer, “El pensamiento literario (1939-1976),” in *La cultura bajo el franquismo*, ed. Carlos Castilla del Pino (Barcelona: De Bolsillo, 1977), p. 109. The lack of italics is mine.

<sup>89</sup> Sultana Wahnón, *La estética literaria de la posguerra: del fascismo a la vanguardia* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), p. 239. In the original: “el simple reconocimiento de la existencia y la importancia de los movimientos y corrientes literaria que el falangismo había decidido, en un gesto de violencia histórica, considerar ‘periclitadas.’”

<sup>90</sup> See, for example, Cano Ballesta, *La poesía española entre pureza y revolución*, pp. 223-24, or Díez de Revenga, *Las vanguardias y la generación del 27*, pp. 31-34. Significantly, both books, from 1996 and 2004, respectively, are revisions of earlier works from 1972 and 1987. There seems to be no real attempt (among anyone) to discard the term, just to recognize repeatedly its insufficiencies.

<sup>91</sup> José-Carlos Mainer, *Historia, literatura, sociedad (y una coda española)* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2000), p. 336. He writes, “No sabemos cómo surge siquiera el nombre y cómo se elige el año: el 1925 sería buen candidato ya que tiene a su favor la Exposición de Artistas Ibéricos, la publicación de *La deshumanización del arte* e Ideas sobre la novela de Ortega (pero también de Literaturas europeas de vanguardia del ultraísta Guillermo de Torre) o la concesión del Premio Nacional de Literatura a Rafael Alberti y Gerardo Diego y el de música a la Sinfonietta de Ernesto Halffter. Y 1928, a cambio, fue año de capitales libros de poesía: el Romancero gitano y la primera edición de *Cántico* son dos referencias solidísimas. ¿Qué hay en 1927? Fue, sobre todo, año de revistas con notable dispersión geográfica que nos habla con elocuencia de la modernización de la vida de provincias bajo la dictadura de Primo de Rivera.”

<sup>92</sup> Andrew Anderson, in *El Veintisiete en tela de juicio* (Madrid: Gredos, 2007), cites numerous other lists, histories and anthologies that helped consolidate the list of ten names, but he singles out the importance of Diego’s anthology. Remarkably, the 1932 edition includes all ten poets now known as the Generation of 1927 and only seven others: Unamuno, both Machados, Juan Ramón Jiménez—all clearly of a different generation—as well as Juan Larrea, José Moreno Villa and Fernando Villalón. The greatly expanded 1934 edition nearly doubles the number of names. For an account of the anthology’s success and controversy, see Gabriele Morelli, *Historia y recepción de la Antología poética de Gerardo Diego* (Valencia: Pre-Textos, 1997).

<sup>93</sup> Anderson, *El Veintisiete en tela de juicio*, pp. 218-19. Here is the full passage in the original: “En la posguerra, pues, varios rótulos aspirantes se proponen, y durante un período reina cierta confusión y no existe ningún consenso crítico. Chabás es ahora el primero en lanzar la etiqueta ‘Generación de 1927,’ en 1944; D[ámaso] Alonso publica su ensayo ‘Una generación poética (1920-1936)’ en 1948; mientras que el primer caso del uso de la frase exacta en España que he podido localizar data de 1953. Gradualmente el marbete va ganando terreno, y con los años va implantándose cada vez más, dominando los títulos de antologías y figurando en programas de estudio de la enseñanza secundaria española. Poco después se implantará en las listas de lecturas de los departamentos de español de universidades extranjeras.”

<sup>94</sup> See note 6 above.

<sup>95</sup> Morán, *El maestro en el erial*, p. 418: “Nada de República, sino dictadura primorriverista; nada de Lopes ni de Quevedos, ni populismos ni compromisos. Góngora, el poeta por excelencia para poetas.... Fue un invento tan feliz que aún hoy cabe admirarse ante tan magnífica superchería.”

<sup>96</sup> Morán, *El maestro en el erial*, p. 421: “Habían pasado veinte años, y ¡qué veinte años! cuando Dámaso Alonso rescite los festejos de 1927 en Sevilla para convertirlos en emblemáticos.... Se exonera de cualquier pecado de politicización a la generación poética más comprometida de nuestra historia literaria.”

<sup>97</sup> Alonso, “Una generación poética,” p. 160: “Ninguno de estos poetas se preocupaba entonces de cuáles fueran las ideas políticas de los otros; varios hasta parecían ignorar que hubiera semejante cosa en el mundo.” He goes on to say that Lorca was the least political of all.

<sup>98</sup> Claudio Guillén stresses the bonds of friendship uniting the group in “Usos y abusos del 27 (Recuerdos de aquella generación),” *Revista de Occidente* 4:191 (April 1997), pp. 126-52. While the group undeniably had a certain social cohesion, this fact strikes me as incidental to their literary significance. Including friendship as a defining characteristic of the group—one of the older alternative designations is “la generación de los amigos”—limits the number of names included and, more importantly, further emphasizes the group’s supposed apoliticism.



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- <sup>99</sup> Alonso, “Una generación poética,” p. 161: “Los poetas de mi generación no abominan de los maestros ya famosos (Unamuno, los Machado, Juan Ramón Jiménez). Más aún: la filiación que respecto a Juan Ramón Jiménez tiene, en parte, el nuevo grupo, es evidente.” Jiménez had become a vocal opponent of the regime; Alonso’s goal seems to be not exactly to link his generation with politically acceptable figures, but to stress their lack of a break.
- <sup>100</sup> Alonso, “Góngora y la literatura contemporánea,” in *Estudios y ensayos gongorinos* (Madrid: Gredos, 1955), p. 537. The essay was written in 1927 and first published (and retouched) in 1932. In a footnote from 1954, he recants this claim. In the original: “La discrepancia actual parece (si no nos engaña la proximidad) la más profunda sima que ha separado, no dos gustos, sino dos conceptos de la literatura desde el Renacimiento, y aun tal vez desde los orígenes de la tradición grecolatina.”
- <sup>101</sup> Alonso, “Una generación poética,” p. 161: “no hay quiebra fundamental alguna (por muy distintos que sean los extremos) entre la revolución modernista y la poesía de hoy, de 1948.”
- <sup>102</sup> Alonso, “Una generación poética,” p. 163: “La diferencia entre ambos momentos es, sin embargo, enorme. Piénsese sólo esto: la generación de antes de 1936 [i.e. la del 27], aunque abierta a muchos influjos exteriores, está profundamente arraigada en la entraña nacional y literaria española; el complejo ultraísta se pone ropas hechas, y casi todas se han hecho fuera de casa.”
- <sup>103</sup> Díez de Revenga, *Las Vanguardias y la Generación del 27*, p. 51: “El genio personal de cada cual y el propio proyecto de búsqueda de la palabra poética original les apartaron pronto de las superficialidades de la primera vanguardia. Pero en sus obras quedó el reflejo de este sarampión juvenil, pronto dignamente superado.”
- <sup>104</sup> Gimferrer, “El pensamiento literario,” p. 111: “la dicotomía clasicismo-vanguardia de un Gerardo Diego, que tenía un sentido muy preciso en la anteguerra, podía ser instrumentalizada por la crítica reaccionaria en la postguerra.”
- <sup>105</sup> See, for instance, Anthony L. Geist and José B. Monleón, “Modernism and its Margins: Rescripting Hispanic Modernism,” in *Modernism and its Margins: Reinscribing Cultural Modernity from Spain and Latin America* (*Hispanic Issues* 19) (New York: Garland, 1999), pp. xvii-xxxv.
- <sup>106</sup> Diego, “Un escorzo de Góngora,” p. 109: “Conste nada más que nuestra generación ama a Góngora, pero reclama el derecho a ‘su Góngora,’ que no es exactamente el que nos habían legado.”

## Chapter Four

### José Lezama Lima's Poetics of Teleology

In September 1949, in the pages of the popular Havana weekly *Bohemia*, Jorge Mañach published an open letter to José Lezama Lima criticizing the “arcane,” nonsensical poetry that Lezama had championed over the previous decade. After his debut with the long poem *Muerte de Narciso*, Lezama had published three volumes of verse and directed a string of literary journals, culminating in the prestigious *Orígenes*. Coming from a figure of Mañach’s stature, the letter carried weight: in the 1920s Mañach had helped found the avant-garde *Revista de Avance* and had later gone on to assume a prominent place in Cuba’s intellectual establishment. He thus knew first-hand the intoxication of avant-garde excess and could give a sober assessment of its risks. Mañach’s letter, which casts a nostalgic but unsympathetic eye on the heyday of literary experimentation, is one of the most significant (and entertaining) documents of the Hispanic avant-garde, and since it has seldom if ever been republished, it bears quoting at length:

It was a revolution—the prelude, in the order of intellectual and aesthetic sensibility, to the political and social revolution that would come later. And like every revolution, it had to fall into exaggerations and injustices.... We extolled what the savvy Mariátegui at the time called *el disparate lírico*, “lyrical preposterousness”; we adored aseptic and antisentimental restraint, to the point of welcoming Giménez Caballero’s scandalous “Ode to the Bidet”; we opened the basement door to all the Freudian microbiology, we praised to the skies—where it had already climbed on its own—the insane metaphor, the image with three or four symbolic layers, capricious adjectives, allusions to all the frantic changes of our time, verses without rhythm or rhyme. We took very seriously Huidobro’s line about the poet creating a poem—or a painter a painting—“as nature creates a tree,” and we heaved overboard all that was representative in art. We took part in the restitution of Góngora, we beatified the Comte de Lautréamont, and Baudelaire and Mallarmé and Apollinaire. We made the aesthetics of the ugly and the unintelligible... I gave a defense of art as pure expression, of poetic meaning as a mere magical streaming of images and words. Many sensible people insulted us, and we in turn heaped insults on them.<sup>1</sup>

After his youthful plunge into the murky depths of literary vanguardism, Mañach had long ago returned to the realm of decorous clarity, and his bona fides as a proponent of the new lent weight to his attack on Lezama. The avant-garde, he claims, has reached a dead end. And it has done so because it tried to do away with something fundamental to

poetry: communication. Mañach goes on to say that, all throughout his years of youthful excess, he held onto the belief that poetry should not only be “expressive”—i.e., the product of a poet’s untransferable, subjective experience—but also communicative, capable of being shared; and that what first drew him to the avant-garde was not its aesthetics per se, but something larger. “More than an aesthetic battle,” he writes, “for me all that was a cultural battle, a rebellion against the lack of curiosity and wit, against provincialism, against the atrophy of the imagination and the apathy to the spirit of our times.” Now that the battle has been won, it no longer makes sense to promote such a flagrantly noncommunicative poetics; to do so in the late 1940s was to ignore both the recent past and the imperatives of the present. The former problem especially irked Mañach, who claimed credit for much of what Lezama and his companions had done, even as he criticized it: “You, the young people at *Orígenes*, my dear Lezama, are our descendants.... You wrap us today in the same haughty disdain that we directed at the academy, not caring to notice the debt you owe your forebears at the *Revista de Avance*.”<sup>2</sup>

Invidiously but perhaps understandably, he faults Lezama and his companions for not learning from his own mistakes. He long ago realized that obscurity ran counter to poetry’s proper function, and he cannot comprehend why a younger generation continues to find it so compelling. “What keeps me at such a distance,” he writes, is an “*inability to enjoy*, which might well be the dullness of my own sensibilities, but which I prefer to attribute—and you won’t hold it against me—to an overstepping on your part.”<sup>3</sup> An “overstepping” or *extralimitación*, that is, beyond the bounds of communication and comprehension. Lezama’s poetry is for him largely unintelligible, or intelligible only in rare moments, which renders it meaningless for anyone aside from the poet or a few intimate companions. And therein lies its irresponsibility. In the work of Lezama and the others, poetry “is no longer what we always thought it should be...an expression, in intelligible symbols, of the deepest human experience, but is becoming...a cryptic language of poets for poets...and for poets from the same chapel.” Mañach, in short, laments the loss of poetry’s social dimension—without advocating, however, a return to the merely edifying or instrumental:

Don’t think me so fallen away from my former rebelliousness that I’m now enlisting support for Romantic sobs, mawkish eroticism, the tropical maracas that serve as our local color, or ideological effusiveness in verse. It’s not that. But nor is it the other thing. Nor is it...the kaleidoscopic mix of words for their own sake, the chaotically superimposed planes of the imagination or the violently juxtaposed subjects, the gratuitous metaphysickry of symbols—in short, the inordinate supra- or infra-realism that’s no longer content with delving swiftly into the obscurity of existence to surface again in the clarity of the soul, but would rather dwell in a larval nocturne... Nor is it that.<sup>4</sup>

Against Lezama’s navel-gazing, self-absorbed and self-indulgent poetry, Mañach proposes communication. His letter encapsulates a common reaction to Lezama’s poetry, one that would provide polemical fodder for critics until his death in 1976. At its core the polemic turns on the question of the writer’s responsibilities to the society in which he or she lives; it recalls of the debates in the 1920s about “pure poetry” and political engagement, and it foreshadows the attacks on Lezama that would come ten years later in the wake of the

Cuban Revolution. While these debates are merely tangential to Lezama's own preoccupations—purity, engagement and revolution having little place in his conceptual vocabulary—the tension between aesthetic devotion and political commitment remains central to how he is understood. More importantly, this tension lies at the heart of the overwhelming success, after the Revolution and after Lezama, of the concept of the baroque.

A titan of Cuban literary culture, Lezama is known for being maddeningly enigmatic, mystical, difficult to the point of desperation. Julio Cortázar, one of his earliest international advocates, conceded that “reading Lezama is one of the most arduous and often most vexing tasks one can undertake.”<sup>5</sup> Difficulty became a hallmark of his poetry, as well as, in different ways, his voluminous body of essays and his two daunting novels, *Paradiso* (1966) and the incomplete, posthumously published *Oppiano Licario* (1977). Difficulty, moreover, held a pivotal place in his “poetic system of the world,” the idiosyncratic theory of poetry and knowledge that he elaborated over the course of his career. His polemic with Mañach afforded him an opportunity to respond to a common criticism and offer a compact formulation of his poetics.

Lezama's style is now often described as baroque, and not without reason, considering the pivotal role he played in redefining what that term meant. By the mid-twentieth century, in Spain and elsewhere, the historical baroque had taken on markedly conservative connotations, as the art of absolutism and the Counter-Reformation. More than any other single figure, Lezama deserves credit for reclaiming its American offshoot as something more unruly and rebellious, the art of “counterconquest” and the first expression of a recognizably different American consciousness. What's more, in the 1970s and 1980s, when Severo Sarduy began to theorize a “neobaroque” in recent Latin American cultural production, it was Lezama's fiction and poetry that provided the most obvious template. Any reflection on Lezama, he later wrote, must include “the possibility and pertinence of the baroque today” and the “probable emergence of the neo-baroque out of his work, in the Caravaggesque light of his scenery, or in the glowing ellipse of his theatricality.”<sup>6</sup> In this sense, at least, Lezama is to the neobaroque what Góngora is to the baroque: the towering figure taken as the very definition of the term. Therefore it is deceptively easy for critics to trace the neobaroque back to him, and particularly to his groundbreaking series of essays *La expresión americana* (1957). Irleamar Chiampi, one of the most prominent Lezama scholars, represents the consensus view when she states that he posits “the aesthetic continuity of the baroque in the American literature of the second postwar period, a proposal that only in the 1960s and 1970s would achieve international notoriety.”<sup>7</sup>

Yet this account involves, if not exactly a misreading, a misplaced emphasis. It would be wrong to see Lezama as a proponent of the neobaroque as it is now generally understood (as a Latin American version of or alternative to postmodernism) and in fact it would be wrong to see him as a theorist of the neobaroque at all. For him “baroque” designates a moment from the past, and can only by a very loose analogy describe the present. This is not to say, of course, that he considered the baroque unimportant. On the contrary, he stresses the baroque's importance for the Americas, and even asserts its foundational nature. And as Roberto González Echevarría points out, “anyone who reads Lezama cannot fail to notice that Góngora is a key figure in his work, nor can he or she avoid the impression that Lezama's poetics are in some way linked to Góngora's.”<sup>8</sup> But for all its relevance, the baroque is just one facet of Lezama's poetics; indeed, the notion

that an originary baroque synthesis should continue to hold sway over all American cultural production is antithetical to his understanding of history and poetry.

As I argue in what follows, Lezama's poetry and essays highlight Latin America's participation in a global aesthetic modernity. For him, the baroque simply represents the first moment such participation was achieved—but it is not the central, defining concept that later critics have made it out to be. Why then, did the baroque become synonymous with his work, especially after his death? The answer, I think, has partly to do with his obscurity, his affinity with Góngora, and his undeniable interest in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—but far more crucially, it has to do with the very objections that Mañach raised in 1949, and that others would raise after the Revolution. Briefly put, the concept of the baroque let critics to solve a problem that Lezama's life and work posed: it offered a way to make his detachedness a form of commitment. It provided a rebuttal of Mañach and others who found fault with Lezama's obscurity, by letting his defenders claim that the subversion or “counterconquest” of aesthetic norms (said to be visible in the colonial baroque) is itself a form of political engagement. That this solution could be used by critics on either side of the Revolution only cemented its success. After Lezama—though not quite because of Lezama—the baroque becomes revolution by other means.

In 1949, in any case, baroque had not yet become a watchword for his aesthetic project, and it is enlightening to see how he explores the same concerns—post-avant-garde difficulty, national and continental sensibilities, *mestizaje* or cultural mixing—in distinctly nonbaroque terms. Lezama's response to Mañach, published in *Bohemia* one week after the open letter, is a rhetorical and even poetic tour de force. He responds to the core of Mañach's critique, the lack of intelligibility, and mounts a forceful defense of the value of difficult poetry. Stunningly, he defends the value of the difficult or obscure with writing that is itself playfully obscure, and insists that comprehension, or a lack of comprehension, is more complicated than Mañach supposes:

Not understanding arises, either from indolence or indifference in penetration or from a particular opacity that certain writings or objects cast on us. But I like to imagine that as soon as a substance keeps itself unintelligible for us, our ardor for its possession beats its crescendo. The incentive for what we don't understand, for what's difficult or what doesn't yield to the first scouts, is the story of the occupation of the ineffable by the logos or poetic seed. What is it we understand? The peasant's mysterious monologues or the telling of his dreams beneath the tree by the river? And what is it we don't understand? The verbal artifice, that second nature long assimilated by the centuries, and in which man has achieved one of his most astonishing experiences: bestowing a verbal meaning, destroying it and watching as it again forms itself as a body, freed from the breath of language or the gesture of his company. In reality, understanding or not understanding play no part in the appraisal of artistic expression.<sup>9</sup>

Obscurity, for Lezama, is not opposed to intelligibility, but serves instead as a kind of framework or platform for artistic expression. Guillermo Cabrera Infante later remarked that, given the opacity of Lezama's reply, “he lost the polemic but won the poetry.”<sup>10</sup> But this passage, while dense, encapsulates a central component of Lezama's poetic system: that poetry is a form of resurrection. If it is successful, a poem will offer a glimpse of a

higher, arcane order inaccessible to causal reason, and will thus point to a plenitude of meaning that available only in the next world. As discussed below, this admittedly idiosyncratic view of poetry fits in with Lezama's larger theory.

What matters now is that, for Lezama, poetry requires an almost religious devotion and a faith in something beyond rational meaning. Mañach, he claims, has given up his commitment to a living poetic project for a place in the intellectual establishment, a seat at the table of Cuban officialdom. As he quipped in a comment that would later become infamous, Mañach and others "obtained their *place* in exchange for their *faith* and are hampered from chasing themselves through the looking glass of the intellect or the sensible."<sup>11</sup> The ecclesiastical resonances—echoing and mocking Mañach's own metaphor of "chapels"—come through more clearly in Spanish: "habían adquirido la *sede*, a trueque de la *fede*." And the line perhaps illustrates Lezama's larger point, or at least serves as an argument for *extralimitación* as a poetic strategy: *fede* is not even a Spanish word, and in this sense it steps outside the bounds of the language, but it is readily understandable, and far more effective than the standard *fe*.

Whereas Mañach can only look back fondly on the *Revista de Avance* from a position of institutional security, Lezama is engaged in a project "which still breathes and strides forward, which still enjoins us, in the devouring demand of absolute devotion, to pour our most generous intuitions into the polemics of contemporary art."<sup>12</sup> *Orígenes*, far more than Lezama's earlier journals *Verbum*, *Espuela de Plata* and *Nadie Parecía*, achieved during its twelve-year run a unique success on the cultural stage, publishing the most prominent voices from Latin America, Spain and beyond.<sup>13</sup> Octavio Paz reputedly called it "the best journal in the language."<sup>14</sup> The self-conscious overstepping that Mañach so harshly criticizes is central to its engagement with contemporary aesthetics. "Today, almost all art and a large part of philosophy, carry their concerns past the contour, past the wall or limitations of causal logic," he writes. "And isn't it in their very fury against limits, against language or situations mired in a bourgeois treatment that we find the greatest delight for an intellect voluptuous for the first gaze? Perhaps this is all a bit obvious for the slyness of your *I don't understand*."<sup>15</sup> Obscurity, and an overstepping or penetration into the unknown, are part of a response to a uniquely modern predicament. But they are also, in an ambiguity that Lezama never quite sought to resolve, fundamental to what all poetry is: an attempt to transcend the bounds of the rational world.

Mañach, in his response, puts a finer point on his barbs. For it is not merely a question of whether or not Lezama's poetry is diaphanous, or whether or not Mañach can stomach Lezama's peculiar brand of obscurity, but whether or not obscurity itself implies a withdrawal from social life, a refusal not only to "communicate" with the reader but to participate in history at all. For Mañach, poetry should be clear because writers or intellectuals have a responsibility to engage with their social circumstance, to put social or political duty above narrow literary devotion. He thus proudly accepts Lezama's charge that he has preferred the *sede* over the *fede*: "Of course, I plead guilty," he writes. But he claims a long line of predecessors: "this is what, in their respective historical moments, the Andrés Bellos, the Sarmientos, the Alberdis, the Lastarrias, the Montalvos, the Hostos and Varona and Martí did." This willing acceptance of the exigencies of social and political life, he says, is their crowning honor—and more importantly, it is a responsibility for Latin American writers in particular to shoulder the burden, even if it means turning their attention away from purely aesthetic matters. "This is the grand tradition of the

American intellectual: to respond to public duty, not to withdraw into oneself: to live in history, not on the sidelines,” he writes. This responsibility stems from Latin America’s peculiar political and cultural circumstances. “In very distinguished and mature countries,” he goes on to say, “it is perfectly justifiable for the writer to devote himself entirely to creative tasks as such, because the moral and historical, and even aesthetic, consciousness which he possesses, finds itself surrounded by an environment of sufficient respect for and service to spiritual values.”<sup>16</sup> And in a final jab at Lezama he adds, “In its day, History will tally its accounts and say who had more *fede* and less *sede*, whether it was those who generously kept watch or those dreamers who remained...sedentary.”<sup>17</sup>

When exactly History’s accounts would be tallied, and more importantly, when Cuba or the rest of Latin America could hope to join the ranks of the “distinguished and mature” nations, Mañach does not say. Nor does he make clear how a poet’s social duty is related to the intelligibility of his or her poetry—which is after all what initially provoked his attack. To be fair, the future of the cultural sphere in 1940s Cuba may indeed have seemed less certain than in Europe or the United States, and Mañach’s point about the value of sacrifice and civic engagement cannot easily be dismissed. Yet there is something suspiciously tautological in the distinction he draws: Latin America is not yet mature because it lacks an autonomous cultural sphere, that is, “sufficient respect for and service to spiritual values.” But its cultural sphere cannot—indeed, *should* not—be autonomous until the country reaches maturity. More troublingly, his distinction seems to function almost performatively: he insists that Cuban poets like Lezama ought not to do the very thing that would prove and establish—that is, *create*—their country’s maturity. When Mañach insists that Latin America is deficient or lagging with respect to Europe, he is not merely pointing out some lamentable but undeniable truth: he is perpetuating a commonplace assumption and, in effect, encouraging others to make it true.

The issues in this polemic were not limited to Mañach and Lezama. In fact, in that same year, Alejo Carpentier would theorize Latin American post-avant-garde aesthetics in the prologue to his novel *The Kingdom of This World*, and his essay casts a clarifying light on Lezama’s positions. It is there that Carpentier introduces the concept of *lo real maravilloso*: against the anemic, artificial, and exhausted European avant-gardes (and in particular surrealism), he proposes an aesthetic grounded in the “marvelous” reality of Latin America, the almost magical dimension he finds in its everyday life.

Carpentier’s rich essay, and the many serious problems it raises, have been discussed at length by others. For now I wish only point out that the geographic division he draws is also distinctly temporal. America appears as the solution to a European problem—but more specifically to a historical problem, a problem Europe reached when modernist experimentation or surrealist nonsequiturs had run their course. The European avant-gardes, Carpentier says, have exhausted their novelty and been reduced to empty, mechanical gestures; they seek the effect of the marvelous, but lack the faith that the marvelous requires. Latin America, not yet having undergone a process of secularization or disenchantment, is deeply imbued with a sense of wonder, and thus offers bountiful material and inspiration for aesthetic innovation. It provides a solution to the exhaustion of the avant-garde precisely because it retains a premodern sense of the magical—that is, precisely because it remains outside modernity.

Thus Carpentier envisions a temporality quite similar to Mañach’s, but with the inverse sign: while Mañach laments that Cuba has not yet reached “maturity,”

Carpentier rejoices that it and the rest of Latin America have remained on the doorstep of the modern. Carpentier concludes:

for the virginity of the landscape, for its formation, for its ontology, for the Faustian presence of the Indian and the black man, for the revelation that its recent discovery represents, for the fertile *mestizajes* that it fostered, America is far from having used up its wealth of mythologies.<sup>18</sup>

Both Carpentier and Mañach provide a useful counterpoint to Lezama. While they bemoan or celebrate America's "lag" with respect to European aesthetic modernity, Lezama sets about undoing that lag by engaging in artistic debates that circulate beyond, as well as within, Latin America. Rather than deferring to political underdevelopment or an essentialized marvelous sensibility, he engages with aesthetic questions of broader import, and posits a poetics of obscurity that, as I describe below, seeks to bring the future into the present. And while he admits that the conditions for cultural production in Cuba are far from ideal, he insists that the country and continent's cultural production—what he would later call "American expression"—can only be furthered through properly artistic means. The poet has a duty, he seems to suggest, to defend a poetic or cultural sphere that is not merely at the whim of political circumstance, even if it is not wholly independent. He did not reply to Mañach's second letter, but he does address the issue in his first response:

from that solitude and that struggle with the appalling reality of the circum-stances, there arose in all of us [at *Orígenes*], the enthralling idea that we could, advancing in the mystery of our poetic expressions, trace, within the surrounding misfortune, a new and old dialogue between the man who penetrates and the earth which becomes transparent to him.<sup>19</sup>

Not unlike Gerardo Diego two decades before him, Lezama claims that political matters should not stand in the way of artistic work. Making poetry subordinate to "the public need" is poetically and politically misguided. Poetically, because it entails sacrificing the faith that gives poetry life; and politically, because it means relegating Cuba to the sidelines of the "polemics of contemporary art." Affirming the relative independence of poetry from political concerns is itself a political gesture, and a vital one at that, insofar as it insists on Cuba and Latin America's participation in, and relevance for, the modern world.

Lezama's aesthetics are universally American, and self-consciously so. His vision of Cuban and Latin American literary expression, grounded in specific cultural and geographic reality but deeply engaged with a larger world, also underlies his conception of the baroque, in ways that diverge markedly from Carpentier's very different, "marvelous" baroque. What did Lezama find so alluring in obscurity? He answered this question a number of different ways throughout his life—and I offer a number of suggestions here as well. But perhaps the best way to begin to answer this question is turn to his poetry itself.

### **The dark meadow**



Lezama published his first volume of poems, *Enemigo rumor*, only in 1941. Though the book went unnoticed among the public, it did, Lezama noted, find a “pleasing resonance” among other poets, especially the younger ones who would go on to form the *Orígenes* group.<sup>20</sup> One of those poets, Cintio Vitier, would later recall that the book’s “originality was so great and the elements it incorporated...were so violently heterogeneous, that if the whole thing didn’t devolve into chaos, it had to engender a world.”<sup>21</sup> *Enemigo rumor* does engender a strange and chaotic world, and in spite of the hermeticism that so exasperated Mañach, the poems—and particularly the one below—hint at a more recondite order, now only glimpsed or suspected:

UNA OSCURA PRADERA ME CONVIDA

Una oscura pradera me convida,  
 sus manteles estables y ceñidos,  
 giran en mí, en mi balcón se aduermen.  
 Dominan su extensión, su indefinida  
 cúpula de alabastro se recrea.  
 Sobre las aguas del espejo,  
 breve la voz en mitad de cien caminos,  
 mi memoria prepara su sorpresa:  
 gamo en el cielo, rocío, llamarada.  
 Sin sentir que me llaman  
 penetro en la pradera despacioso,  
 ufano en nuevo laberinto derritido.  
 Allí se ven, ilustres restos,  
 cien cabezas, cornetas, mil funciones  
 abren su cielo, su girasol callando.  
 Extraña la sorpresa en este cielo,  
 donde sin querer vuelven pisadas  
 y suenan las voces en su centro henchido.  
 Una oscura pradera va pasando.  
 Entre los dos, viento o fino papel,  
 el viento, herido viento de esta muerte  
 mágica, una y despedida.  
 Un pájaro y otro ya no tiemblan.

And here is Nathaniel Tarn’s 1969 translation:<sup>22</sup>

AN OBSCURE MEADOW LURES ME

An obscure meadow lures me,  
 her fast, close-fitting lawns  
 revolve in me, sleep on my balcony.  
 They rule her reaches, her indefinite

alabaster dome re-creates itself.  
 On the waters of a mirror,  
 the voice cut short crossing a hundred paths,  
 my memory prepares surprise  
 fallow deer in the sky, dew, sudden flash.  
 Without hearing I'm called:  
 I slowly enter the meadow,  
 proudly consumed in a new labyrinth.  
 Illustrious remains:  
 a hundred heads, bugles, a thousand shows  
 baring their sky, their silent sunflower.  
 Strange the surprise in that sky  
 where unwillingly footfalls turn  
 and voices swell in its pregnant center.  
 An obscure meadow goes by.  
 Between the two, wind or thin paper,  
 the wind, the wounded wind of this death,  
 this magic death, one and dismissed.  
 A bird, another bird, no longer trembles.

The poem is undeniably evocative. But what exactly does it evoke? Its difficulty may at first call to mind the poetry of Diego, Lorca or Neruda, but it shares little with the willful, dreamlike transformations of *Residencia en la tierra* or *Poeta en Nueva York*, and even less with the patiently calculated geometry of the *Fábula de Equis y Zeda*. No doubt the poem owes a debt to the strange imagistic registers of the early avant-gardes, but it seems to obey a noticeably less visual logic, as if the metaphors pointed not to a physical likeness but to some deeper analogy, a resemblance more mystical or obscure. César Vallejo's *Trilce* might bear the closest resemblance, but where Vallejo's verse, even at its most celebratory, is shot through with a profound and solitary mourning, Lezama's poem breathes a tone of calm joy. Calm, yet irregular—the “asthmatic” rhythm of his writing, frequently pointed out by his readers and Lezama himself, appears in the numerous and often unnecessary commas ending or breaking up the verses. Lines such as “sus manteles estables y ceñidos, / giran en mí,” or “Allí se ven, ilustres restos” give the composition a rhythm at once assured and halting. (Tarn's English translation smooths this over.)

From the second line the poem descends into obscurity: the inviting meadow has “stable, tight tablecloths” that somehow both revolve in the speaker and sleep on his balcony. Images, more conceptual than visual, follow one another in alarming succession: alabaster domes, paths, fallow deer, sunflower, wind, birds. There is nonetheless a discernible movement, as the speaker looks in a mirror that conjures surprising memories and then, ignoring others' calls, enters a dark meadow—perhaps a memory invoked by the mirror, or an image seen inside—where he encounters an array of objects and sounds. But soon the meadow itself is moving away, separated from the speaker by a wind or thin paper, perhaps the mirror's surface. The flitting bird of the speaker's memory lies suddenly still.

One possible reading might take this as a poem about poetry itself, a meditation on the experience of encountering a text that does not yield to interpretation. As a meadow stretched out before the speaker, the text summons or lures him; its voice is

“breve,” both brief and small, yet it offers a hundred paths of possible meaning. Heedless of the obvious calls, the speaker slowly makes his way through the labyrinth of text, discovering remains, ruins, a thousand functions or possibilities or surprises, familiar echoes of other texts. The meadow passes as the poem comes to a close, with a “magic death” that might signal the end of reading or perhaps the failure of meaning, or at least of a readily accessible logic.

Tarn’s English version suggests a more compelling alternative. In line two, Lezama’s “manteles” or tablecloths appear as “lawns”—a surprising choice that only makes sense in view of the English word’s secondary meaning, as a kind of fine cotton or linen. More than a tablecloth, though, such a fabric suggests intimate wear, and its presence immediately pulls the poem into a sexual realm. Tarn’s decision to make the ambiguous “su” an as yet unspecified “her” conjures—where the original does not, at least not directly—a reclining, partly nude female body. On this reading, the “indefinite alabaster dome” would be a breast, and the dark meadow itself suggests a nether region surrounded by hair. The penetration into the meadow, then, becomes a metaphor for sexual intercourse, and the “pregnant center” gestures toward the fertility of the encounter.) In a sexual confusion of subject and object, the meadow itself moves away, as a paper-thin gap of airs appears between the two lovers; the “magic death” of climax leaves to the two birds or lovers reclining, motionless.

While Tarn does not add the poem’s sexual overtones, he does amplify them, and in doing so he slightly distorts the notes. (This is not a criticism.) For one thing, he gives the poem an overtly heterosexual meaning, while Lezama’s original proceeds, I think, along distinctly homosexual lines. Beyond the biographical justification for such a reading—his homosexuality has been the subject of some debate—the text points in this direction.<sup>23</sup> The mirror in line six could suggest that the two lovers look similar, and are of the same sex; that the speaker disregards the calls of others suggests there is something illicit in the encounter; the “centro henchido” could perhaps be read as the lover’s sex, which earlier appears as an alabaster dome, “indefinite” because it lies in a state of repose, masked by the white, tight-fitting undergarments. Above all, in the final line, the word “pájaro”—Cuban slang for a homosexual man—marks the encounter as strongly, if not unambiguously, male. (The sudden intrusion of a colloquial, almost comical element is very much in keeping with Lezama’s tone.)

Yet it would be wrong to claim that the poem is “about” a sexual encounter. An approach that merely decodes images seems misguided in the case of Lezama, for whom obscurity and difficulty serve as tools to dismantle whatever logical content underlies the poem. The poem is undoubtedly sexual, and undoubtedly metapoetic, but Lezama’s deliberate obscurity ensures that it cannot be reduced to either reading.

A comparison to Diego may clarify matters. In his *Fábula de Equis y Zeda* Diego braids together several half-stories or motifs that repeatedly echo one another and form a delicate harmony. Here, on the other hand, the images flit around too quickly, as the balcony gives way to a fallow deer, then “a hundred heads,” “a thousand functions,” wind or thin paper, birds. It comes almost as a surprise when the meadow reappears in line 19. Where Diego devises an almost mathematical method to call up the vanished essence of poetry, Lezama delves ecstatically into the darkness in search of something quite different: a form of knowledge that follows poetic, nonrational intuition—or, to use his own idiosyncratic vocabulary, one that unveils a “metaphoric causality.” Where Diego mathematicizes poetry, Lezama, poeticizes knowledge.

All this is not to say that poem lacks a unifying “meaning,” nor even that its unity lies in purely visual or phonic elements, but simply that this unity is unavailable to reason. The odd constellation of images, their strangely evocative power, point to a secret, even mystical, coherence. Lezama’s poem seems to obey a logic that is obscure, not readily open to us or perhaps even to the speaker. Obscurity, the dark meadow, incites a desire to understand and to lovingly penetrate—to *know*, in the most erotic sense. What this penetration or discovery yields is not some fact or statement expressible as a logical proposition, but at most a sudden illumination, the momentary apprehension of a deeper unity. And this exploration seems to take place both in the writing and the reading of the poem: knowledge is something the poet seeks, but more centrally something he creates through and in the poem. Speaker and reader both confront obscurity, and both share in the revelation.<sup>24</sup> As Lezama often stated, obscurity and clarity imply one another.

In an interview from 1966 he quoted, with approval, a comparison made between him and Góngora: “On a certain occasion someone said that Góngora was a poet who rendered clear things obscure, and that I, on the other hand, was a poet who rendered obscure things clear, visible, with a noonday light.”<sup>25</sup> Throughout his writing, obscurity and illumination appear not as opposites but as part of a larger and more complicated dynamic. This dynamic lies at the heart of Lezama’s ambitious and idiosyncratic theory of poetry, which he termed, not without irony, his “poetic system of the world.”

### **Knowledge of another order**

Lezama outlined his system in a handful of essays, particularly “Las imágenes posibles” (1948), “Introducción a un sistema poético” (1954), “Preludio a las eras imaginarias” (1958) and the “Confluencias” (1968). While he altered and amended the theory in successive texts, the fundamentals remained remarkably stable over the course of the decades.<sup>26</sup> Consistency notwithstanding, it is difficult to pinpoint what exactly his “system” consists of, for these essays seem intended drive the reader to despair, and their logical exposition hangs by the barest of threads. González Echevarría calls his style “jarring and out of tune with [conventional] essayistic prose, where poetic license is less generous than in fiction, or, of course, in poetry.”<sup>27</sup> Perhaps this is fitting for a theory of obscurity and its role in poetic understanding; in any event several of the critics who seek to explicate his system reach the conclusion that the whole thing is so intuitive and unsystematic that it makes no sense to approach it rationally. Gustavo Pellón, for example, observes that any attempt to pinpoint how exactly the elements of the theory fit together “is rendered difficult (if not ultimately impossible) because there is much more poetic insight than critical systematization in Lezama’s literary system.”<sup>28</sup> Lezama himself explicitly rejected the notion that his system was a philosophical study of poetry. “Nothing further from what I intend,” he clarified in an interview in 1966. “I have always started from the elements proper to poetry, that is, the poem, the poet, metaphor and image.”<sup>29</sup> This does not mean, however, that his essays read like poems, because what makes them difficult—the jolting digressions, the undefined terms, the baffling examples, the haphazard punctuation and stray clauses—bears little relation to the darkly radiant, otherworldly images of his verse.<sup>30</sup> His system, in other words, deserves to be interpreted not as an extended prose poem, but as a coherent, if not wholly systematic, theory of poetry.

Lezama posits poetry as a form of knowledge capable of transcending the limits of logic. Logical thought, and particularly relations of cause and effect, are according to his

system just one of the ways we make sense of a terrifyingly infinite world and find coherence amid its otherwise chaotic phenomena. Accompanying and perhaps preceding rational causality is a fundamentally mystical or poetic apprehension of the world's oneness—Lezama at one point calls it “metaphoric causality”—that arises from a suspicion that the many phenomena in our daily experience are related in mysterious, as yet unknown ways. In his view poetry, and by extension any creative or artistic endeavor, seeks to transcend the bounds of reason and cast a momentary light on the hidden order of the world; if successful, it provides an intimation of a future plenitude we have not yet attained but hope to reach after death. Poetry moves past the limits of rationality to give a glimpse of resurrection.

A key element of this theory is the “image” or *imago*, a term he uses inconsistently, but which most often seems to refer to the intuitive vision that frames our experience of the world. We cannot grasp the raw, unmediated expanse of reality, so we occupy and cordon off a small part of it to make it inhabitable; we arrange a sort of garden or, to use a metaphor Lezama liked to repeat, we plant a tree. On a collective level, the image is the manner in which a culture makes sense of its surroundings. Greek myths provide a simple example: they domesticate the world by populating it with capricious and vindictive gods, and thus transform the chaos of nature into a familiar, well-trodden landscape. Coherently, if not rationally, this “image” explains the cosmos and frames how the ancient Greeks experienced it. Such collective images are what Lezama dubbed the *eras imaginarias*, a peculiar term we might translate as “image eras.”<sup>31</sup> Here his theory acquires a historical dimension: image eras are the various cultural imaginaries created throughout human existence, either over millennia or in more compressed, fruitful moments of the past. Again, Greek myth provides an obvious illustration, but Lezama, with his vast and indiscriminate erudition, usually prefers to take his examples from further afield, and thus speaks of the Etruscan era, the Carolingian era, the Breton era, the eras of ancient Egypt and ancient China. What is clear is that Lezama came to consider this concept one of his key theoretical insights. As he writes in “A partir de la poesía” (1960), “the history of poetry can be nothing other than the study and expression of image eras.”<sup>32</sup>

But the image, in Lezama's system, functions on an individual level as well. As he explains in “La imagen histórica” (1959), each poem is itself an attempt to make visible a portion of the world, a foray into the dark meadow in search of knowledge; through metaphor it strives to reach the clarity of the image: “The image draws a sudden illumination from the enigma, by the light of which we can penetrate or at least live awaiting resurrection. The image, in this sense of ours, seeks to reduce the supernatural to man's transfigured senses.”<sup>33</sup> If the poem makes visible some aspect of reality not susceptible to reason, it offers a fleeting, fragmentary vision of a future wholeness and hints at an impossible causal relationship (i.e., death leading to resurrection, or nonreproductive sex engendering new life). It is in this context that we should understand one of his most oracular pronouncements: “The impossible, acting upon the possible, creates a possibility acting in infinity.”<sup>34</sup> The poem is this “possibility in infinity,” a projection of human understanding onto the endless expanse of what we cannot fathom. On the same page, perhaps by way of explanation, Lezama adds:

Everything man knows is like an enigma, knowledge or ignorance of another hierarchy, of what he will know fully in death, but he has an inkling that this enigma possesses a meaning. The impossible, the absurd,

create their possibility, their reason. The impossibility of man justifying death makes this impossibility turn resurrection into a possibility. What is neither truth nor falsehood, man perceives as truth.<sup>35</sup>

All this has a whiff of medieval scholasticism, and it is hard to know how literally to read it. Lezama, a devout Catholic, no doubt means actual resurrection. What I want to retain from the passage is the notion that in Lezama's system poetry is the "possible" version of resurrection. That is, it is future life refracted through the realm of the real, the only taste of salvation or paradise available to us in this world.

The notion of poetry as a glimmer of resurrection has two or three very significant consequences. First, it lends meaning to obscurity, which is, in effect, the "death" through which the poem must pass before reaching a new, nonrational illumination. Since it is also a lover whom the poet or poem lovingly penetrates in the hope of engendering new, impossible life, obscurity serves more generally as a proxy for all kinds of otherness. A second consequence is that the knowledge attained in poetry, or indeed in this life at all, is only a part of a larger, still unknown plenitude. As Fina García Marruz observes, despite its totalizing ambitions, Lezama's system is only a fragment: "Far from making his system a whole, he tended to make every system a fragment of a greater unity unknown to us all."<sup>36</sup>

A third consequence of the emphasis on resurrection is that Lezama's poetry and thought looks resolutely toward the future—or perhaps more accurately, it finds the future in the present. The meaning that the *imago* conveys is not so much absent as it is present in a tentative, embryonic form, as a sort of promise. This attitude toward the "fallenness" of the world is contrary to that of, say, Vallejo or Eliot or Sarduy—three common points of comparison—whose work, however different, revolves around a central, foundational absence. Lezama did suffer a foundational trauma at age eight, with the sudden death of his father, a tragedy which indelibly marked his life and apparently led to his literary vocation. "He stood at the center of my life and his death gave me the sense of what I would later call the heartbeat of absence," he explained in an interview. Particularly formative was a quasi-mystical vision of his father during a game of jacks with his mother and sisters. "[O]ne afternoon, while playing jacks with her, we noticed that the pieces in the circle began to form a figure resembling the face of our father," he recalled. "We all cried, but that patriarchal image gave us a supreme unity and instilled in my mother the idea that it was my destiny to tell the story of our family."<sup>37</sup> Thus loss provides the impulse to create. This same scene, as evoked in *Paradiso*, distinctly echoes Lezama's future-oriented poetics by presenting a fragment that points to a coming wholeness. Here, too, the characters are gathered in a circle playing jacks, when they see a vision of their father, the Colonel:

Suddenly, in a flash, as if a cloud broke to give way to a new vision, there appeared on the tiles enclosed by the circle a complete uniform jacket... And above the stiffened collar, the absent Colonel's face, perhaps smiling within his remoteness... Penetrating this vision that the earlier flash seemed to release, the four inside the illuminated circle had the feeling they were entering a tunnel; in reality, it was a halting feeling, for it opened up inside of an instant, but through it the fragments and the whole coincided in that flicker of the vision cut short by a sword.<sup>38</sup>

The image of the dead father appears briefly, as fragments and whole coincide for an instant. In the novel, as in his life, this moment links literary creation (“his destiny”) to a fleeting vision of resurrection. Lezama’s syntax highlights the uncertain, contradictory nature of this experience: it is unclear, for example, who or what is “penetrating” the vision, whether the family members or the feeling itself; later, the phrase “through it” could conceivably mean through the instant or through the feeling; and at the end of the sentence, “that flicker of the vision” seems to refer to the vision of the Colonel’s face, but that reading is grammatically awkward. (I have translated the passage myself, because Gregory Rabassa’s published version, though excellent, omits and rearranges some of the clauses; even my literal-minded attempt, however, fails to reproduce the repetitive irregularity of the original.) What the passage highlights is the “teleological” orientation of Lezama’s poetics: loss is transformed into a faith in a future, a future which is revealed, however confusingly or tentatively or incompletely, in the present.

### **Seeds in the abyss**

Lezama’s joyful, teleological poetics is radiantly visible in one of his most well-known poems, “Rapsodia para el mulo.” Published in *La fijeza* (1947), the book that prompted Mañach’s angry letter, this poem describes (to the extent that it can be said to describe anything) a packmule plodding slowly up a forest path and plunging into an “abyss.” Emilio Bejel calls the poem “a good example of a Lezaman *ars poetica*,”<sup>39</sup> in that the poem dramatizes Lezama’s view of how poetry functions, which Bejel understands as a movement from individual metaphors (the mule) toward a larger or more general image (the abyss). Like the scene from *Paradiso*, this text has a biographical origin, specifically in his childhood on the military base where his father was stationed, where he watched packmules loaded with matériel stubbornly make their way over steep mountain paths. In the late essay “Confluencias” he describes this experience: “I would watch them and see how they penetrated a destiny unknown to them with the most invincible resistance. They bridged fall and redemption, bearing the weight of a total grief. The closer I came, the more clearly I’d make out the quivering of their skin. They’d sweat, quiver and penetrate.” His recollection transmutes this experience into an image of aesthetic significance: “Their distances are occupied by the unending transformations of poetry. The mule’s resistance sows in the abyss, as poetic duration sows resurging in the stellar.”<sup>40</sup> His odd phrase “siembra en el abismo,” sows in the abyss, sums up the teleological orientation of his poetics. Beyond the apparent infertility or meaninglessness of obscurity, the poetic image can engender new life.

“Rhapsody for the mule” gains a hypnotic momentum through a carefully choreographed repetition of words and concepts, above all of the refrain “Paso es el paso del mulo en el abismo.” This line can be taken as a hyperbaton which, unraveled, would give “the mule’s step is a step into the abyss,” or perhaps alternatively as a more general statement, “each step is a step of the mule in the abyss.”<sup>41</sup> A stronger read would take the first *paso* as an adjective (“slow”), giving the verse a meaning along the lines of “Paced is the pace of the mule in the abyss.” A resolute, plodding repetition evokes the mule’s stubbornness and carries the poem along from beginning to end:

Con qué seguro paso el mulo en el abismo.

Lento es el mulo. Su misión no siente.  
 Su destino frente a la piedra, piedra que sangra  
 creando la abierta risa en las granadas.  
 Su piel rajada, pequeñísimo triunfo ya en lo oscuro,  
 pequeñísimo fango de alas ciegas.  
 La ceguera, el vidrio y el agua de tus ojos  
 tienen la fuerza de un tendón oculto,  
 y así los inmutables ojos recorriendo  
 lo oscuro progresivo y fugitivo.  
 El espacio de agua comprendido  
 entre sus ojos y el abierto túnel,  
 fija su centro que la faja  
 como la carga de plomo necesaria  
 que viene a caer como el sonido  
 del mulo cayendo en el abismo.

The mule's slow march and eventual plunge into the abyss, described in the first scene, plays out over and over in slow motion in the stanzas that follow. What strikes the reader in this first line is the mule's blindness and persistence; not sensing its mission, its limited vision is paradoxically a source of strength, or at least not an obstacle. A sudden switch to the second person (tú) raises the question of to whom or to what the mule refers. Given Lezama's own statements about the text's metapoetic dimension, it is not unreasonable to see it as a figure for the poet. His sister Eloísa later recalled that he was often heard to say, "I am a blindered mule heading toward its destiny," a line she took to refer very generally to his determination, but which seems especially relevant for this poem, as it suggests an identification with the poet looking out on a meaningless, uninterpreted world.<sup>42</sup> The mule stubbornly proceeds into the unknown, trusting in some larger purpose and, perhaps as a result of this unseeing faith, in death gives life to something greater. This death and its possible transformation are the magnetic center around which the poem centripetally revolves. Weighted down by the heavy arms it is transporting, the mule stumbles and plummets into the abyss:

Cuerpo pesado, tu plomada entraña  
 inencontrada ha sido en el abismo  
 ya que cayendo, terrible vertical  
 trezada de luminosos puntos ciegos,  
 aspa volteando incesante oscuro,  
 has puesto en cruz los dos abismos.

Luminous blind spots weave together the fall, and the "aspa volteando incesante oscuro"—a line whose syntactical ambiguity prevents easy reading, but seems to refer to the mule—suggests both a helpless flailing and a Christlike death (taking "aspa" to mean X or cross). In the next line, in fact, the mule has formed a cross out of two abysses. Here again is the familiar Lezamian dynamic of death and darkness giving way to resurrection. In the strange, veiled logic of the poem, this resurrection takes the form of a tree. This is what the mule "sows" in the abyss:



Los ojos del mulo parecen entregar  
a la entraña del abismo, húmedo árbol.  
Árbol que no se extiende en acanalados verdes  
sino cerrado como la única voz de los comienzos.  
Entontado, Dios lo quiere,  
el mulo sigue transportando en sus ojos  
árboles visibles y en sus músculos  
los árboles que la música han rehusado.  
Árbol de sombra y árbol de figura  
han llegado también a la última corona desfilada.

The tree that the mule “sows” in the abyss recalls the tree planted in the desert that Lezama mentions in his later essays, particularly “Preludio a las eras imaginarias,” and it seems to invoke the distinction between landscape and nature that runs (as discussed below) through *La expresión americana*. To put it schematically, the tree could be the image of the world, either created individually (the “image”) or formed collectively (the “era”). “Tree of shadow and tree of figure,” in any event, suggest a dialectic of enigma and representation inherent in his concept of the poetic image. It is the tree that keeps the animal’s death from falling into meaninglessness, and makes the mule, in an impossible, non-literal sense, fertile: “Su don ya no es estéril: su creación / la segura marcha en el abismo.” This becomes a central preoccupation of the poem:

Ese seguro paso del mulo en el abismo  
suele confundirse con los pintados guantes de lo estéril.  
Suele confundirse con los comienzos  
de la oscura cabeza negadora.  
Por ti suele confundirse, descastado vidrioso.  
Por ti, cadera con lazos charolados  
que parece decirnos yo no soy y yo no soy,  
pero que penetra también en las casonas  
donde la araña hogareña ya no alumbra  
y la portátil lámpara traslada  
de un horror a otro horror.  
Por ti suele confundirse, tú, vidrio descastado,  
que paso es el paso del mulo en el abismo.

The strange violence of these lines, in which the glassy gaze of the mule is confused with the “glassy outcast,” adorned with patent leather ribbons, who seems to negate his or her identity. What is not clear is whether this confusion is a good or a bad thing, whether the outcast is pitied or despised. The sympathetic image of lost fortune—the empty mansion no longer lit by a chandelier but by a solitary lamp carried “from one horror to another horror,” suggests the decline in Lezama’s own family fortunes after the death of his father. In any case what is clear is that the mule’s sterility is only apparent. As Bejel observes, this “transformation of the sterile into the creative is the central theme of the stanza (and, in a certain sense, the whole poem).” His comment could be extended to Lezama’s entire poetic system: obscurity turning into sudden illumination, death turning into half-glimpsed resurrection. Even if “the mule cannot reproduce itself in the natural sense”—

mules being sterile—“it is precisely the absence of the ‘natural’ that allows its participation in the *sobrenaturalaleza* of the poetic Image.”<sup>43</sup> In effect, Lezama affirms the creative force of the unnatural. In the context of his personal life, this immediately calls to mind his homosexuality, as other critics have not failed to note. Raymond Souza, in a fit of euphemistic excess, remarks that “Lezama Lima, who through personal choice never engendered any offspring, at times must have felt like a marginal member of society because of his childless state and his dedication to poetry.”<sup>44</sup> In the context of his thought about American identity, it calls to mind the concept of hybridity. This resonance is not insignificant, for the same belief in the fertility and productivity of infertile beings underlines Lezama’s theory about cultural blending and the incorporation of otherness as an aesthetic project for modernity, as discussed below.

What makes the mule creative are above all its eyes. The constant reference to its blindness, its “dirty tears,” its glassy stare, etc., point to an alternative gaze: the mule cannot see the unmediated abyss but nevertheless produces an image, a vision of world or a glimpse of something more complete. Perhaps because it does not see death, the mule can see resurrection.

In its meditation on sight, and a troubled or unclear vision of death, Lezama’s poem calls to mind Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, specifically the eighth, which ponders the animal’s experience of finitude. (Beyond the poems’ thematic commonalities, Lezama’s own interest in the Austrian poet, whom he apparently read in French, suggests this comparison.<sup>45</sup>) In Rilke’s poem, the animal’s gaze at “the open” is contrasted with a human vision turned toward death and the limited world. It is hard not to hear an echo, in the mule’s “seguro paso,” of Rilke’s “sure animal that approaches us / in a different direction,” lacking our manner of awareness. Rilke’s poem strikes a distinctly melancholy (or, I suppose, elegiac) tone. Where we contemplate death, the animal is blissfully free:

Doch sein Sein ist ihm  
 unendlich, ungebraht und ohne Blick  
 auf seinen Zustand, rein, so wie sein Ausblick.  
 Und wo wir Zukunft sehn, dort sieht es Alles  
 und sich im Allen und geheilt für immer.

In C. F. MacIntyre’s translation:

But his existence  
 is infinite to him, ungrasped, without a glimpse  
 at his condition, pure as his outward gaze.  
 And where we see the future, he sees All  
 and himself in All and himself healed forever.<sup>46</sup>

Unlike humans, the animal sees a truer vision of the endlessness of the world, for it cannot see itself as a separate being. Lezama’s mule is not Rilke’s animal: it too is blind to its fate, but it sees a tree, that is, it gives a vision—not of the infinite, ungraspable world, but of the interpreted world in which (to quote a line from the first elegy) we are not very reliably at home. Lezama conflates the animal’s vision and the human’s, by making the mule a figure for the poet; more importantly, in his poem the mediate vision of the world

is not a cause for lament, but just the opposite. Rilke's elegy ends with a chilling reflection on human inability to make sense of the world:

Und wir: Zuschauer, immer, überall,  
dem allen zugewandt und nie hinaus!  
Uns überfüllts. Wir ordnens. Es zerfällt.  
Wir ordnens wieder und zerfallen selbst.

In Edward Snow's translation:

And we: Spectators, always, everywhere  
looking at, never out of, everything!  
It overfills us. We arrange it. It falls apart.  
We rearrange it, and fall apart ourselves.<sup>47</sup>

Unlike Rilke's speaker, for whom, "we live our lives, forever taking leave"—*so leben wir und nehmen immer Abschied*—for Lezama we live in joyful hope, awaiting the arrival of a future plenitude. This is what Gustavo Pellón has called Lezama's "joyful vision": for the lost nature or paradise causes us to create our own vision of nature, our own paradise. Thus his poem ends on a distinctly optimistic note:

Paso es el paso, cajas de agua, fajado por Dios  
el poderoso mulo duerme temblando.  
Con sus ojos sentados y acuosos,  
al fin el mulo árboles encaja en todo abismo.

The sterility of the mule calls forth a new creation. Ambiguously, the verb "encajar" suggests that the mule "receives" the trees as blows, but also that it fits or places them in the abyss. Pain inflicted becomes inseparable from creation, and for this reason the poem is not an elegy but a rhapsody, a song of praise or jubilation. Brett Levinson has stressed how Lezama insistently avoids positing casting a nostalgic glance back at some lost paradise.<sup>48</sup> Instead, he speaks of a "second nature" or *sobrenaturaleza*, which he defines as "the image's penetration in nature." In the late essay "Confluencias" (1968) he writes:

I never tire of repeating Pascal's sentence, which was a revelation for me, "since true nature has been lost, anything can be nature"; the terrible affirmative force of that sentence, persuaded me to put the image in the place of lost nature. Thus against nature's determinism, man responds with the total willedness [*arbitrio*] of the image. And against the pessimism of lost nature, man's invincible joy in the refashioned image.<sup>49</sup>

Loss is also liberation; the poet is free to refashion an image of the world, and this refashioned image will be, perhaps paradoxically, the promise of a future plenitude. Lezama's faith in the germinal presence of the future forms the base of his teleological poetics.

A vision of the future in the future runs through all of Lezama's thought, including how he understands Cuba and Latin America's in the world. In an early letter to Cintio Vitier, Lezama spoke of the need to fashion a "teleología insular," an insular or island teleology. What exactly he had in mind he did not say, but Vitier took the phrase to mean a finality toward which Cuban poetry could strive. (The letter also cryptically called for an "astronomic economics" and a "Havana meteorology for poets and the wayward," proposals which, sadly, he never developed.) According to Vitier, Lezama and the *Orígenes* group sought to create a larger poetic purpose for the island, which, they felt, had long been politically and culturally adrift. In *Lo cubano en la poesía* (1958), Vitier explained that this involved "taking culture out of its cold apparent sequences, out of the stubbornness of consummated fact (since culture means history) to make it enter into the eternally generative impulse of poetic meaning."<sup>50</sup> In other words, it meant making Cuban poetry more than a reflection of national malaise or political dependency, and forging something more ambitious and original.

Poetry, for Lezama, transcends history and historical causality by giving a glimpse of a larger meaning; this meaning, inaccessible to reason and only incompletely present, is always located in the future. As an aesthetic project, an "island teleology" implies a direction, not a fixed identity or essence that a poet should seek to reflect. It is in light of this ginger approach to national consciousness, and this creative faith in the future, that Lezama's most complete statement about American culture should be understood.

### **Counterconquest and assimilation**

Lezama delivered the five essays collected *La expresión americana* as a series of lectures in Havana's Centro de Altos Estudios in January of 1957. Though not widely attended at the time, the book quickly became one of Lezama's most significant texts, and it would be hard to overstate its importance within twentieth-century Latin American thought.<sup>51</sup> Sketching out a cultural history of America from the conquest to the twentieth century, the work invites comparison with that Mariano Picón Salas's *De la conquista a la independencia* (1944) or Pedro Henríquez Ureña's *Corrientes literarias en la América Hispánica* (1941). Critics quite rightly situate the book within the context of the Latin American "identity essay," the long line of texts stretching at least from Martí's "Nuestra América" (1891) to Roberto Fernández Retamar's *Calibán* (1971) which, in various ways, have sought to define the continent's identity and relationship to Europe or the United States. Irlemar Chiampi, in the introduction to her excellent, meticulously annotated edition of the book, points out that by the late 1940s this discourse had come to be dominated by the view of Latin America as the product of an ethnic and cultural *mestizaje* or mixing. Lezama no doubt joins this tradition, though he seems almost at pains to avoid this more laden (or merely prosaic) word, preferring instead to speak of "assimilation," "incorporation" or—in one particularly memorable phase—"counterconquest."

The overwhelming success that the concept of "counterconquest" has recently enjoyed (visible in work by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Gonzalo Celorio, among others) makes it easy to overlook the fact that Lezama only uses the term once throughout the essay, and then almost as a sort of joke. Impishly reversing Werner Weisbach's well-known line that the baroque was the art of the Counter-Reformation, he asserts in the second essay, "La curiosidad barroca," that in America the baroque became "an art of counterconquest."<sup>52</sup> In so doing, he decisively linked the baroque to *mestizaje*, making the concepts largely synonymous and giving them a thrust neither quite had before.<sup>53</sup> The

book marks the moment at which the baroque first begins to occupy a central place in Latin American identity discourse. If critics now see the baroque as a foundational fusion of European, indigenous and African elements, and if it is said to define the continent's art and literature up to the present day, and if, in short, it is now indissociably linked to Latin American and Hispanic identity, *La expresión americana* deserves much of the credit. Or at least, a certain reading of the book deserves credit.

As nearly all critics note, the essay revolves around the “creative assimilation” of other cultures. Lezama's history stresses the ways American artists have creatively appropriated European aesthetic codes and transformed them into something unique. Two paradigmatic examples stand out, both taken, not coincidentally, from the baroque: José Kondori's church façade in Potosí, which includes a distinctly Incan figure among the usual array of saints, and the dynamic, almost contorted sculptures of Antônio Francisco Lisboa, known as “O Aleijadinho,” in Minas Gerais.<sup>54</sup> Their ethnicity—indigenous in the case of Kondori, European and African in the case of Aleijadinho—is significant for Lezama's argument, since he reads their work as two forms of counterconquest synthesis. To these he adds the Mexican writers Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora (a distant cousin of Góngora the poet), and he sums them all up in a composite, idealized figure whom he calls “the baroque gentleman.” The baroque gentleman is the “auténtico primer instalado en lo nuestro,” the first one authentically settled in our world, and represents the establishment of colonial culture that is no longer a foreign occupation but a thriving society at home in its environment. Indigenous, African and creole elements have combined to forge a uniquely American culture. “Thus we see how the American baroque gentleman,” writes Lezama, “takes part, watches over and cares for, the two great syntheses that lie at the root of the American baroque: the Hispano-Incan and the Hispano-African.”<sup>55</sup> American sensibility, it would seem, is defined by this baroque *mestizaje*.

It is easy to see how the essay lends itself to a reading in which the baroque is not only synonymous with *mestizaje*, but also—and therefore—quintessentially American. Many critics have understood Lezama's version of cultural appropriation to be, as Gustavo Pellón argues, “a particular characteristic of American writers, an outgrowth of the historical experience of colonialism.” Pellón adds that this circumstance affords American writers a degree of liberty unknown to their counterparts across the Atlantic: “Free from the European chains of causality, Lezama rearranges literary constellations with impunity, creating new patterns in the mosaic of the literary tradition.”<sup>56</sup> What's most odd about this line of thought is the ease with which freedom from “chains of causality” is conflated with a sort baroque determinism—quite visibly in the work of Irlemar Chiampi, who draws a comparison with a character from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. She claims that Lezama “paints his American as a kind of Caliban<sup>57</sup>: irreverent, corrosive, rebellious and devouring,” and she then goes on to add the following sentence: “It is natural that, with this profile, the aesthetics that best suit the paradigmatic American are baroque aesthetics.”<sup>58</sup> For Chiampi, cultural appropriation is a uniquely American gesture, and a defiant one at that, countering European purity and clarity with American heterodoxy and subversion. Moreover, she very subtly makes this appropriation, and this defiance, synonymous with the baroque. Indeed, a defiant attitude for her is the reason for the baroque's centrality: “within his argument,” she writes, “this primacy is justified by the attribution of a revolutionary meaning to baroque aesthetics—that of an subterranean ‘politics’ of *counterconquest*.”<sup>59</sup>

This is in essence the counterconquest reading of Lezama, which (in varying ways) largely holds sway in contemporary scholarship. Maarten van Delden is nearly alone today in suggesting that critics have overstated its importance and overlooked Lezama's conservatism.<sup>60</sup> Yet for Lezama the baroque is not merely a rebellious appropriation of the foreign: immediately after calling it "the art of the counterconquest," he adds that "it represents a triumph of the city and an American happily settled there with a normal style of life and death."<sup>61</sup> In other words, it represents the establishment, and stability, of a new colonial society. The synthesis that lies at the heart of the American baroque is less about defiant appropriation than about formal achievement—what Mañach might have called cultural maturity. What counts for Lezama is not that American artists "subverted" a European style, but rather that they expanded it. "This is the most decisive proof," Lezama writes, "when a bold maker of form, receives a style from a grand tradition, and far from diminishing it, offers it back magnified, it is a sign that the country has achieved its form in the art of the city."<sup>62</sup> What Kondori and Aleijadinho do is prove that America is now the site of great art, on par with the European metropolis. Sor Juana also illustrates this point for Lezama, for she marks "the first time that in the language, an American occupies a place of primacy. During the reign of Charles II, when the reciprocal influence of America on the Hispanic makes itself visible, she is the central figure of poetry."<sup>63</sup> A threshold to a full participation in modernity, the baroque thus has a lasting significance for Latin America. It marks the moment when the continent achieved an American (as opposed to Aztec or Mayan or Spanish) expression, and it marks the moment when this new consciousness first has an artistic expression of universal significance. The "baroque gentleman" can meet his European counterparts as equals at the table of culture: this seems to be the point of the literary banquet that Lezama conjures in "La curiosidad barroca," the series of short, food-related passages of verse from Spain and Latin America.

Important though it is, the baroque for Lezama is just one moment in the continent's past. Its foundational status does make it especially influential, he says, and Góngora and Quevedo's satirical verse left a particularly deep imprint on popular poetic traditions. But he never actually claims that America is baroque, or that the baroque is uniquely American—a striking fact which, when it is noticed at all, is usually dismissed as an odd but trivial fact. Luis Duno Gottberg, for example, observes that "it is surprising that the most baroque of Cuban writers at no point ever claimed that the baroque constitutes the essence of Latin America; nevertheless he always had this period and this aesthetic in mind."<sup>64</sup> In fact, however, Lezama kept pointedly silent on the notion of a baroque American identity, and strenuously rejected the notion that a style from the past could return in the present. In an essay published in 1948, one of his first statements on the topic, he is quite explicit. "[W]e will never believe that the baroque is a historical constant and a destiny and that certain ingredients repeat and accompany it," he states, referring to the idea, popularized by Eugenio d'Ors and others, that the baroque had reappeared across cultures and epochs as a universal aesthetic constant:

And those who want to ruin something of ours, claiming that in Greek culture there was a baroque and another in the Middle Ages, and another in China, statically believe that the baroque is a stage of culture and that it is arrived at, just like teething, gingivitis or menopause, not seeing that for

all of us, in historical discovery or in achievement, it was a landfall, a disembarking and an astonishment of wonders.

In his view, Spain and Latin America do of course play a central role in the baroque—but not because of some national or continental essence, but because of the baroque’s specific historical roots. “For in Spain the baroque was not a style to be evaluated in the presence of or distance from the Gothic,” he writes, “but a fertile *humus* that evaporated some five civilizations.”<sup>65</sup> It grew consciously but organically out of previous cultural elements. For this reason it cannot return in the present, and it is not an imposed destiny on American cultural expression.

These ideas reappear nine years later in *La expresión americana*, where Lezama similarly takes pains to distance himself from any notion of historical return: “Our point of view,” he writes in “Mitos y cansancio clásico,” the book’s first essay, “assumes the impossibility of two similar styles, the rejection of disdain for epigones, the nonidentity of two apparently conclusive forms, the creativity of a new concept of historical causality, which destroys the timebound pseudoconcept of everything aiming toward the contemporary, toward a fragmentary time.”<sup>66</sup> This dense passage lays out the real concern of these essays, which is a theory of artistic creation based on the free appropriation of the past (and hence “a new concept of historical causality”). In fact, more than a definition of American culture, *La expresión americana* is a theory of aesthetic modernity, both within and without Latin America.

As noted above, and as Chiampi points out, Lezama is responding to the theory that all cultural production is limited to a handful of periodically recurring cultural constants, an idea that had acquired a certain respectability in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s in the work of Spengler, d’Ors, and others. Lezama finds it especially prominent in Eliot, and quotes his *Four Quartets* as an encapsulation of Eliot’s ideas on originality: “And what there is to conquer / By strength and submission, has already been discovered / Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope / To emulate—but there is no competition—.”<sup>67</sup> For Eliot (or Lezama’s reading of Eliot), novelty or originality is a chimera; the modern artist can do nothing but repeat. Such a view is profoundly pessimistic, Lezama notes, especially for American artists, who face the added stigma that their work is often regarded as derivative of European trends. “Here are the seeds of the American’s terrible complex,” he writes, “the belief that his expression is not a fully achieved form, but problematization, something to solve.”<sup>68</sup> In reality, he is conflating two separate issues: on the one hand, the theoretical possibility of a truly original style, and on the other, the practical question of whether Americans artistic expression is or can be more than a weak echo of Europe’s. This conflation hardly matters, though, because the solution he offers is the same. Against the pessimism of these “crepuscular critics,” Lezama affirms that new myths can in fact be created, by a synthesis or “summa” of past styles, concepts, ideas, modes of thought. His method, in essence, consists of arranging these styles, concepts, etc., in a counterpoint to create a “fictional” vision of history. “Our method would like to approach that technique of fiction, advocated by Curtius, more than Eliot’s mythical-critical method,” he writes. “Everything will have to be reconstructed, invented anew, and the old myths, reappearing again, will offer their charms and their enigmas with an unfamiliar face. The fiction of myths is new myths, with new fatigues and terrors.”<sup>69</sup> Such a synthesis requires a keen eye to recognize what parts of the past still have life in the present, a talent Lezama calls “historical vision.”

What he presents is therefore less a method of doing history than a method of artistic creation that uses, quite instrumentally, the past for its own ends. Whereas Spengler, d'Ors and others aim to explain how certain forms echo each other over the centuries, Lezama is concerned with how the individual can listen to the past and find those notes that resonate in the present.<sup>70</sup> In his jargon, the poet or artist (or critic) who does this is the “metaphoric subject,” because he or she draws analogies between moments of the past into a contemporary synthesis.

(Confusingly, at this point Lezama introduces, in an almost offhand way, the notion of the “eras imaginarias.” As noted above, these are essentially the various forms of collective imagination from the past, and to this extent, at least, they correspond to literal “eras” in the everyday sense of the word.<sup>71</sup> His point here seems to be that attention to how people have imagined their world, rather than to causal chains of events, makes it easier to pick out which historical voices still speak to the present. In other words, image eras provide the raw material from which the “metaphoric subject” can fashion something new.)

Strikingly absent in his discussion of method is any sustained explanation of what in this process is unique to America. At times he suggests that American artists are particularly well-positioned for such syntheses, but he never actually suggests that Europeans are not. Creative assimilation and synthesis are universal phenomena. To the extent that he draws a distinction at all, it divides the present and the past: contemporary artists, responding to a sense that everything has already been done, have no choice but to seek the new by refashioning the old.

Lezama sketches this theory out in the first essay but fills it in only in the last, “Sumas críticas del americano,” arguably the most important in the book. He starts by pointing out the odd shift in critical views on twentieth-century art: in the 1920s critics saw rupture everywhere, while in the 1930s they found only continuity with the past. How could Picasso, for example, be at once radically new and firmly rooted in Spanish tradition? What had really taken place, Lezama contends, was something different, “a new manifestation of man in his struggle with form.” Contemporary artists differ from their nineteenth-century counterparts in their ability to spot the living moments from the past. “The great figures of contemporary art, have discovered regions that seemed submerged, forms of expression or knowledge that had been ignored,” writes Lezama. “Joyce’s knowledge of neo-Thomism, even as a dilettante, was not a late scholastic echo, but a medieval world, which coming into contact with him turned strangely creative. Stravinsky’s arrival at Pergolesi, was not a neoclassical trick, but the need to find a thread in tradition.”<sup>72</sup> These and many others discovered how to use the past in superbly novel ways. (One might add that this is precisely what Eliot does, pessimism notwithstanding.) For Lezama, this “historical vision” or sharp eye for those antiques that are most at home in the modern, is the hallmark of contemporary artists, and while such syntheses in the past were not unheard of, they were exceptional. Now they are required:

The grand exception of a Leonardo or a Goethe, became in our time the signary expression, which demanded an intuitive and rapid knowledge of earlier styles, faces of what has remained creative after so many shipwrecks, and an appropriate position in contemporary polemics, poised between what recedes into the shadows and the jet that leaps from the waters.<sup>73</sup>



The last tantalizing phrase suggests (among other things) that the artist must be equally attuned to the past and to the present. It is clear, in any event, that the demand to synthesize applies to contemporary artists generally, and is by no means a specifically American operation. It is not by chance that his examples are Picasso, Joyce and Stravinsky. If anything in this process is unique to Americans, it is that *their* assimilations are assumed to be illegitimate. “If Picasso leapt from the doric to the Eritrean, from Chardin to the Provençal, it seemed to us an excellent sign of the times, but if an American studied and assimilated Picasso, *horror referens*.”<sup>74</sup> In other words, Picasso is no more or less “original” than the American artists he influences, because his (and others’) originality lies precisely in the ability to synthesize and transform. Picasso is something of a special case, both because he is the figure critics most often accuse American artists of imitating, and—more importantly—because his discoveries are so far-reaching that they cannot be ignored. Lezama even suggests that others *should* let themselves be influenced by him. “The new art which in Cézanne had been a painful search, with very few disciples...in Picasso had become a shared secret,” something that others could partake of. He is, he says, “in our time, the influencing entity, the being made to create in others a recipiendary virtue.”<sup>75</sup> Fears of imitation are thus misplaced: artistic originality in the twentieth century does not mean avoiding outside influences but knowing which ones to assimilate. And Picasso, along with the creative world he reveals, are exactly the elements that an American artist can and should incorporate. In these pages Lezama does not mention the Cuban painter Wifredo Lam by name, but he must have had him in mind, for he illustrates this point perfectly: in Lam, Picasso’s influence is everywhere apparent, yet it never detracts from the imposing originality of his canvases.

One feature that sets Lam apart from Picasso is his thoroughly American vision of the natural world, and for this reason he illustrates the final piece in Lezama’s conceptual artifice: landscape. Lezama introduces this term toward the end of the final essay, and with it he highlights the fundamental significance of an experience of nature, of geographic specificity. Landscape, in Lezama’s definition, is nature as it is known or imagined by humans. In this sense it is synonymous with the “image eras”—or, perhaps, if the image eras are the “image participating in history,” then landscape is the image participating in geography. Lezama defines it as follows:

Landscape is one of the forms of man’s dominion, like a Roman aqueduct, a sentence by Lycurgus or the Apollonian triumph of the flute. Landscape is always dialogue, nature’s reduction placed at man’s height. When we say nature the *panta rhei* engulfs man like a leviathan from the expanse. Landscape is nature that has befriended man.<sup>76</sup>

More than a human projection, though, landscape is the result of an encounter; as Lezama repeats time and again, nature *wants* to be seen as landscape, just as the world wants to be known through the image, and therefore even if it varies from artist to artist, it cannot be an arbitrary creation. What’s more, landscape is a precondition for culture, and always peeks through, as it were, in the background of cultural works. In the case of painting, it appears very literally in the background, but it is no less present in literature or music, for without it, there can be no expression of any kind: “the only thing that creates culture is landscape, and that we have in masterful monstrosity.”<sup>77</sup> Within the

logic of the essay, then, the concept serves to further safeguard American originality. No matter how much it looks toward Europe, any American art will necessarily reflect, in more oblique or more straightforward ways, a distinct vision of the natural world.

Lezama thus takes a two-pronged approach: on the one hand he claims that culture is the result of successive assimilations, especially in the twentieth century, and that influence is therefore a good thing; on the other hand, he claims that culture inevitably reflects its landscape, and that no amount of influence can make a work unoriginal. Together these two points prop up Lezama's defense of American originality, and while they are not at odds, there does seem to be a tension between them. Gustavo Pérez Firmat puts his finger on this tension, noting that even as Lezama celebrates the joys of creative assimilation, "he sketches out the outlines of a different poetics, a poetics of wonder rather than joy, one based on the supersession of culture rather than on its consumption."<sup>78</sup> Lezama seems almost to want it both ways: creative freedom and geographic determinism. But while the concept of landscape poses a handful of questions that Lezama does not address—and more seriously, suggests very troubling political positions, as I discuss below—it is nevertheless an elegant solution to a vexing problem: he relegates the differences between American and European expression to the level of the unconscious. American artists should feel no qualms about Europe's influence in their work, because in some subtle, never quite determined way, their own continental vision will make itself evident. Even an artist "enthralled by the mimesis of the European, melts away if the landscape that accompanies him has its spirit and offers it up, and we converse with it if only in dreams."<sup>79</sup> Landscape is the necessary counterpart to creative assimilation.

And therein lies the real importance of the baroque: it was with the baroque that the continent first achieved a new vision of nature, a distinctively American landscape. It heralds an "achieved form" that was not a European offshoot or indigenous expression, but something distinct and—most importantly—in dialogue with a larger world. As a foundational synthesis, it does not limit cultural expression but frees it. Because of the baroque, "we see that we can approach the manifestations of any style without complexes or missteps, as long as we insert there the symbols of our destiny and the writing in which our soul flooded its objects."<sup>80</sup>

This vision of the baroque as a fully fledged engagement with the wider world can provide a direct refutation to Mañach, for whom, as discussed above, Cuba remained stuck in a prolonged cultural immaturity. This vision is also a far cry from the excessively defiant understanding of counterconquest that has found purchase among Lezama scholars. Irleamar Chiampi can again serve as an example of this "counterconquest" reading:

His work has reinvented the finest gesture of the true cannibal: devouring and parody of the patrimony of great cultures, ancient or modern; appropriation and estrangement of language, through the destruction of its most hallowed constrictions and conventions; parricidal practice of permanent conspiracy against the authority and composure of discourse. In sum: *rebellion producing difference in difficulty*. Lezama is indeed that 'thing of darkness' that Prospero saw in Caliban, and for that very reason his texts have opened a new and revolutionary aesthetic experience in the realm of our literary modernity.<sup>81</sup>

This very powerful reading does capture something of the ironic tone with which Lezama treats d'Ors, Eliot, Weisbach, Worringer, Spengler, Hegel and others in his essay, and it certainly reflects Lezama's emphasis on the assimilation of other cultural artifacts. Yet Lezama is at best ambiguously rebellious, and shows little interest in affirming "difference" between epochs or cultures. On the contrary, his poetics are oriented toward unearthing a secret, still-invisible unity, a trace of some kind of Parmenidean "one." And it hardly needs to be said that Caliban is an awkward description of Lezama, who did not after all appropriate a "foreign" language or set of artistic codes, but used those that belonged to him as fully as they would any European or North American writer. Fina García Marruz gives a better account of Lezama's poetics when she remembers him quoting the line, "The island distinct in the Cosmos or, what amounts to the same thing, the island indistinct in the Cosmos." She explains it as follows: "No confrontation between 'American' and 'European' or another culture, no confrontation between generations or different expressive modes, no dichotomy between art and life."<sup>82</sup> Far from emphasizing an American difference that appropriates or parodies the foreign, Lezama imagines an America that, since the baroque, has nothing to fear from engagement with Europe.

But if the baroque occupies a relatively minor place in his poetic system, why is it assumed to be so central? The answer, I think, lies in the way commitment and culture were understood in revolutionary Cuba. The baroque allows for a peculiar mediation of the tension between art and politics, a way for critics to claim that Lezama remained politically engaged without sacrificing his artistic integrity.

### **The baroque as aesthetics and revolution**

After the triumph of the Revolution in 1959, Lezama's fortunes took a series of strange and seemingly contradictory turns: in the first years he occupied important positions in government-sponsored cultural bodies, and became a vice president of the newly created UNEAC (Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas Cubanos) in 1961.<sup>83</sup> He continued to publish sporadically and in 1965 edited a three-volume *Antología de la poesía cubana*. In short, he obtained the *sede* but kept the *fede*, proof of which is the publication in 1966 of his monumental novel *Paradiso*, by far his most well-known and widely studied work, which he once described as the culmination of his poetic system. That book catapulted him to international literary stardom, thanks in large measure to its enthusiastic reception by Julio Cortázar. In 1970, on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday, he was officially honored by the UNEAC, and Casa de las Américas devoted a volume of its "Valoración múltiple" series to him—facts which I cite as an index of his official good graces.

But the Revolution also brought renewed attacks on Lezama for his lack of engagement with the country's social and political transformation. These attacks came first of all in the newly created newspaper *Revolución* and, more infamously, in the newspaper's short-lived cultural supplement, *Lunes de Revolución*. Most notably, Heberto Padilla, in an article entitled "La poesía en su lugar," harshly criticized Lezama's aestheticism and aloofness, concluding that "José Lezama Lima is over... His name will remain in our anthologies illustrating the blunders of a transitional stage that in 1959 we have now closed."<sup>84</sup> Attacks like this one did not represent an official position on Lezama (nor did such a thing really exist in 1959, if it ever has), but they did raise the specter of

commitment and detachment that so preoccupied Mañach in 1949. Cuba's cultural policy over the 1960s became increasingly intolerant of anything deemed counterrevolutionary, and without officially falling out of favor, Lezama became increasingly marginalized.<sup>85</sup> Ben Heller, who gives one of the most valuable accounts of Lezama's afterlife in Cuba, writes that after 1959, "*Orígenes* in general, as a cultural project, was repeatedly accused of escapism (of having evaded social reality and an engagement with history)."<sup>86</sup> As *Orígenes* had ceased publication in 1956, this cultural project largely meant Lezama. *Paradiso's* enormous international success brought him enthusiastic attention, but its controversial content, and in particular the overtly sexual, almost gleefully pornographic eighth chapter, made it unwelcome in revolutionary Cuba; the first edition was published uncensored, but since then no subsequent editions have been printed on the island.<sup>87</sup>

After 1971, Lezama lost even this official half-tolerance. The occasion for this change was the well-known "Padilla affair," in which the same writer who had attacked Lezama's revolutionary credentials a decade earlier now found himself accused of writing counterrevolutionary poetry. Imprisoned for a month, Padilla was forced to make a degrading public self-accusation, and in doing so he pointed the finger at a number of other prominent intellectuals, among them Lezama.<sup>88</sup> Cabrera Infante writes that after 1971, "a double dome of silence fell on the poet and on *Paradiso*, and when he won an prize in Italy and was invited to Rome he was denied an exit visa. He was likewise prevented from traveling to Mexico."<sup>89</sup> He spent the last five years of his life in isolation, and died in 1976.

I cite all this because in the first two decades after his death, Lezama's views of and treatment by the Cuban revolution provided a constant source of debate, and a sporadic occasion for vitriol. In 1979 his sister Eloísa published a volume of his correspondence that publicly revealed his frustrations about not being allowed to travel. Presumably to counter the insinuation that the island's most internationally respected writer had not supported the government, in 1981 Letras Cubanas published, under the title *Imagen y posibilidad*, a collection of pro-revolutionary articles that Lezama had written in the early 1960s but had carelessly or willfully excluded from his complete works. Enrico Mario Santi has shown how the volume's articles, and especially its omissions, cast Lezama as an enthusiastic supporter of the Revolution.<sup>90</sup> Several critics within Cuba have presented Lezama as an orthodox revolutionary, with arguments that range from the disingenuous to the patently dishonest. For example, Fina García Marruz, in her otherwise excellent essay "La poesía es un caracol nocturno," follows up a penetrating account of Lezama's poetic system with a blandly celebratory review of this book. Lisandro Otero gives a more extreme example, denying wholesale that Lezama suffered any kind of persecution:

Some counterrevolutionary hacks have unleashed a campaign trying to show that Lezama suffered persecutions and attacks from the Revolution. The evidence given shows the contrary: never before did the poet receive so much recognition, support, incentives, laurels, as in the period that begins in 1959.<sup>91</sup>

It seems almost undeniable that he did in fact suffer persecution, but that is not the point. Heller observes that such defenses of Lezama centered "almost obsessively his political

correctness, i.e., the social role *Orígenes* played in the Batista years and Lezama's degree of conformity to the expressed goals and methods of the 1959 Revolution."<sup>92</sup> The goal—never quite framed in these terms, of course—was to show how arguments like Mañach's were wrong, that is, to show that in some way Lezama had taken part in the revolutionary struggles around him. Yet making this case involves, Gustavo Pellón argues, a fundamental misreading: "If the memory of Lezama has been allowed to survive in Cuba, it has been largely through a campaign that focuses on his support of the Revolution and not on an acceptance of his poetics and worldview."<sup>93</sup>

Outside Cuba something surprisingly similar took place. Few critics claimed that Lezama had supported the Cuban government, of course, and fewer still that he had been a dissident. But in an odd parallel, many began to highlight Lezama's revolutionary leanings—taking "revolution," however, not to mean Castro's regime but rather a more abstract revolt against clarity, meaning, tyranny and logocentrism. This line of criticism is visible in the work of Chiampi, who in 1985 could write of Lezama: "A silent revolutionary, his politics are articulated as the falsification of the colonizer's symbolic system."<sup>94</sup> Indeed, her invocation of Caliban is a clear nod to Roberto Fernández Retamar's essay of the same name published in the wake of the Padilla affair, the very event which spelled ostracism for Lezama and other writers. Retamar's *Caliban* famously asserts that the proper task of the Latin American intellectual is to defy the tyranny of neocolonial Prosperos; Chiampi claims that Lezama, whatever his attitudes toward the regime, does just that. If he was not a revolutionary in the narrow sense, he could be one in a broader sense.

Both critical gestures, inside and outside Cuba, respond to an anxiety over Lezama's political engagement, or lack thereof. His biography, and especially his final years of persecution, represent in a sense the failures of a revolutionary political project; faced with this failure, critics on or near the left could respond in one of two ways. On the one hand, they could simply deny that the Cuban Revolution had actually failed or treated Lezama (or others) unjustly, as Lisandro Otero in effect does. On the other hand, they could make "revolution" a primarily aesthetic, rather than political, project, and comfortably dub Lezama a revolutionary. This is in essence what Chiampi does, along with Sarduy, Yurkiévich, Ortega, Levinson, Moreiras or Parkinson Zamora, albeit in extremely varied ways. It is equally possible to claim that Lezama was conservative or apolitical, but very few critics take this line—Emir Rodríguez Monegal, Gustavo Pellón and, more recently, Maarten van Delden are among the few who do. For the majority of critics, whatever their views on the Cuban Revolution, Lezama is a revolutionary Cuban.

Of the two responses outlined above, it is the second one—Lezama as aesthetically revolutionary—that has exerted the widest international influence. It underlies the familiar version of Lezama as a "baroque" or "neobaroque" writer engaged in an aesthetics of counterconquest. In fact—and this is the crucial point—the baroque is the conceptual mechanism that allows this redefinition to take place. And if this redefinition starts with Lezama, it does not end with him, and is in fact part of a much larger shift. Earlier I stated that after Lezama, though not quite because of Lezama, the baroque becomes revolution by other means (aesthetic means). I would even add, at the risk of overgeneralizing, that in Latin American literary and cultural studies, the baroque quickly becomes the ideal tool for mediating anxiety about the failure of political revolution. That is, as a critical concept, it allows critics to celebrate a revolutionary stance while letting them keep a distance from any actual political program—and perhaps

even more specifically, from that of the Cuban government. In practice this takes many different forms, of course, yet the attribution of a vague, revolutionary stance to baroque aesthetics has now become commonplace, and this trend begins, I think, with Lezama and his critics. In any event it is not wholly a coincidence that the clearest and boldest statement that the baroque has a revolutionary thrust—Severo Sarduy's essay "El barroco y el neobarroco" (1972), which takes Lezama as its prime example—appeared just one year after the Padilla affair had caused widespread disillusionment with the Cuban government. (I return to this question in the next chapter.) If, after Padilla, it was no longer possible to support a specific revolutionary government, one could at least hold on to an aestheticized idea of revolution under a different name. The baroque, in short, is revolution aestheticized.

As a conceptual tool, the baroque is more than this, yet the revolutionary valence is what Lezama's legacy brings most dramatically into relief. It is of course easy to see how Lezama's interest in cultural assimilation, and his emphasis on the seventeenth century, could lend themselves to a reading of the baroque as revolutionary. And in any event, his poetry is "revolutionary" in the sense that it struck a former vanguardist like Mañach as scandalously original, and it is "baroque" in the sense that its difficulty recalls the most impenetrable compositions of the seventeenth century.

Nevertheless, as I have argued, Lezama does not ultimately envisage a defiant act of counterconquest endlessly replayed in the form of permanent baroque aesthetics. Lezama's view of the baroque remains overshadowed by a "revolutionary" version that has little to do with his work but which, ironically, his work and life helped bring about. In a curious inversion, what happens to the baroque in Cuba after the Revolution is almost the mirror image of what happens in Spain after the Civil War. There, the innovative, cosmopolitan-minded aesthetics that Gerardo Diego and others found in Góngora gave way to a spiritually obsessed expression of Spanishness; here, a sign of participation in a larger world becomes an argument for separateness and revolution.

Lezama's baroque is, instead, a moment in the past that marked an origin, the establishment of a landscape, the achievement of an expressive height that meant that the continent had nothing to fear from openness to and influence from the world. In a letter from 1975 to the Spanish publisher Carlos Meneses, Lezama issued a surprising and seldom-cited judgment on the term. "I think we make a mistake, using old designations for new forms of expression," he writes. To call contemporary writing baroque is to misunderstand it:

I think by now baroque is becoming a musty term, propped up by habit and fatigue. With the designation "baroque" people try to rope together styles that at bottom have radical differences. García Márquez isn't baroque, neither is Cortázar or Fuentes, Carpentier seems more neoclassical, Borges even less.

The concept has now become a crutch, a way of closing off understanding. He goes on to say that "[t]he surprise with which our literature arrived in Europe made people reach for that old style, extremely brilliant in its own right and with moments of great splendor."<sup>95</sup> Worthy of respect, the baroque is not a sufficient description of the present, and it can only be limiting to apply the label haphazardly, for it forecloses novelty or simply nonbaroque manifestations.

Lezama's poetics remain open to a still unknown future. "We might say that the firmest Cuban tradition is the tradition of the future," he says in an interview with Reynaldo González from 1972. "We all march toward a finality, and we see it still a ways off, and perhaps we can't yet reach it. That imprecision is convenient, it enriches us. The unreached definition gives us vigor and breadth."<sup>96</sup> Rather than an aesthetics of counterconquest and difference, he points to an engagement with a wider cultural universe; rather than turning back toward a timeless baroque, he looks teleologically forward to an unknown end.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Jorge Mañach, “El arcano de cierta poesía nueva,” *Bohemia* 39 (September 25, 1949), p. 78. In the original: “Fué una revolución—el preludio, en el orden de la sensibilidad intelectual y estética de la revolución política y social que quiso venir después. Y como toda revolución, tuvo que incurrir en exageraciones e injusticias. Le negamos la sal y el agua a todo bicho viviente que no compartiera nuestro credo, y el credo mismo tuvo a veces mucho de desaforado. Exaltamos lo que por entonces el sagacísimo Mariátegui se atrevió a llamar ‘el disparate lírico,’ adoramos la ‘asepsia’ y el pudor antisentimental, hasta el extremo de darle cabida a aquella escandalosa ‘Oda al bidet’ de Giménez Caballero; le abrimos la puerta del sótano a toda la microbiología freudiana, pusimos por las nubes—adonde ella ya de por sí se encaramaba—la metáfora loca, la imagen de tres o cuatro estratos simbólicos, los adjetivos encabritados, las alusiones a toda la frenética de nuestro tiempo, los versos sin ritmo y sin rima. Tomamos muy por lo serio aquello de Huidobro de que el poeta crea un poema—o el pintor un cuadro—‘como la naturaleza crea un árbol,’ y echamos enteramente por la borda todo lo que fuese arte representativo. Participamos del rescate de Góngora, beatificamos al Conde Lautréamont, y a Baudelaire y a Mallarmé y a Apollinaire. Hicimos la estética de lo feo y lo ininteligible. A propósito de Mariano Brull y de otros aun menos comunicativos, hice yo la apología del arte como expresión pura, del sentido poético como mera irradiación mágica de imágenes y vocablos. Mucha gente sensata nos insultó, y nosotros los insultamos de lo lindo a nuestra vez.”
- <sup>2</sup> Mañach, “El arcano de cierta poesía,” p. 78: “Más que una batalla estética, para mí fué todo aquello una batalla cultural, una rebelión contra la falta de curiosidad y de agilidad, contra el provincianismo, contra el desmedro imaginativo y la apatía hacia el espíritu de nuestro tiempo.” And later: “Pues bien: ustedes los jóvenes de ‘Orígenes’ son, amigo Lezama, nuestros descendientes... Nos envuelven ustedes hoy en el mismo altivo menosprecio que entonces nosotros dedicábamos a la academia, sin querer percatarse de la deuda que tienen contraída con sus progenitores de la ‘Revista de Avance,’ que fuimos los primeros en traer esas gallinas de ‘la nueva sensibilidad.’”
- <sup>3</sup> Mañach, “El arcano de cierta poesía,” p. 78: “Lo que me tiene en esa distancia más bien (déjeme ver si acierto a sugerirselo) una *incapacidad de fruición* que muy bien puede ser un embotamiento de mi sensibilidad, pero que prefiero atribuir—y usted no me lo tendrá a mal—a una extralimitación de ustedes.”
- <sup>4</sup> Mañach, “El arcano de cierta poesía,” p. 78: “No me imagine tan descaecido de mi antigua rebeldía que ande ya reclutando sufragios para los sollozos románticos, los erotismos empalagosos, las maracas tropicales que vienen a ser nuestra pandereta, o las efusiones ideológicas en verso. No es eso. Pero tampoco es lo otro. Tampoco es... el abigarramiento de las palabras por las palabras mismas, la superposición caótica de planos imaginativos o las violentas asociaciones temáticas, el metafisiqueo gratuito de los símbolos, la desmesura, en fin, de ese supra o intra-realismo que ya no se contenta con calar súbitamente en lo oscuro de la existencia para aflorar de nuevo a la claridad del alma, sino que prefiere quedarse alojado en un nocturno de larvas... Tampoco es eso.”
- <sup>5</sup> Julio Cortázar, “Para llegar a Lezama Lima,” in *Recopilación de textos sobre José Lezama Lima*, ed. Pedro Simón (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1970), p. 148.
- <sup>6</sup> Severo Sarduy, “El heredero,” in his *Obra completa*, vol. 1, p. 1405. “Una meditación sobre Lezama, sobre la posible herencia de su palabra, no puede evitar esas interrogaciones...: la de la posibilidad y pertinencia del barroco hoy, la de un probable surgimiento del neo-barroco a partir de su obra, en la luz caravagesca de su escenografía, o en la elipse incandescente de su teatralidad.”
- <sup>7</sup> Irlemar Chiampi, “La historia tejida por la imagen,” in José Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, p. 26: “Se formula, así, *sub specie allegorica*, la continuidad estética del barroco en la literatura americana de la segunda posguerra, propuesta que sólo en los años sesenta y setenta ganaría notoriedad internacional con Alejo Carpentier y Severo Sarduy.” Her superb edition tracks down countless references adds invaluable notes to Lezama’s text.
- <sup>8</sup> Roberto González Echevarría, “Lezama’s and Góngora’s Appetites,” trans. Maarten van Delden, in *Baroque New Worlds*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Monika Kaup, p. 554. Originally published in *Revista Iberoamericana* 41:92-93( 1975), pp. 479-91.
- <sup>9</sup> José Lezama Lima, “Carta abierta a Jorge Mañach,” *Bohemia* 40 (October 2, 1949), p. 77: The phrase “play no part” is a free rendering of the odd “carecen de vivencia.” Here is the complete original: “Pero gusto de suponer que apenas una sustancia se mantiene ininteligible para nosotros, nuestro ardor para su apoderamiento bate su crescendo. El incentivo de lo que no entendemos, de lo difícil o de lo que no se rinde a los primeros rondadores, es la historia de la ocupación de lo inefable por el logos o el germen



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poético. ¿Qué es lo que entendemos? ¿Los monólogos misteriosos del campesino o el relato de sus sueños a la sombra del árbol del río? ¿Y qué es lo que no entendemos? ¿El artificio verbal, esa segunda naturaleza asimilada ya por la secularidad, y en el cual el hombre ha realizado una de sus más asombrosas experiencias: otorgar un sentido verbal, destruirlo y verlo como de nuevo se constituye en cuerpo, liberado del aliento de la palabra o del ademán de su compañía[?] En realidad, entender o no entender carecen de vivencia en la valoración de la expresión artística.”

<sup>10</sup> Guillermo Cabrera Infante, “Tema del héroe y la heroína,” in *Mea Cuba* (Barcelona: Plaza & Janés, 1992), p. 325: “Perdió la polémica pero ganó la poesía.”

<sup>11</sup> Lezama, “Carta abierta,” p. 77: “Muchos entre nosotros no han querido comprender que habían adquirido la *sede*, a trueque de la *fede* y que están dañados para perseguirse a través del espejo del intelecto o de lo sensible.”

<sup>12</sup> Lezama, “Carta abierta,” p. 77: “Dispéñeme, pero su fervor por la *Revista de avance* es de añoranza y retropección, mientras que el mío por *Orígenes* es el que nos devora en una obra que aún respira y se adelanta, que aún demanda como la exigencia voraz de una entrega esencial, que volquemos nuestras más rasgadas intuiciones en la polémica del arte contemporáneo.”

<sup>13</sup> The story of how and why it folded involves a separate polemic, between Lezama and his co-editor and financing partner, José Rodríguez Feo. Lezama had published an article by Juan Ramón Jiménez criticizing Vicente Aleixandre; this criticism caused Rodríguez Feo some embarrassment when he later asked Aleixandre for a poem to contribute to the journal. See Lezama’s *Cartas a Eloísa y otra correspondencia*, ed. José Triana (Madrid: Verbum 1998), especially the 1954 letters to Juan Ramón Jiménez (pp. 283-87), as well as José Rodríguez Feo, *Mi correspondencia con Lezama Lima* (Havana: UNEAC, 1989). Guillermo Cabrera Infante gives a short description of the events in *Mea Cuba*, pp. 326-27.

<sup>14</sup> See “Interrogando a Lezama Lima,” in *Recopilación de textos*, ed. Pedro Simón, p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> Lezama, “Carta abierta,” p. 77: “Casi todo el arte y gran parte de la filosofía contemporánea, llevan su problemática más allá del contorno, del muro o de las limitaciones de la lógica causalista.... ¿Y no es precisamente en su furia contra el límite, contra el lenguaje o situaciones ya enquistadas por un tratamiento burgués, donde encontramos la mayor fruición para un intelecto voluptuoso de la primera mirada? Quizá todo esto resulte un poco obvio para la malicia de su *no entiendo*.”

<sup>16</sup> Jorge Mañach, “Reacciones a un diálogo literario,” *Bohemia* 42 (October 16, 1949), p. 63: “Por supuesto, me declaro culpable. Salvadas las distancias, lo mismo hicieron, en sus respectivos momentos históricos, los Andrés Bello, los Sarmientos, los Alberdi, los Lastarria, los Montalvo, los Hostos y Varona y Martí. Esa es la gran tradición del intelectual americano: responder al menester público, no sustraerse a sí: vivir en la historia, no al margen de ella. En los países ya muy granados y maduros, es perfectamente justificable que el escritor se consagre enteramente a us tareas creadoras como tal, porque la conciencia moral e histórica de que está asistido, y aun la estética, encuentra en torno suyo un ámbito de suficiente respeto y servicio a los valores espirituales, y gente lo bastante numerosa, en la política o el periodismo, para sustentar esos valores.”

<sup>17</sup> Mañach, “Reacciones,” p. 63: “En su día, pues, la Historia sacará sus cuentas, y dirá quiénes tuvieron más *fede* y menos *sede*, si los generosos en el desvelo o los soñadores...sedentarios.”

<sup>18</sup> Alejo Carpentier, *El reino de este mundo* (Madrid: Alianza, 2003), 13-14: “Y es que, por la virginidad del paisaje, por la formación, por la ontología, por la presencia fáustica del indio y del negro, por la Revolución que constituyó su reciente descubrimiento, por los fecundos mestizajes que propició, América está muy lejos de haber agotado su caudal de mitologías.”

<sup>19</sup> Lezama, “Carta abierta,” p. 77: “Pero de esa soledad y esa lucha con la espantosa realidad de las circunstancias, surgió en la sangre de todos nosotros, la idea obsesionante de que podíamos[,] al avanzar en el misterio de nuestras expresiones poéticas, trazar, dentro de las desventuras rodeantes, un nuevo y viejo diálogo entre el hombre que penetra y la tierra que se le hace transparente.”

<sup>20</sup> “Interrogando a Lezama Lima,” in Simon, ed., *Recopilación de textos sobre José Lezama Lima*, p. 17. “El libro fue acogido con relativa indiferencia...pero, sin embargo, en lo que era el estado naciente de sensibilidad en aquellos momentos el libro tuvo una grata resonancia.”

<sup>21</sup> Cintio Vitier, *Lo cubano en la poesía* (Las Villas: Universidad Central de Las Villas, 1958), p. 373. His enthusiasm is even more apparent in the longer quote: “Yo me siento impotente para comunicarles a ustedes lo que este libro significó en aquellos años. Leerlo fue algo más que leer un libro. Su originalidad era tan grande y los elementos que integraba (Garcilaso, Góngora, Quevedo, San Juan, Lautréamont, el

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surrealismo, Valéry, Claudel, Rilke) que si aquello no se resolvía en un caos, tenía que engendrar un mundo.”

- <sup>22</sup> The translation first appeared first in *Mundus Artium* 2:1 (winter 1969), and more recently in the volume of Lezama’s work published by University of California Press in the “Poets for the Millennium” series (as far as I know, the first book-length collection of his poetry in English): José Lezama Lima, *Selections*, ed. Ernesto Livon-Grosman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 3-4. Given Lezama Lima’s tremendous importance, it is shocking that more of his works are not available in translation. Roberto González Echevarría notes that “en inglés, Lezama es un desconocido.” *Crítica práctica / práctica crítica* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica), p.189.
- <sup>23</sup> Labels aside, Lezama pursued sexual relations with men but married a family friend, María Luisa Bautista, in 1964, satisfying his mother’s dying wish. See Cabrera Infante, “Tema del héroe y la heroína.” Reinaldo Arenas discusses his sexual complicity in *Before Night Falls*; some critics in the 1970s and 1980s, however, vehemently claimed he repudiated homosexuality, such as Reynaldo González, Fina García Marruz and, from a very different political position, Gustavo Pellón. The case of Reynaldo González is especially odd: in his 1970 essay “Lezama Lima: el ingenuo culpable,” later published in a book of the same name (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 1988), he argues at great length that *Paradiso* condemns homosexuality. However, in the more recent *Lezama sin pedir permiso* (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 2007), pp. 59-60, he suggests ambiguously that he may have been one of Lezama’s lovers. Specifically, he includes himself among “quienes fuimos sus amigos, sus amantes, pues en su concepción de la amistad las lindes se difuminaban para la plenitud del sentimiento.”
- <sup>24</sup> Reynaldo González makes this point in “Lezama, pintura y poesía,” in *Lezama sin pedir permiso*, p. 19: “Resulta difícil discernir dónde concluye el paladeador de la cultura y comienza el creador, pues confluyen en similar goce.”
- <sup>25</sup> Armando Álvarez Bravo, “Órbita de Lezama Lima,” in Simón, ed., *Recopilación de textos*, p. 55: “En cierta ocasión, me decían que Góngora era un poeta que tornaba oscura[s] las cosas claras y que yo, por el contrario, era un poeta que tornaba las cosas oscuras claras, evidentes, cenitales.”
- <sup>26</sup> Brett Levinson takes this fact as license to treat Lezama’s writings as on though it were one single text. See *Secondary Moderns* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1996), p. 20.
- <sup>27</sup> Roberto González Echevarría, *Crítica práctica / práctica crítica*, p. 195: “Ese estilo personal y familiar de Lezama es uno con su estilo literario, chocante y fuera de tono en la prosa ensayística, donde la licencia poética es menos generosa que en la ficción, o, desde luego, en la poesía.”
- <sup>28</sup> Gustavo Pellón, *José Lezama Lima’s Joyful Vision* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), p. 46.
- <sup>29</sup> Álvarez Bravo, “Órbita de Lezama Lima,” in Simón, ed., *Recopilación de textos*, p. 57: “Nada más lejos de lo que pretendo. He partido siempre de los elementos propios de la poesía, o sea, del poema, del poeta, de la metáfora, de la imagen.”
- <sup>30</sup> Raymond Souza sees a fluctuation between metonymy and metaphor in Lezama’s writing. That is, rather than proceed by means of argumentative or expository contiguity (i.e. metonymy) he sees sometimes to get lost in digressive analogies (i.e. metaphor). See Souza, *The Poetic Fiction of José Lezama Lima* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983), p. 37.
- <sup>31</sup> Here I take “imaginarias” simply to be the adjective corresponding to “image.” It would be a mistake, I think, to suggest that the eras in question are “imaginary” in the sense of invented or dreamed up, though many critics view them in just this way. The concept first appears under very confusing circumstances in *La expresión americana*, where it primarily seems to be an ancillary for another concept, the “historical vision,” as discussed in the next section. When Lezama devotes an entire essay to the “eras imaginarias,” he focuses on more or less literal historical eras (ancient Egypt and ancient China). As always, though, with Lezama one can only tentatively assert a particular reading.
- <sup>32</sup> José Lezama Lima, *La cantidad hechizada*, in *Obras completas*, vol. 2 (Mexico: Aguilar, 1977), p. 832: “La historia de la poesía no puede ser otra cosa que el estudio y expresión de las eras imaginarias.”
- <sup>33</sup> Lezama Lima, *La cantidad hechizada*, in *Obras completas*, vol. 2, p. 848: “La imagen extrae del enigma una vislumbre, con cuyo rayo podemos penetrar o al menos vivir en la espera de la resurrección. La imagen, en esa [acepción] nuestra, pretende así reducir lo sobrenatural a los sentidos tranfigurados del hombre.”
- <sup>34</sup> Lezama Lima, *La cantidad hechizada*, in *Obras completas*, p. 849: “El imposible, al actuar sobre lo posible, crea un posible actuando en la infinitud.”
- <sup>35</sup> Lezama Lima, *La cantidad hechizada*, in *Obras completas*, p. 849: “Todo lo que el hombre conoce es como un enigma, conocimiento o desconocimiento de otra jerarquía, de lo que conocerá plenamente en la muerte,

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pero tiene vislumbre de que ese enigma posee un sentido. Lo imposible, lo absurdo, crean su posible, su razón. La imposibilidad de que el hombre justifique la muerte hace que ese imposible convierta la resurrección en un posible. Lo que no es verdad ni mentira, el hombre lo percibe como verdad.”

- <sup>36</sup> Fina García Marruz, “La poesía es un caracol nocturno (en torno a *Imagen y posibilidad*),” in *Coloquio internacional sobre la obra de José Lezama Lima*, vol. 1: poesía, (Madrid: Fundamentos, 1984) p. 256: “Lejos de hacer de su sistema un todo, tendía a hacer de todo sistema fragmento de una unidad mayor que nos era a todos desconocida.”
- <sup>37</sup> Tomás Eloy Martínez, “El peregrino inmóvil,” *Índice* 23:232 (1968?), pp. 22-23: “Él estaba en el centro de mi vida y su muerte me dio el sentido de lo que yo más tarde llamaría el latido de la ausencia.... [U]na tarde, cuando jugábamos con ella a los yaquis... advertimos en el círculo que iban formando las piezas, una figura que se parecía al rostro de nuestro padre. Lloramos todos, pero aquella imagen patriarcal nos dio una unidad suprema e instiló en mi madre la idea de que mi destino era contar la historia de la familia.”
- <sup>38</sup> José Lezama Lima, *Paradiso* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2001), p. 299: “De pronto, en una fulguración, como si una nube se rompiera para dar paso a una nueva visión, apareció en las losas apesadas por el círculo la guerrera completa del Coronel, de un amarillo como oscurecido, aunque iba ascendiendo en su nitidez, los botones aun los de los cuatro bolsillos, más brillantes que su cobrizo habitual. Y sobre el cuello endurecido, el rostro del ausente, tal vez sonriéndose dentro de su lejanía, como si le alegrase, en un indescifrable contento que no podía ser compartido, ver a su esposa y a sus hijos dentro de quel círculo que los unía en un espacio y en un tiempo coincidentes por su mirada. Penetrando en esa visión, como dejada caer por la fulguración previa, los cuatro que estaban dentro del círculo iluminado tuvieron la sensación de que penetraban en un túnel; en realidad, era una sensación entrecortada, pues se abría dentro de un instante, pero donde los fragmentos y la totalidad coincidían en ese pestañeo de la visión cortada por una espada.”
- <sup>39</sup> Emilio Bejel, *José Lezama Lima, poeta de la imagen* (Madrid: Huerga & Fierro, 1994), p. 49: “un buen ejemplo de *ars poetica* lezamiana.”
- <sup>40</sup> Lezama Lima, *La cantidad hechizada*, in *Obras completas*, pp. 1224-25: “Los observaba y veía cómo penetraban en un destino que desconocían con la más invencible resistencia. Atravesaban la caída y la redención, soportando una total pesadumbre. Cuanto más me acercaba, más precisaba el temblor de su piel. Sudaban, temblaban y penetraban.... Sus distancias están ocupadas por las transformaciones incesantes de la poesía. La resistencia del mulo siembra en el abismo, como la duración poética siembra resurgiendo en lo estelar.”
- <sup>41</sup> These two version are how the poem is rendered in the published English translations: the first is by G. J. Raczy in Lezama Lima, *Selections*, ed. Ernesto Livon-Grosman (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005), p. 32; the second is by Dudley Fitts, D.D.W. and José Rodríguez Feo, in *Anthology of Contemporary Latin American Poetry*, ed. Dudley Fitts (New York: New Directions, 1947), p. 231.
- <sup>42</sup> Eloísa Lezama Lima, “Mi hermano,” in *José Lezama Lima: textos críticos*, ed. Justo C. Ulloa (Miami: El Universal, 1979), pp. 15-16: “‘Soy un mulo con orejeras que va a su destino,’ era frecuente oírle decir. Qué terquedad en su empeño literario. Nada lo desviaba de su destino. Nada lo hacía claudicar.”
- <sup>43</sup> Bejel, *Poeta de la imagen*, p. 62: “La transformación de lo estéril en lo creativo, es el tema central de la estrofa (y, en cierto sentido, de todo el poema)...el mulo no puede reproducirse en el sentido natural, pero es precisamente la ausencia de lo ‘natural’ lo que permite la participación en la sobrenaturaleza de la Imagen poética.”
- <sup>44</sup> Souza, *Poetic Fiction*, p. 15.
- <sup>45</sup> Lezama mentions him repeated in *La expresión americana*, and specifically refers to the second elegy.
- <sup>46</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans. C. F. MacIntyre (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), p. 63.
- <sup>47</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans. Edward Snow (New York: North Point, 2000), p. 51. The previously quoted line: “und die findigen Tiere merken es schon, / daß wir nicht sehr verlässlich zu Haus sind / in der gedeuteten Welt.” In Snow’s translation: “and the sly animals see at once / how little at home we are / in the interpreted world” (p. 5).
- <sup>48</sup> He stresses this point throughout *Secondary Moderns*, as well as in “Possibility, Ruin, Repetition: Rereading Lezama Lima’s ‘American Expression,’” *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 18:1 (Fall 1993), 49-66.
- <sup>49</sup> Lezama Lima, *La cantidad hechizada*, in *Obras completas*, p. 1213. In fact, Pascal’s original sentence, from §426 of the *Pensées*, runs slightly differently: “La vraie nature étant perdue, tout devient sa nature; comme, le véritable bien étant perdu, tout devient son véritable bien.” Here is Lezama’s quote: “En esa dimensión no me canso de repetir la frase de Pascal que fue una revelación para mí, ‘como la verdadera naturaleza se ha perdido, todo puede ser naturaleza’; la terrible fuerza afirmativa de esa frase, me decidió a colocar la

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imagen en el sitio de la naturaleza perdida de esa manera frente al determinismo de la naturaleza, el hombre responde con el total arbitrio de la imagen. Y frente al pesimismo de la naturaleza perdida, la invencible alegría en el hombre de la imagen reconstruida.”

- <sup>50</sup> Vitier, *Lo cubano*, p. 399: “sacar a la cultura de sus fríos encadenamientos aparentes, de su cerrazón de hecho consumado (pues quien dice cultura dice historia), para hacerla entrar en el impulso perennemente generador del sentido poético.”
- <sup>51</sup> Gustavo Pérez Firmat states that the essay is “now widely regarded as perhaps the most important mediation on the theme of Latin America identity since Octavio Paz’s *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950).” Pérez Firmat, “The Strut of the Centipede,” in *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* ed. Gustavo Pérez Firmat (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), p. 316.
- <sup>52</sup> Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, p. 80: “Repitiendo la frase de Weisbach, adaptándola a lo americano, podemos decir que entre nosotros el barroco fue un arte de la contraconquista.”
- <sup>53</sup> He was not, however, the first to point out the importance of fusion or formal blending in baroque American art. As Parkinson Zamora and Monika Kaup have stressed, Lezama no doubt drew on work by Ángel Guido, Pál Kelemen and Manuel Toussaint, among others. See my second chapter, as well as the selections by Guido in *Baroque New Worlds*, ed. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Monika Kaup (Durham: Duke, 2010).
- <sup>54</sup> At any rate, they fit Lezama’s chronologically expansive definition of the baroque, which extends throughout the eighteenth century (rather than ending at a more conventional date like 1700 or 1750). Aleijadinho died in 1814.
- <sup>55</sup> Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, p. 106: “Vemos así que el señor barroco americano, a quien hemos llamado auténtico primer instalado en lo nuestro, participa, vigila y cuida, las dos grandes síntesis que están en la raíz del barroco americano, la hispano incaica y la hispano negroide.”
- <sup>56</sup> Pellón, *Joyful Vision*, pp. 54, 55.
- <sup>57</sup> In Shakespeare’s play, Caliban famously rebukes Prospero, who has dispossessed him of his island and attempted to “civilize” him: “You taught me language, and my profit on’t / Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you / For learning me your language” (I.2.368-70).
- <sup>58</sup> Chiampi, “La historia tejida por la imagen,” p. 24: “Desprovisto de la solemnidad interpretativa de los ideólogos del americanismo y sin optimismo enajenante, Lezama pinta su americano como una suerte de Calibán: irreverente, corrosivo, rebelde y devorador.... Es natural que, con ese perfil, la estética que mejor le cuadra al americano paradigmático sea la estética barroca.” In this essay she does not really explain why the baroque aesthetic is the most suited for this Calibanesque gesture, but in an earlier essay treating the subject at length, she defines baroque discourse as obscure and thus subversive of classical standards of clarity. Because Lezama’s syntax ignores grammatical norms, it is both baroque and defiant. Chiampi, “La expresión americana de José Lezama Lima: La dificultad y el diabolismo del caníbal,” *Escritura* 10:19-20 (1985) 103-115.
- <sup>59</sup> Chiampi, “La historia tejida por la imagen,” in Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, p. 25: “dentro de su argumento, esa primacía se justifica con la atribución de un sentido revolucionario a la estética barroca—el de una ‘política’ subterránea de *contraconquista*—.”
- <sup>60</sup> Maarten van Delden, “Europe and Latin America in José Lezama Lima,” in Parkinson Zamora and Kaup, eds., *Baroque New Worlds*, p. 592. He stresses that Lezama has a very conservative streak, a view held also by Luis Duno Gottberg, Gustavo Pellón, and Emir Rodríguez Monegal.
- <sup>61</sup> Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, p. 81: “Representa un triunfo de la ciudad y un americano allí instalado con fruición y estilo normal de vida y muerte.”
- <sup>62</sup> Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, pp. 104-105: “He ahí la prueba más decisiva, cuando un esforzado de la forma, recibe un estilo de una gran tradición, y lejos de amenguarlo, lo devuelve acrecido, es un símbolo de que ese país ha alcanzado su forma en el arte de la ciudad.”
- <sup>63</sup> Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, p. 95: “Es la primera vez que en el idioma, una figura americana ocupa un lugar de primacía. En el reinado de Carlos II, donde ya se asoma la recíproca influencia americana sobre lo hispánico, es la figura central de la poesía.”
- <sup>64</sup> Luis Duno Gottberg, *Solventando las diferencias: la ideología del mestizaje en Cuba* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2003), p. 206: “Es sorprendente que el más barroco de los escritores cubanos no afirmara en ningún momento que lo barroco constituye la esencia de lo latinoamericano; no obstante siempre tuvo presentes dicho período y dicha estética.”

- <sup>65</sup> José Lezama Lima, “En una exposición de Roberto Diago,” from *Tratados de la Habana*, in *Obras completas*, vol. 2, p. 745. The essay was written in 1948. Lezama frequently used *evaporar* (evaporate) as a transitive verb, apparently in the sense of “give off,” as a smell. As Chiampì points out, this is among other things a reference to Rilke’s second elegy. Here is Lezama’s original quotation: “Por eso no creeremos nunca que el barroco es una constante histórica y una fatalidad y que determinados ingredientes lo repiten y acompañan. Y los que quieren estropear una cosa nuestra, afirmando que en la cultura griega hubo un barroco y otro en el medioevo, y otro en la China, creen estáticamente que el barroco es una etpaa de la cultura y que se llega a eso, como se llega a la dentición, a la menopausia o a la gingivitis, ignorando que para todos nosotros, en el descubrimiento histórico o en la realización, fue una arribada, un desembarco y un pasmo de maravillas. Pues en España no fue el barroco un estilo que había que valorarlo en presencia o lejanía del gótico, sino como un *humus* fecundante que evaporaba como cinco civilizaciones.”
- <sup>66</sup> Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, pp. 62-63. The long paragraph this passage is taken from comes very close to summing up the argument of the entire book. Here is the quoted text in the original: “Nuestro punto de vista parte de la imposibilidad de dos estilos semejantes, de la negación del desdén a los epígonos, de la no identidad de dos formas aparentemente concluyentes, de lo creativo de un nuevo concepto de la causalidad histórica, que destruye el pseudo concepto temporal de que todo se dirige a lo contemporáneo, a un tiempo fragmentario.”
- <sup>67</sup> Quoted by Lezama, *La expresión americana*, p. 57; T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1971), p. 31.
- <sup>68</sup> Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, p. 63: “He ahí el germen del complejo terrible del americano: creer que su expresión no es forma alcanzada, sino problematismo, cosa a resolver.”
- <sup>69</sup> Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, p. 58: “Nuestro método quisiera más acercarse a esa técnica de la ficción, preconizada por Curtius, que al método mítico crítico de Eliot. Todo tendrá que ser reconstruido, invencionado de nuevo, y los viejos mitos, al reaparecer de nuevo, nos ofrecerán sus conjuros y sus enigmas con un rostro desconocido. La ficción de los mitos son nuevos mitos, con nuevos cansancios y terrores.”
- <sup>70</sup> See Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, pp. 53-54.
- <sup>71</sup> Lezama’s argumentation on pp. 58-59 make it clear that he is referring to an alternative but not radically different approach to history: he outlines his method, goes on to state that historiography should stress “image eras” rather than cultures, and then cites examples: “Es decir, la imaginación etrusca, la carolingia, la bretona, etc., donde el hecho, al surgir sobre el tapiz de una era imaginaria, cobró su realidad y su gravitación.” After giving a detailed account of the Carolingian imagination, he reiterates that this is an approach to history that lets the “metaphorical subject” use the past more easily: “Sorprendido ese cuadro de una humanidad dividida por eras correspondientes a su potencialidad para crear imágenes, es más fácil percibir o visualizar las extensión de ese contrapunto animista, donde se verifican esos enlaces, y el riesgo o la simpatía del sujeto metafórico.” Admittedly, this is a minor point, but it is worth making in order to show that Lezama’s most often cited concept is more than the grab bag of historical miscellany that it is often made out to be.
- <sup>72</sup> Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, pp. 160-161: “[Era] una nueva manifestación del hombre en su lucha con la forma.... Las grandes figuras del arte contemporáneo, han descubierto regiones que parecían sumergidas, formas de expresión o conocimiento que se habían desusado, permaneciendo extrañamente creadoras. El conocimiento de Joyce del neotomismo, siquiera sea como diletante, no era un eco tardío de la escolástica, sino un mundo medieval que al ponerse en contacto con él se volvía extrañamente creador. La llegada de Stravinsky a Pergolesi, no era una astucia neoclásica, sino la necesidad de encontrar un hilo en la tradición.”
- <sup>73</sup> Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, p. 161. “La gran excepción de un Leonardo o de un Goethe, se convertía en nuestra época en la expresión signaria, que exigía un intuitivo y rápido conocimiento de los estilos anteriores, rostros de lo que ha seguido siendo creador después de tantos naufragios[,] y una adecuada situación en la polémica contemporánea, en el fiel de lo que se retira hacia las sombras y el chorro que salta de las aguas.” (Comma added in translation.)
- <sup>74</sup> Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, p. 161: “Si Picasso saltaba de lo dórico a lo eritreo, de Chardin a lo provenzal, nos parecía una óptima señal de los tiempos, pero si un americano estudiaba y asimilaba a Picasso, *horror referens*.” Chiampì explains that the Latin phrase *horresco referens*, meaning “I shudder to tell,” comes from the *Aeneid* 2:204.
- <sup>75</sup> Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, p. 163: “Ha sido el malagueño, en nuestra época, el ente influenciador, el ser hecho para provocar en los demás una virtud recipiendaria.”

- <sup>76</sup> Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, p. 167. "El paisaje es una de las formas de dominio del hombre, como un acueducto romano, una sentencia de Licurgo o el triunfo apolíneo de la flauta. Paisaje es siempre diálogo, reducción de la naturaleza puesta a la altura del hombre. Cuando decimos naturaleza el *panta rei* engulle al hombre como un leviatán de lo extenso. Paisaje es la naturaleza amigada con el hombre."
- <sup>77</sup> Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, p. 63: "Lo único que crea cultura es paisaje y eso lo tenemos de maestra monstruosidad, sin que nos recorra el cansancio de los crepúsculos críticos."
- <sup>78</sup> Pérez Firmat, "Strut of the Centipede," in Pérez Firmat, ed., *Do the Americas Have a Common Literature?* p. 328.
- <sup>79</sup> Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, p. 167: "El más frenético poseso de la mimesis de lo europeo, se licua si el paisaje que lo acompaña tiene su espíritu y lo ofrece, y conversamos con él siquiera sea en el sueño."
- <sup>80</sup> Lezama Lima, *La expresión americana*, p. 104: "Ahora, gracias al heroísmo y revivencia de sus símbolos, precisamos que podemos acercarnos a las manifestaciones de cualquier estilo sin acomplejarnos ni resbalar, siempre que insertemos allí los símbolos de nuestro destino y la escritura con que nuestra alma anegó los objetos."
- <sup>81</sup> Chiampí, "La dificultad y diabolismo del caníbal," p. 107: "Su obra ha reinventado el más fino además del caníbal auténtico: devoración y parodia del patrimonio de las grandes culturas, antiguas o modernas; apropiación y extrañamiento del lenguaje, por la ruina de sus constricciones y convenciones más consagradas; ejercicio parricida de conspiración permanente contra la autoridad y la compostura del discurso. En suma: *rebelión productora de la diferencia en la dificultad*. Lezama es bien aquella 'thing of darkness' que Próspero atribuyó a Calibán, y por ello mismo sus textos nos han abierto una nueva y revolucionaria experiencia estética, en el ámbito de nuestra modernidad literaria."
- <sup>82</sup> García Marruz, "La poesía es un caracol nocturno," p. 257: "'La ínsula distinta en el Cosmos o, lo que es lo mismo, la ínsula indistinta en el Cosmos.' Ningún enfrentamiento de 'lo americano' frente a 'lo europeo' o de otra cultura, ningún enfrentamiento entre generaciones o distintos modos expresivos, ninguna dicotomía de arte y vida, de poesía culta y poesía popular."
- <sup>83</sup> For a helpful chronology of Lezama's life, see Iván González Cruz, *Lezama Lima 1910-1976* (Madrid: Ediciones del Orto, 1999). There were five other vice presidents, among them Guillermo Cabrera Infante. Here, too, Cabrera Infante's essay "Tema del héroe y la heroína," in *Mea Cuba*, is extremely useful and interesting.
- <sup>84</sup> Heberto Padilla, "La poesía en su lugar," *Lunes de Revolución* 1:38 (December 7, 1959), pp. 5-6, quoted in Óscar Montero, "El 'compromiso' del escritor en 1959 y la 'Corona de frutas' de Lezama," *Revista Iberoamericana* 57:154 (winter 1991), p. 35. I have not been able to see the whole article, as very few U.S. libraries have a complete run of *Lunes*. Here is Padilla's original quote: "'José Lezama Lima terminó ya.... [S]u nombre quedará en nuestras antologías ilustrando las torpezas de una etapa de transición que acabamos de cancelar en 1959.'"
- <sup>85</sup> Incidentally, the editorially independent *Lunes* was shut down in 1961 after it protested the censorship of the short film *P.M.*; the polemic around this film prompted Casto to issue his memorably ambiguous guidelines, "within the Revolution, everything, against the Revolution, nothing." William Luis's very useful book *Lunes de Revolución: literatura y cultura en los primeros años de la Revolución Cubana* (Madrid: Verbum, 2003) contains an essay by Cabrera Infante, "Un mes lleno de *Lunes*," that describes these polemics (and others) in some detail.
- <sup>86</sup> Ben A. Heller, *Assimilation/Generation/Resurrection* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1997), p. 155.
- <sup>87</sup> This was the case at least as of a decade ago. See González Echevarría, *Crítica práctica / práctica crítica*, p. 190, especially n. 2.
- <sup>88</sup> See, for example, Lourdes Casal, *El caso Padilla: literatura y revolución en Cuba* (Miami: Universal, n.d.) or more recently Marcela Croce, ed., *Polémicas intelectuales en América Latina, del 'meridiano intelectual' al caso Padilla (1927-1971)* (Buenos Aires: Simurg, 2006).
- <sup>89</sup> Cabrera Infante, *Mea Cuba*, p. 346: "Pero a partir de 1971 y la delación de Padilla, cayó sobre el poeta y *Paradiso* un doble domo de silencio y cuando ganó un premio en Italia y fue invitado a Roma le fue negado el permiso de salida. Igualmente le impidieron viajar a México."
- <sup>90</sup> See Enrico Mario Santi, "La invención de Lezama," *Vuelta*, 9:102 (May 1985), pp. 45-49. Also: José Lezama Lima, *Imagen y posibilidad*, ed. Ciro Bianchi Ross (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 1981).
- <sup>91</sup> Lisandro Otero, "Para una definición mejor de Lezama Lima," in *Disidencias y coincidencias en Cuba* (Havana: José Martí, 1985), pp. 96-103. Consulted online at [lajiribilla.cu](http://lajiribilla.cu). In the original: "Algunos plumíferos de la contrarrevolución han desatado una campaña que intenta demostrar que Lezama sufrió persecuciones y ataques de la Revolución. La evidencia ofrecida demuestra lo contrario: nunca antes el poeta recibió tanto

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reconocimiento, apoyo, estímulos, lauros, como en el período que se inicia en 1959; nunca, como hasta entonces, pudo encauzar su vocación tan plenamente.”

<sup>92</sup> Heller, *Assimilation / Generation / Resurrection*, p. 156.

<sup>93</sup> Pellón, *José Lezama Lima's Joyful Vision*, p. 94.

<sup>94</sup> Chiampi, “La dificultad y el diabolismo del caníbal,” p. 115: “Revolucionario silencioso, su política se articula como la contrafacción del sistema simbólico del colonizador.”

<sup>95</sup> Lezama Lima, *Cartas a Eloísa*, p. 419. María Guadalupe Silva studies this letter in “Avatares de un concepto. Notas sobre Lezama, Carpentier y el barroco americano,” *Lucero* 15 (2004), 75-91. In the original: “Creo que cometemos un error, usar viejas calificaciones para nuevas formas de expresión.... Creo ya lo de barroco va resultando un término apestoso, apoyado en la costumbre y el cansancio. Con el calificativo de barroco se trata de apresar maneras que en su fondo tienen diferencias radicales. García Márquez no es barroco, tampoco lo son Cortázar o Fuentes, Carpentier parece más bien un neoclásico, Borges mucho menos. La sorpresa con que nuestra literatura llegó a Europa hizo echarle mano a esa vieja manera, por otra parte en extremo brillante y que tuvo momentos de gran esplendor.”

<sup>96</sup> González, *El ingenio culpable*, p. 123: “Pudiéramos decir que la más firme tradición cubana es la tradición del porvenir.... Todos marchamos hacia una finalidad, que la vemos todavía un poco lejana, que quizá todavía no la podamos alcanzar. Esa imprecisión es conveniente, nos enriquece. Esa definición por alcanzar nos da vigor y amplitud.”

## Chapter Five

### Severo Sarduy's Alternative Revolution

“We condemn the false Latin American writers who...cut ties with their countries of origin and took refuge in the capitals of the rotting and decadent societies of Western Europe and the United States to become agents of the imperialist metropolitan culture.” So ran the official statement issued by Cuba’s first National Congress on Education and Culture, held in late April 1971. The declaration clarified the government’s position on fashion, customs, religion, sexuality and cultural activity, among other things, and it singled out intellectuals sympathetic to the Revolution who had recently criticized its treatments of writers. “In Paris, London, Rome, West Berlin, New York,” the text went on, “these pharisees find the best ground for their ambiguities, hesitations and miseries, generated by the cultural colonialism they have accepted and profess. In revolutionary peoples, they will find only the scorn due traitors and turncoats.”<sup>1</sup> Presumably these lines referred to the fifty-four authors of an open letter published earlier that month in *Le Monde*, denouncing the detention of poet and critic Heberto Padilla, whose award-winning collection of poems *Fuera del juego* (1968) had been deemed counter-revolutionary. Padilla spent a month in prison and upon his release had to read a self-criticism at the Cuban Writers and Artists Union (UNEAC), in which he warned his colleagues—many of whom he identified by name—not to stray from the party orthodoxy. In response to this degrading spectacle, a second, more pointed letter appeared in *Le Monde* on May 20, dismissing Padilla’s recantation as forced and drawing comparisons with the Stalinist show trials of the 1930s.

The event divided the intellectuals of the Spanish-speaking world. Of the many prominent writers previously aligned with, or favorably disposed toward, Cuba’s revolutionary government, some publicly broke with the regime, like Mario Vargas Llosa, others defended it, like García Márquez and Rodolfo Walsh, and at least one, Julio Cortázar, voiced initial discomfort but ultimately defended its policies. It would be difficult to overstate the polarizing effect of the “Padilla affair,” as it quickly came to be known, just as it would be difficult to overstate the unifying effect of the revolutionary enthusiasm that preceded it in the 1960s.<sup>2</sup> As Emir Rodríguez Monegal later noted, “the overwhelming majority of the Latin American *intelligentsia* put itself at the service of the revolution,” and this in turn led to a sort of conceptual centralization of the continent’s culture. If before 1959 its intellectual life had been scattered, with little communication between Argentina and Mexico, Peru and Colombia, after 1959 it becomes “a culture that has a center: Havana, and an ideology: that of revolutionary Cuba.”<sup>3</sup> Cuba became the imagined space through which all questions of politics and aesthetics inevitably passed. And not only for Latin America, but for Spain as well, where the Cuban cause had ignited the sympathies of Carlos Barral, Alfonso Sastre, José María Castellet, and many others. In the 1960s, the Hispanic world found itself more connected than it had



been perhaps since the wars of independence, and Havana lay squarely at its intellectual meridian.<sup>4</sup>

Severo Sarduy, one of the most conspicuous “pseudo-leftist writers” whose residence in Paris so irked the Cuban establishment, took no active part in the events surrounding the Padilla affair. He did not sign either letter, nor did he comment publicly on the flurry of accusations that followed. In 1959, at the age of twenty-two, he left Cuba on a scholarship to study art history, and after meeting François Wahl, who would become his lifelong partner, he settled in Paris. He had never openly criticized the regime—indeed, aside from isolated or offhand comments, he never did<sup>5</sup>—but his decision to prolong his stay (among other factors) led the government in 1964 to withdraw his passport and permission to return. This left him in a contradictory and uncomfortable position, as Roberto González Echevarría has noted. “In sharp contrast to other Latin American exiles in 1960s Paris, Sarduy lived excluded from the country that for them had become a focus of convergence of a sort of continental supranationality: revolutionary Cuba,” he writes. “Among these, and with no small amount of suffering, Sarduy was an exile to the second degree,” outside both his homeland and the imagined Cuba of his contemporaries.<sup>6</sup>

This awkward position did not, however, make him an outsider. In fact, more than perhaps any other Latin American writer living in Paris, he was an insider, serving as a nexus to the Parisian intellectual world during the heyday of structuralism and poststructuralism. As editor (and eventually head) of the Iberoamerican section of Éditions du Seuil, Sarduy published Lezama Lima, García Márquez, Reinaldo Arenas, Manuel Puig and many others in French translation. And as a writer, he had by 1971 made a name for himself with two novels, *Gestos* (1963) and *De donde son los cantantes* (1967), and a book of criticism, *Escrito sobre un cuerpo* (1969)—this last title made up largely of essays previously (and prominently) published in *Tel Quel* and *Mundo Nuevo*. María Eugenia Mudrovic notes that Sarduy “imported theories, molded tastes, promoted certain authors, took issue with certain others, translated works, connected critics, artists and writers, and conquered editorial circuits traditionally impenetrable to young foreign novelists.”<sup>7</sup> By the time of the Padilla affair, Sarduy had become a fixed star in the Latin American intellectual firmament. And this fact makes his silence puzzling.

Of course, on a list of concerned supporters of the Revolution, his name would have convinced no one. His distaste for the regime, or at least its cultural policies, must have seemed obvious in the 1960s and 1970s: in the first place he published in the journal *Mundo Nuevo*, which held itself aloof from revolutionary enthusiasm (and which even received funding from the CIA), he also showed no qualms about poking fun at the most revered heroes of the Revolution: *De donde son los cantantes* ends with a pointed, campy send-up of Castro’s triumphal entry into Havana. In this light, Sarduy’s decision not to sign the letters of protest came as no surprise.

What makes Sarduy’s silence so surprising is the prominence he gives “revolution” in his theoretical writings. Revolution is absolutely central to Sarduy’s concept of the neobaroque—a concept he invented, and which, in turn, defined his career. Others before him had turned their attention to the baroque, of course: Gerardo Diego and the Generation of 1927 had made it an avant-garde obsession, José Lezama Lima had placed it at the center of Latin American cultural history, Eugeni d’Ors had made it eternal and recurring, and Alejo Carpentier had promoted it as a style for the present. But it is Sarduy who defined the neobaroque as a specific aesthetic program, and who traced the

lines along which it is still understood today—namely, as something subversive, queer, metalinguistic, campy, elliptical, extravagant, ironic, defiant and, not least, revolutionary.

This last point is nowhere more striking than in “El barroco y el neobarroco” (1972), without a doubt Sarduy’s most widely read and influential essay. There he notes an affinity for baroque aesthetics in contemporary Latin American writing and visual arts. Part of this lies in a playful, excessive poetics that seems to impede rather than convey an intelligible message. At the end of the essay, after a long discussion of the baroque’s characteristic failure to produce a single, recognizable meaning, he concludes with a passage that, despite having been cited countless times, deserves quoting here:

Baroque which, in its toppling over, in its fall, in its *paintery* and occasionally shrill, motley, chaotic language, metaphorizes defiance against the logocentric being that formerly structured it and us from its distance and its authority; baroque which rejects any establishment, metaphorizes the disputed order, the god put on trial, the law transgressed. Baroque of the Revolution.<sup>8</sup>

The baroque aesthetics that he identifies in (then) contemporary Latin American art and letters is revolutionary because it rejects a logocentric faith in “truth,” “meaning,” “presence” or any other such transcendent organizing principle. Such a rejection, to put it mildly, stands at odds with the revolutionary aesthetics codified the previous year in the declaration of the National Congress on Education and Culture, which condemned not only the “pseudoleftist” writers living in Europe but also any art that did not overtly support the revolutionary cause. Fidel Castro, in his closing speech, made this perfectly clear: “There can be no aesthetic value without human content,” he declared. “There can be no aesthetic value against man. There can be no aesthetic value against justice, against welfare, against liberation, against man’s happiness. There can be none!”<sup>9</sup> Time would make clear that these words signaled a return to socialist realism—an aesthetic that outside Cuba did not inspire much enthusiasm.

But Sarduy’s neobaroque did, and quite a lot of it: the term resonated among writers and critics, and in subsequent decades it went on to become a key point of reference for postwar Latin American literature—eventually even inside revolutionary Cuba. Its later success went far beyond (or perhaps fell short of) what Sarduy had originally envisaged, becoming a convenient label for any work that stood out for its exuberance, its difficulty, or its explicit interest in Latin American identity. If the concept and the term grabbed hold of the critical imagination, part of the reason lies in its ambivalence toward revolution: it celebrates it as an abstract, aesthetic operation while remaining silent about any concrete political agenda—and most pointedly, about Cuba’s increasingly intransigent cultural politics.

The fact that in 1972 a Cuban exile made “revolution” the cornerstone of his aesthetic project, with no comment on the political crisis of the previous year, is no mere coincidence. At the time the significance of this gesture must have been clear: in effect, Sarduy redefines revolution in primarily aesthetic terms, and in doing so challenges the revolutionary potential of the social-realist aesthetics put forth by the regime. His diplomatically, even clinically neutral tone barely conceals a boldly polemical statement.

As virtually all critics note, the neobaroque draws equally on French structuralism (and poststructuralism) and mid-century Latin American writing. Sarduy’s genius, it

would appear, lies in his ability to open a channel between what had seemed unrelated intellectual currents. But this is only part of the picture. Beyond the marriage of high theory and literary innovation, Sarduy's essay taps into a deep uneasiness about the meaning of revolution, an uneasiness that became harder to ignore once the Cuban government could no longer claim to be the beacon of cultural and artistic freedom its supporters hoped it would be. The essay's importance—indeed its popularity—lies above all in this fact.

Perhaps, then, Sarduy did not remain silent on the Padilla affair after all—one could read “El barroco y el neobarroco” as his response. Whether he intended his essay as such is unclear. It seems unlikely, as the book in which it appeared, *América Latina en su literatura* (1972), had most almost certainly been in the works since before Padilla's arrest. But the timing is beside the point. For in the neobaroque Sarduy provided a new critical tool for endorsing revolution in the abstract without supporting the Cuban government—but also, just as importantly, without having to repudiate it. In fact, the neobaroque more broadly, as a theoretical construct and a critical tradition, might best be seen as a response to the questions of politics, art, identity, solidarity and sacrifice that came to a head in 1971, but which extended far beyond the fate of a single poet. After the Padilla affair had carved stark divisions among Latin American (or Hispanic) intellectuals, the neobaroque offered a sort of reconciliation. The neobaroque, in short, made it possible to be revolutionary without the Revolution.

### **Instability, new and old**

Sarduy coined the term “neobaroque” in 1972, but his interest in the topic (with or without the prefix) dates back to the mid 1960s, when he published essays on Góngora and Lezama, the twin figures who more than any other defined the baroque. And his interest lasted throughout his career, reappearing more or less prominently in all of his subsequent criticism: most obviously in *Barroco* (1974), but also in *La simulación* (1981) and *Nueva inestabilidad* (1987). He only distinguished baroque from neobaroque when such a distinction became necessary—for him the two were essentially continuous, part of the same phenomenon: a sort of self-referential use of language unconcerned with communication. But while in the broad outlines the definition remained the same, over the following two decades he constantly revisited and revised it. In *Nueva inestabilidad*, for example, he restricts the definition by cautioning against a merely formal understanding of the baroque:

We will avoid simple-minded analogies according to which accumulation, waste or complexity, the play of curves or the absent center would suffice to define a language as baroque. Likewise, tautological works, *mises en abyme*, any symbolic structure whose source or generation are made explicit in the work itself, like something visible on the signifying surface, find themselves, by definition, outside of what could be called a neobaroque *retombée*.<sup>10</sup>

His statement that the baroque involves more than a handful of self-conscious gestures is in fact a veiled critique of another theory—namely his own from 1972: accumulation, waste, complexity, the play of curves and the absent center are all traits he defined as baroque fifteen years earlier. Below I will return to what he proposes in place of this

formal definition—and also to the underlying tensions that this revision seeks to resolve. First, though, a closer examination of the earlier essay is in order.

Following a carefully divided and subdivided structure, in “El barroco y el neobarroco” Sarduy identifies three main components of baroque aesthetics and language, which with some simplification could be called artificialization (i.e., contrived circumlocution), parody (i.e., various forms of intertextuality) and eroticism (i.e., nonproductive or nonreproductive activity, and by extension any playful or gratuitous use of language aimed more at pleasure than communication). Lezama, for example, much like Góngora before him, takes extravagant pains to avoid the “natural,” direct stratum of language, tracing instead elaborate metaphors that more often than not obscure what they ostensibly describe. Likewise, the work of both writers, along with that of many contemporaries, constantly allude to other texts, which are visible “between the lines” through mimicry, mockery or direct incorporation. And third, by delighting in circumlocution, excess, language for language’s sake, such works do not seek simply to convey a message. What unites all these features is a sense of nonproductive playfulness: Sarduy’s baroque means above all an opposition to the “work” of communication, or to a naive belief in language as a window onto reality. “Baroque space is one of superabundance and waste,” he writes. “In contrast to communicative, economic, austere language, reduced to its functionality—to serve as a vehicle for information—baroque language delights in the supplement, in excess and the partial loss of its object.” Excess in one form or another is central to many definitions of the baroque, but Sarduy’s novelty lies in how he links abundance to a foundational lack through a distinctly Lacanian or Derridean language: “The supplement—one more twist, that ‘one more angel!’ that Lezama talks about—intervenes as the acknowledgment of a failure: the failure that signifies the presence of a nonrepresentable object, which resists crossing the line of Alterity.”<sup>11</sup> A secret central absence is the baroque’s animating germ—an idea that would become increasingly prominent in his work. Artificialization, parody, and eroticism respond to this underlying emptiness.

Sarduy’s attempt to introduce theoretical rigor into the often hazy discussions of the baroque makes his essay very compelling, and the subdivision of each of the three general features into a series of more specific techniques—substitution, proliferation, condensation, intertextuality, intratextuality, etc.—gives the argument an air of almost scientific precision. Earlier critics had described Lezama’s prose as “baroque,” but the term evoked only a vague sense of difficulty or exuberance; Sarduy’s essay seeks to remedy that lack. Nevertheless, much of this precision is deceptive, for most if not all of the techniques are familiar from other contexts—and indeed are fundamental to any definition of literary language. Metaphor, intertextuality, circumlocution, etc., are simply not unique to the baroque. To take one of Sarduy’s examples, calling a character’s uncommonly large member “leptosomático macrogenitoma,” as Lezama does in *Paradiso*, is indeed a very peculiar kind of metaphor, extreme and exaggerated in a style that became Lezama’s trademark. But the operation—substituting a humorous circumlocution for an everyday term—is not unique to the baroque.

No doubt sensing this problem, Sarduy takes a markedly different tack in his second critical work, *Barroco*. There he studies not the literary or artistic devices visible in the baroque but rather the underlying epistemic rift that he sees dividing the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Baroque art, architecture and literature appear here as the echo of a much larger transformation in the understanding of the world, a change most

clearly visible in a new model of the solar system. The key figure is Kepler, whose elliptical theory of planetary motion dislodged the circular Copernican model and thus carried with it a radical decentering of the world. Suddenly, writes Sarduy, “the master figure is not the circle, with its single, radiating, luminous, paternal center, but the ellipse, which sets against that visible focus another one, equally operative, equally real, but occluded, dead, nocturnal, the blind center.”<sup>12</sup> Beyond astronomy, the discovery finds resonance in art and architecture, where the ellipse becomes an organizing principle, as well as in literary production, where the ellipse’s rhetorical counterpart—the ellipsis—takes hold. Many of the techniques outlined in the previous essay, such as circumlocution around an absent center, are here linked to larger epistemic shift. Baroque poetry, with its overwrought metaphors and conceits, thus reflects a larger disruption in the certainties of meaning and authority.

This effect or reflection is what Sarduy terms the *retombée*—literally “echo” or “impact.” Sarduy uses the term to fill a curious gap in his argument: many recognizably baroque works in fact appear *before* the scientific discoveries were made or publicized. “There is a ‘décalage’ in the epistemic break,” he writes. “The *retombée* can occur without respecting causalities...but rather, paradoxically, shuffling them.”<sup>13</sup> A *retombée* is thus “the echo that precedes the voice,” an effect that precedes its cause—and thus a methodological device that lets Sarduy dispense with causality altogether, or simply to emphasize correspondence and correlation.

While Sarduy is far from the first to relate baroque art to astronomy—art historians had long traced it back to the ascendance of the heliocentric model and the corresponding notion of infinite space—he is perhaps the first to move the emphasis away from Copernicus and onto Kepler. Copernicus would seem the more obviously “revolutionary” figure—after all, one speaks of a Copernican revolution, not a Keplerian revolution—but in Sarduy’s view he simply replaces one circular system with another, leaving a model every bit as balanced, regular and perfect as its Ptolemaic predecessor. Copernicus “modifies the system, he does not subvert it; he does not revolutionize, he reforms.”<sup>14</sup> Kepler, on the other hand, inaugurates a more radical, more truly revolutionary break by replacing that single center—which corresponds to God or truth—with a double center. Aside from its originality, Sarduy’s move is important for two reasons. First, it points to the penchant for dualism that runs throughout his work: characters, chapters, even whole books come in sets of twos. Duality is above all nonunity in his work, as mirrors, twins, repetitions and the like aim ultimately at undermining the production of a single, unified meaning (something that becomes evident in *Cobra*). In the second place, Sarduy’s preference for Kepler over Copernicus gives a clue to how he understands revolution: it is not necessarily found in the most obvious change—replacing the earth with the sun, or Batista with Castro—but rather in a disruption of the system’s underlying logic. His bid to define revolutionary aesthetics in “El barroco y el neobarroco” along lines that run counter to the official aesthetics of the Cuban regime echoes this move.

The distinction between the apparently and the actually revolutionary seems pertinent to how he revises the neobaroque in *Nueva inestabilidad*, quoted above. Rejecting a merely formal understanding of the neobaroque as a series of techniques—abundance, excess, metaphor—Sarduy here notes that the contemporary baroque should, like its seventeenth-century predecessor, be the *retombée* of an epistemic shift. In the twentieth century, this shift comes from the theory of the Big Bang, which, he explains, offers a

coherent explanation of the initial state of the universe but not of its subsequent expansion. “The mission of today’s curious observer, of the spectator of the baroque,” he writes, “is to detect, in art, the *retombée* or reflection of a cosmology for which the origin is almost a certainty but the forms following it an inconceivable hiatus, almost an aberration.”<sup>15</sup> He then goes on to give a slightly more concrete, more suggestive description. Whereas ellipsis characterized the first baroque,

unevenly expanding phonetic and graphic matter would be the hallmark of the second. An irregular expansion whose origin has been lost and whose law cannot be formulated...a neobaroque in eruption whose signs spin and escape toward the boundaries of the medium, with no formula capable of charting their boundaries or following the mechanism of their production. Toward the boundaries of thought, the image of a universe erupting to the point of exhaustion, until it is ashes. And, perhaps, closing in on itself again.<sup>16</sup>

This later reflection on the baroque adopts a more somber tone and places an even greater emphasis on absence, emptiness and death. Here Sarduy replaces the earlier enumeration of techniques with less itemized but more suggestive definition of the baroque, as the response—*retombée*—to a more recent epistemic groundlessness. But this revision of the neobaroque raises questions that Sarduy never wholly resolves: does the baroque define the aesthetic or epistemic horizon of an age, thus making everyone or every work baroque? Or is it rather an aesthetic mode that an individual artist could consciously adopt or reject? And in either case, is it more pronounced in certain traditions or countries than in others? Is it limited to Latin America, or does it have universal application?

This last question might seem odd, for contemporary critics overwhelmingly view the neobaroque as an exclusively Latin American (or perhaps Hispanic) phenomenon. Sarduy, however, made surprisingly unclear and contradictory statements on this point. Given that “El barroco y el neobarroco” was commissioned for a volume entitled *América Latina en su literatura*, it seems reasonable to conclude that he meant it strictly as a Latin American aesthetic, one whose “baroque-ness” stemmed from its dialogue with the literature of the Hispanic Golden Age. (For Sarduy the historical baroque means above all Góngora.) Nevertheless, Sarduy ultimately seems interested in something with a wider reach. His previous book of criticism, *Escrito sobre un cuerpo*, outlined a similar aesthetic, though not identified as baroque, in a handful of French and Italian authors and North American visual artists; his later essays are similarly international and inclusive—but not without ambiguity. For example, in an essay entitled “Barroco furioso” (included in *La simulación*), he gives perhaps his strongest statement about the baroque’s distinctive Americanness:

This frenzied and defiant new baroque can only emerge on the critical or violent margins of a great surface—of a language, an ideology, or a civilization: in the space at once lateral and open, superimposed, excentric and *dialectal* of America: edge and

negation, displacement and ruins of the reborn Spanish surface, exodus, transplant and end of a language, of a knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

More than a definitive statement, however, this should be seen as an attempt—and an only partly successful one at that—to resolve this fundamental ambiguity, which cuts across his imaginative and theoretical work. In the sentence following the above lines, Sarduy hedges the statement, saying that Latin American artists might provide “one of the most significant indications” of a presumably broader contemporary baroque.<sup>18</sup> In fact most of the “neobaroque” artists he discusses in that same book (such as Carlos Saura and Antoni Tàpies) come from Europe. This fact, taken together with his insistence on the neobaroque as a response to a much broader epistemic break, suggest that Sarduy’s neobaroque is tied only ambivalently, at best, to questions of identity. Far more important were its epistemic, aesthetic and political dimensions.

But in the 1970s it became difficult not to see the theory in terms of identity. On the one hand, Alejo Carpentier and others had already given the baroque a central place in Latin American identity discourse; on the other, Sarduy himself had made Cuban identity the key focus of his second and most successful novel, *De donde son los cantantes*. Beyond these two factors, however, there is a third reason the baroque became tied to identity, and it has to do (as outlined above) with the events of 1971. For the angry denunciations and exchanges of letters had the curious effect of collapsing and confusing politics and identity, as questions about who could speak for the left became questions about who could speak for Latin America. Nowhere is this more visible than in Roberto Fernández Retamar’s essay *Caliban* (1971), a text which, perhaps even more than the declaration of the First National Congress on Education and Culture, served as the “official” response to the Padilla crisis. More to the point, the text and its central conceit act as a sort of double for Sarduy’s reflections on the neobaroque, providing a radically different—but ultimately complementary—view of revolution in the intellectual sphere.

### **No logos**

Retamar’s title *Caliban* refers less to *The Tempest* than to José Enrique Rodó’s watershed essay *Ariel* (1900), which had invoked the characters from Shakespeare’s play as an allegory about Latin America’s future. As Rodó saw it, the continent faced a choice between the vulgar materialism the United States, represented by the monstrous and malformed Caliban, and the spiritual values of its own Latin heritage, symbolized by the ethereal spirit Ariel. Needless to say, Rodó called on his contemporaries to choose the latter. Retamar, writing seventy years later, does not wholly disagree with Rodó, but sees the allegory somewhat differently: in his view Europe and the United States, with their colonial pretensions, both play the role of Prospero—and in response Latin America must adopt an appropriately defiant, “Calibanesque” posture:

Our symbol is thus not Ariel, as Rodó thought, but Caliban. This is something that we *mestizos* who live on the same islands as Caliban see with particular clarity. Prospero invaded the islands, killed our ancestors, enslaved Caliban and taught him his language in order to communicate with him. What else can Caliban do but use that same language to curse, to wish the ‘red plague’ on him? I

know of no other metaphor more apt for our cultural situation, for our reality.<sup>19</sup>

For Retamar, it is incumbent upon Latin Americans, and above all Latin American intellectuals, to use the tools of European science and culture to rebel against capitalist and neocolonial oppression and to join in the struggle for socialism. Though he never mentions Padilla by name—the controversy apparently went unreported in the Cuban press—he leaves no doubt about which events occasioned the essay: he begins with a transparent reference to “the recent polemic about Cuba” and ends with an attack on writers who questioned the regime’s policies. Even more intriguingly follows the above passage with a lengthy list of preeminent figures from Latin America’s past and present who embody, he feels, just such a spirit of rebellion. Those fifty or so names recall—perhaps intentionally—the names on the two collective letters of protest published just months earlier. If dozens of the most prominent European and Latin American intellectuals had voiced opposition to the Cuban regime, Retamar would enlist Túpac Amaru, Toussaint L’Ouverture, Simón Bolívar and José Martí in support, along with several more contemporary literary and artistic figures: Aimé Césaire, Gabriel García Márquez, Rosario Castellanos, Juan Rulfo, and Wifredo Lam, among many others. Retamar does not say that these figures form a coherent political group, but he does place them in a single intellectual genealogy: these contemporary writers, he implies, are the true heirs to an authentically Latin American tradition of revolt. They are, in short, the intellectuals who ally themselves with Caliban. For while Caliban is the symbol of Latin America as a whole, Ariel—who in *The Tempest* loyally serves Prospero—is the intellectual. And Ariel has a choice: “he can choose either to serve Prospero...with whom he apparently gets along wonderfully, but for whom he can never be more than a frightened slave, or to join Caliban in his struggle for true freedom.”<sup>20</sup> Retamar leaves little doubt about which camp Cuba’s critics fall into. Much of the essay’s considerable force derives from its division between authentic Latin Americans, who fight for freedom, and inauthentic ones who put themselves at the service of the continent’s oppressors. In a subtle but effective rhetorical gesture, Retamar presents the Cuban government as Caliban, and its critics as foreign henchmen. Hence the writers who expressed alarm at the hostile, hardline rhetoric of Castro’s 1971 speech, and saw in it signs of Soviet influence, were in Retamar’s view disingenuous or out of touch:

The fact that some of those alarmed once praised Fanon...and now ascribe to distortion or outside influence an attitude that is at the very root of our historical essence, may be evidence of several things. Among them, total incoherence. Also ignorance of—if not scorn for—our concrete realities, both in the present and in the past. Which, incidentally, does not authorize them to have much to do with our future.<sup>21</sup>

If Caliban’s defiance lies at the root of Latin America’s “historical essence,” then writers who criticize the defiant, revolutionary, *Calibanesque* policies of the Cuban government cannot, it would seem, be authentically Latin American. Retamar never puts it in quite those terms, of course, but he does conflate Latin America and the Cuban government, in order to cast the latter as the legitimate representative of the former. Politics and identity



thus merge, and attacks on a writer's politics imply an attack on his or her authenticity as a Latin American.

Retamar saves most of his ire for Carlos Fuentes and Jorge Luis Borges, but he reserves an offhand comment for the “neo-Barthesian fluttering of Severo Sarduy”—the word “fluttering” or *mariposeo* barely concealing a gay slur. Sarduy did not profess support for the right, and in France he apparently always supported the left. What seems to have bothered Retamar was his dramatically different understanding of revolution. In fact, in *Escrito sobre un cuerpo*, from 1969, Sarduy dismisses art that seeks merely to “denounce” the capitalist order—increasingly, the only art the Cuban regime deemed acceptable—as childish and ineffective. True radicalism lies elsewhere. “The only thing the bourgeoisie cannot bear,” Sarduy writes, “what ‘drives it up a wall,’ is the idea that *thought can think about thought*, that *language can speak about language*, that an author *does not write about something, but writes something* (as Joyce argued).” Whether such reflexivity really does bother the bourgeoisie is debatable at best, but within the essay Sarduy's point is clear: the purportedly revolutionary language of the Cuban establishment leaves untouched the principles underlying bourgeois capitalism. Neither can tolerate a challenge to logocentrism: “Faced with this transgression,” he goes on, “believers and atheists, capitalists and communists, aristocrats and proletarians, readers of Mauriac and Sartre find themselves suddenly and definitively in accord. The distrust and aggression that current critical approaches arouse illustrate the *unity* of the most opposed ideologies.”<sup>22</sup> While transgression is not the same as revolution—a word he does not use here—his opposition to bourgeois capitalism suggests a revolutionary (and not just avant-garde) stance. In any event, three years later, in “El barroco y el neobarroco,” he uses nearly identical terms to define the neobaroque: it is language that refuses to perform the “work” of communication, and thus mocks the pretensions of meaning or truth that (he says) underpin communism and bourgeois capitalism and communism alike.

Syntactically incorrect from absorbing of incompatible allogeous elements, from multiplying the endless artifice of subordination to the point of “losing the thread,” the neobaroque sentence—Lezama's sentence—shows, in its incorrectness (false quotations, bungled “graftings” from other languages, etc.), in its “not landing on its feet” and its loss of agreement, our loss of the single, harmonious, ultimately theological *ailleurs*, in agreement with our image.<sup>23</sup>

For Sarduy, the baroque gives the lie to faith in any transcendental entity, whether history, God, emancipation, the individual—and therein lies its revolutionary thrust. It is revolutionary insofar as it breaks with the conceptual certainties of a previous order. Sarduy's neobaroque thus contrasts sharply with Retamar's Calibanism, which entails a mere redeployment of the oppressor's theoretical toolbox. As Retamar argues,

intellectuals who consider themselves revolutionary must break ties with their class of origin (often the petty bourgeoisie), and must *also* break their bonds of dependence on the metropolitan culture, which did, however, teach them its language, its conceptual and

technical apparatus. That language, in Shakespeare's terminology, allows them to curse Prospero.<sup>24</sup>

Retamar accepts the colonizer's conceptual apparatus and seeks merely to put it toward a revolutionary end; Sarduy, on the other hand, advocates the wholesale rejection of that apparatus, with its misguided belief in truth, liberation, and objectivity—in a word, with its logocentrism. Both Sarduy and Retamar claim the revolutionary mantle, but they have drastically different ideas of what that means.

On another level, however, their statements reveal themselves to be surprisingly compatible. Retamar, in making Caliban's curse the quintessential revolutionary act, makes revolution a largely rhetorical or cultural gesture. He does not downplay political acts—far from it—but his emphasis on Caliban is ultimately an emphasis on a cultural posture. (That is why it allows him to group together figures with aims as different as Amaru, Bolívar, Martí, and Guevara.) Sarduy, for his part, likewise moves revolution to the intellectual or cultural sphere by claiming that above all it means overthrowing the reigning conceptual logic. Both, in other words, make revolution a primarily rhetorical or linguistic gesture. Both claim that Lezama, for example, is a revolutionary. This is the reason why later critics could see both quite unproblematically as compatible—and this is why Irleamar Chiampi, for example, could see a neobaroque Calibanism in Lezama Lima.<sup>25</sup>

As the events from 1971 faded from view, the two essays which began as contrary, even incompatible, visions of revolution in the intellectual and aesthetic sphere came to appear entirely complementary. Sarduy's discussion of revolution and subversion seemed to dovetail nicely with Retamar's insistence on Caliban's "cursing." Indeed, in the 1990s, when Sarduy was finally readmitted to the canon in Cuba, his revolutionary rhetoric played no small role.

Equally important, however, was Sarduy's interest in Cuban and Latin American identity, dramatically visible in *De donde son los cantantes*. This interest is ultimately quite distinct from the neobaroque, though it quickly overtook it: after the neobaroque merged with and incorporated a generalized notion of "Calibanism," first outlined in Retamar's essay, it became easy to see the neobaroque as a uniquely, fundamentally Latin American sensibility. However, these questions come to light more clearly in Sarduy's novels than in his essays—and it to those that I now turn.

### **Who sings the nation state?**

Sarduy's second and most well-known novel, *De donde son los cantantes* (1967), is a delirious mock investigation into Cuban identity. An explanatory note at the end of the novel clarifies matters by stating that "three cultures superimposed on each other make up Cuban culture—Spanish, African, Chinese; three fictions alluding to them make up this book."<sup>26</sup> These stories share little but some characters—the constantly transforming drag queens Auxilio and Socorro, and the general Mortal Pérez—and a narrative of desire and absence. In the first, "Junto al río Cenizas de Rosa," the general becomes obsessed with a drag performer in Havana's Chinatown, and resolves to murder her when he realizes he cannot possess her; in the second, "Dolores Rondón," an ambitious woman marries a politician (the general) and accompanies him in his vertiginous rise and calamitous fall. In the third, "La entrada de Cristo en la Habana," Auxilio and Socorro pursue their missing beloved from medieval Al-Andalus to contemporary Cuba,

unearthing a wooden figure of Christ along the way and carrying it in procession to Havana. Preceding all three is the “Curriculum Cubense,” a sort of introduction in which Auxilio and Socorro visit the Domus Dei, the house of God, only to find that He is not in. Thus the three parts are really four, The three parts are really four, or five, including the note—or six, if we add Roland Barthes’s glowing review of the novel, “La face baroque,” which appears as a preface in the second edition, published by Seix Barral.

What all this actually says about Cuban identity is up for debate. Enrico Mario Santi suggests that “the very act of denying Cuban specificity through parody [might be] the most peculiarly Cuban gesture of all,”<sup>27</sup> and that the novel is in reality a back-door affirmation of that identity. It would be a way of furthering, albeit through mockery, a venerable tradition of trying to define Cuban culture visible in Fernando Ortiz’s *Contrapunteo cubano* (1940) or Cintio Vitier’s *Lo cubano en la poesía* (1958)—or, indeed, in countless statements made by Lezama and others in the journal *Orígenes*. This question took on a special relevance after the Revolution, as Sarduy later noted in an interview from 1986: “We debated, after the revolution, the following: does Cuban culture exist? Does Cubanness exist? Something which, for example, an Argentine would never ask.... I always replied: the fact that the issue is raised is itself a guarantee of this culture’s existence.”<sup>28</sup>

One might expect that this pedigree would make the novel attractive to critics close to the regime, concerned as they were with defining the island’s new cultural and political reality. But in fact in Cuba the novel met with hostility: Ambrosio Fornet memorably referred to “the Franco-Cuban author Severo Sarduy,” implicitly questioning his legitimacy in talking about, or for, Cuba.<sup>29</sup> Not only did it nostalgically evoke Havana’s pre-revolutionary nightlife—itsself grounds for censorship, as the government had made clear since 1961—it presented unapologetically homosexual characters who looked quite unlike the “new man” that Che and others envisioned for the new Cuba. More seriously, the novel included a savage satire of Castro’s entry into Havana, as the “Cristo” who inspires popular devotion in his journey across the island but begins to rot as soon as he arrives. The novel is not, for all that, a political allegory, but its vision of Cuba differed sharply with that of the revolutionary government. In fact, Sarduy seems to take special delight in presenting a vision of the country that eschewed historical and even climatological reality. Cleverly reversing the longstanding tradition in Cuban literature of describing the landscape to a foreign reader—visible in *Sab* (1841), for example, or even the *Espejo de paciencia* (1608)—Sarduy fills the third section of the novel with patently false details. Emir Rodríguez Monegal describes his reaction to this unfamiliar countryside:

when I got to the part where the kirsch factory shows up, I said to myself: To think, there are kirsch factories in Cuba! Then, when I began to notice a strange flora and fauna, and especially when I saw the Havana metro, I discovered I didn’t know the first thing about Cuba. Then I realized, luckily, that it wasn’t that I didn’t know anything, but that the Cuba in the novel was a totally metaphoric and synthetic one.<sup>30</sup>

Snow falling on Havana in the final scene removes any lingering doubt about the Sarduy’s realist pretensions. He repeats but inverts the foundational gesture by naming what is not there. Even the more believable scenes do not seek to portray “Cuba,” but

only a melodramatic, touristic, nostalgic image of it—and this Fornet and others could not accept. As Duanel Díaz writes, “There, in the flair for the surface, for the stage set, in the nostalgia for that postcard or papier mâché Cuba, lay authentic subversion, which necessarily made this novel a scandal for a socialist-realist-inspired aesthetics.”<sup>31</sup> Sarduy had hit upon a vision of Cuba that Cuba could not accept.

In fact, the title itself highlights this difference. Literally translated as “Where the singers are from,” it comes from the “El son de la loma,” a popular song from the 1930s by the Trío Matamoros. A speaker wonders where some musicians are from and wishes he could meet them and learn their song. The verse runs as follows:

Mamá yo quiero saber  
de dónde son los cantantes,  
que los encuentro muy galantes  
y los quiero conocer,  
con su trova fascinante,  
que me la quiero aprender.<sup>18</sup>

Despite their simplicity, these lyrics resonate deeply with Sarduy’s novel. The question is formulated only obliquely, as an expression of desire, and a desire for knowledge at that. The answer, given in the next verse, is only a pun: *son de la loma*—they’re from the hills, or the *son* of the hills. What is more, the music the speaker hears is inaccessible to us, for we hear it only indirectly, in his own song about a desire to learn another. Very subtly, the dialectic of unfulfilled desire that propels each of the book’s sections moves these lyrics as well. And though not immediately obvious, the song carries distinctly gay overtones, as the male singer both identifies with and is infatuated by the singers. Sarduy’s novel draws out those hints—and indeed, what it shows is hidden in plain sight, a facet of Cuban culture that its official representatives before and after the revolution had preferred not to acknowledge.

He does, however, slightly alter the original lyrics by omitting the accent on *dónde*, ingeniously changing the line’s meaning without quite changing any of the words. In its near silence, the accent has a ghostly status: present in writing, absent from speech, it highlights how Sarduy gives a familiar “text”—Cuba—a radically different meaning. Critics often take this omission as a way of making a statement out of an question, of changing “Where are the singers from?” to “Where the singers are from.” González Echevarría writes that “without an accent on the ‘donde,’ it is an affirmation made in the usual pattern of a question. That is to say, ‘De donde son los cantantes’ has the odd quality of being simultaneously a question and an affirmation.”<sup>32</sup> Strictly speaking—grammatically speaking—this is not quite true: removing that accent from *dónde* makes the interrogative adverb a relative adverb, and makes the complete, interrogative sentence into a lonely dependent clause. In other words, the title does not respond to the implied question with an affirmation, but with a fragment, a relative whose antecedent and main verb have gone missing. Thus in its very name the novel describes a lack, much as a line describes a circle; it traces the absence that the characters in each story endlessly pursue.

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<sup>18</sup> Mama I want to know / where the singers are from / I find them so gallant / and I want to meet them / with their fascinating *trova* / I want to learn it

What then is missing? For González Echevarría the answer is clear: “what is not said, what is surrounded, what is avoided, is the initial and final meaning: Cuba.”<sup>33</sup> This is undeniable, all the more so because the word does not appear even once in the novel, as González Echevarría notes. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to take *De donde son los cantantes* as a novel exclusively concerned with national identity (or its impossibility). Sarduy’s ambitions reach much further—and in fact what makes his novel neobaroque, according to his own later definition of the term, is precisely everything that goes beyond the narrowly national questions. The being or truth or self-identity that Sarduy makes absent in his novel are not only the “being” or “truth” of Cuba, but being and truth *as such*. And perhaps most particularly, the pretension that truth or reality can be adequately expressed in language—a pretension he attempts to overturn by putting the conventions of fiction on their head.

He achieves this first of all through narrative fragmentation, by creating three stories that do not fit together in any chronological order and do not exist in the same fictional universe. They are moreover narrated in a deliberately confusing manner. The first section seems to follow a dream, with fleeting images from Chinatown and the burlesque theater, while the third moves in a series of sudden leaps across time and space. As for the second—written in the form of a script, and even performed on German radio—rather than chronological order, it follows the verses in the protagonist’s epitaph: we thus go from Dolores’s deathbed to the moment she meets her future husband, and so on.

Beyond these disorienting plot tricks, Sarduy creates characters barely worthy of the name, who seem to be little more than cartoons or puppets, or allegories of theoretical concepts. Auxilio and Socorro are quite literally cries for help, expressions of a desire for aid that has not yet come. They are, in essence, signifiers whose signified is necessarily absent; their “pursuit of meaning” is thus made ludicrously literal in the visit to the Domus Dei. Not surprisingly, they have little psychological depth or even physical continuity, subject as they are to constant transformation. Throughout their constant changes they adopt the most outlandish guises and costumes—costumes which, of course, the reader must try (and fail) to imagine. Auxilio and Socorro’s outfits described with lush visual detail, almost as if the whole novel were the transcription of a painting or film or drag show, complete with music—but the image and sound, however, are left necessarily outside the novel.

What *De donde son los cantantes* so pointedly erases is not only a national identity or historical reality—Cuba—it is also a whole tradition of narrative representation. Plot, characters, psychological development, conflict and resolution, the usual satisfactions of fiction, are constantly undermined and frustrated. At one point the reader interrupts a dispute between a narrator and a character with exasperation:

The (*increasingly hypothetical*) Reader of these pages: “Come on, get your stories straight: either one version or the other. What I want are facts. Yes, facts, action, development, in short, a message. A lyrical message!”<sup>34</sup>

In short, the emptiness that Sarduy creates in this novel points in two very different directions: on the one hand it is a Cuba whose absence becomes a sort of spectral presence, the very topic of the book—much like the missing accent from the title. On the

other, it is a whole set of narrative conventions that purport to represent the world in a more or less unproblematic way, conventions for which Sarduy has little patience, and whose inadequacies he gleefully points out. And not just novelistic convention: he repeatedly sets up for mockery the very assumptions that underpin signification or communication—in short, the possibility of meaning as such. But here, too, the negation appears to be an ambiguous affirmation. “In reality there is no work more concerned with meaning than *De donde son los cantantes*, only this preoccupation includes the question of how meaning is produced,” observes González Echevarría.<sup>35</sup> In effect, Sarduy’s dazzling second novel lays bare the processes of signification and the construction literary meaning. And it is here—much more than in its obsession with Cubanness—that Sarduy’s neobaroque makes itself palpably present. But this fundamentally epistemic and aesthetic orientation of the neobaroque reveals itself most clearly in his next novel.

### **Leaving something to be desired**

For all its radicalism, *De donde son los cantantes* does not wholly do away with plot or character. Auxilio and Socorro may be linguistic allegories, signifiers in search of a transcendental signified, but they are nevertheless characters. If the novel is *about* the problem of signification and meaning, its own meaning remains more or less undisturbed: the book tells three relatively coherent stories, even if the characters or narrators themselves loudly point out that such coherence illusory at best and in any case outmoded. *Cobra* (1972) goes a step further. It continues to investigate problems of meaning, and does so in an equally campy manner, yet it incorporates those problems, so to speak, into its own process of signification. Rather than tell a fairly coherent story about incoherence, it disrupts itself, it shows itself to be impossible. And it casts a retrospective light on its predecessor, by following its main theoretical lines to a more extreme conclusion.

The plot of *Cobra*, such as it is, consists of very little: in the first half, a Parisian drag performer named Cobra travels to Tangiers with her miniature double and undergoes a torturous but apparently successful sex-change operation. In the second half, a presumably different character receives the name “Cobra” after being initiated into a gang of drug-trafficking Buddhist bikers, dies in a police raid, and is given extensive funeral rites. The novel ends with a “Diario indio,” a series of sketches from a travelogue to India. Sarduy explained in interviews that the idea of the book came from a chance phrase he happened to overhear: “Cobra died in a jet over Fujiyama.” Otherwise insignificant—none of the characters travels to Japan or dies in a jet—this detail sheds light on Sarduy’s procedure in writing the novel, which consists largely of just these kinds of scraps of public and private experience and high and low culture. Catch phrases, inside jokes, advertising slogans, Buddhist sutras, Lacanian diagrams, new age bromides, nods to semiotic theory, insults to the reader, names of heavenly bodies, ekphrases of baroque art, whole paragraphs from other books—all this overlays a relatively simple (if zany) plot, all of this is written on the body of the text. The result is a novel that seems to point in all directions, that delights in language in all of its forms. Roland Barthes found in *Cobra* “the challenge of a continual joy, the moment in which verbal pleasure by its excess chokes and reels into bliss.”<sup>36</sup> Somewhat more drily, González Echevarría notes that “going through the text of *Cobra*, we get the feeling that it lacks a focus of meaning to give cohesion to the elements that compose it.”<sup>37</sup> This seems to be the point: it self-consciously performs nearly every one of the “neobaroque” techniques he outlines in his essay from

the same year. Quite deliberately, *Cobra* is a near anagram for *barroco*—though it contains other suggestions as well. Emir Rodríguez Monegal offers the following lengthy, if not exhaustive, explanation:

it is (why not, if the author says so again and again) a phallic, insatiable Indian snake, coiling around itself to bite its own tail, when it's not devouring alive...some willing victim; and it is...the anagram of a group of painters (Appel, Aleschinsky, Corneille, Jorn), who came...from COpenhagen, BRussels and Amsterdam (which spells COBRA); and it is, in Spanish at least, a form of the verb *cobrar*, even if this is important only on the level of a reinterpretation of bourgeois capitalism and its horror of *gaspillage* (in other words of the baroque, in other words of sex, in other words of art); and it is, finally (for now) the name that alludes by contiguity to the Spanish word for copper, which in Cuban mythology is the emblem of Ochum, the Yoruba goddess, and her Catholic equivalent, Our Lady of Cobre...<sup>38</sup>

To this extensive list, González Echevarría adds the suggestion that the name evokes and conceals the word Cuba itself, and he even goes on to muse on the word's phonetic structure—the hardness of the initial *c*, the roundness of the *o* and the openness of the final *a*—and rather fancifully claims that this arrangement of sounds gives a clue to the novel's meaning.<sup>39</sup>

It would be a mistake to give these any references more importance than they deserve—despite the fact that Sarduy himself helpfully pointed them out in interviews. Appel, Alechinsky and Corneille seem wholly tangential to the book, even if part of the plot takes place in Amsterdam; the eponymous snake plays no role in the plot or the structure, which is not after all circular; the receiving of payment (the meaning of *cobrar*) plays no greater role in this novel than in any other. What is relevant, however, is the fact that the title seems to point in so many directions at once, for if the novel enacts one gesture over and over, it is to highlight how multiple meanings can coexist in a single word or passage. This insistence on “polysemy” is what distinguishes it most clearly from *De donde son los cantantes*—and also what most clearly makes it an extension of the previous novel's theoretical concerns.

At repeated points throughout the novel, Sarduy highlights the role of context in the construction of meaning. An example will make this clear. In the second part, Cobra and his biker companions visit a spiritual guru in Amsterdam, who responds to their questions with more or less irreverent and impractical advice:

TOTEM: What's the best spiritual exercise?

THE GURU: Sit down. Place your left foot on your right thigh and your right foot on your left thigh. Cross your arms behind your back. With your right hand grab your left foot, and with your left hand your right. Gaze at your navel. And then try to untangle yourself...<sup>40</sup>

What stands out here—more than the evident satire or the almost slapstick image the response conjures—is the fact that, about thirty pages later, when a different character asks a different expert an entirely different question—“I’d like to be an acrobat in the *Palace of Wonders*. How do I go about getting totally disjointed?”—we read, or rather reread, an identical response. Similarly, one of the bikers asking a guru how to achieve liberation receives a definitively terse reply: “Don’t think about it.” That same advice appears later on, when a character asks a fortune-teller a much less metaphysical question: “What should I do to stay hard once I’m inside?”

Sarduy’s point with this repetition seems to be to demonstrate how the same words can take on a different meaning in a different context. And he goes to considerable lengths to draw the reader’s attention to this fact—among other things, by beginning the novel with the following passage:

She enclosed them in moulds as soon as she awakened, applied alum compresses, punished them with successive cold- and hot-water baths. She forced them with vises, subjected them to crude mechanisms. She fashioned, to hold them, metal frames whose wires she would shorten, twisting them off with pliers; after daubing them with gum arabic she bound them with straps: they were mummies, children from Florentine medallions.

She tried curettage.

She turned to magic.

She gave in to orthopedic determinism.<sup>41</sup>

Encountering this puzzling and gruesome passage on this first page of the first chapter, the reader has no idea what “they” are, or even, in the Spanish, whether the subject is male or female. Only later does it become clear that Cobra, the drag performer, is trying vainly to reduce the size of her unsightly and mannish feet. Such calculated effects of momentary confusion are not of course unique to Sarduy—but what *is* unusual is the fact that Sarduy repeats this passage some fifteen pages later, at the start of the net section, preceded by a clarifying sentence: “Flat anchors held her to the ground: Cobra’s feet left something to be desired, ‘they were her hell.’”<sup>42</sup> By now the explanation is redundant, but it drives home the point: the passage acquires meaning—that is to say, it *cobra sentido*—only in its larger context. The text thus prepares the reader for what is to come. And Sarduy does not quote only himself, he also incorporates whole passages from other books: a page from Giancarlo Marmori’s *Storia di Vous* (1965) appears twice—in different contexts, of course—while an entry from Columbus’s diary adorns the *Diario indio*.

Sarduy in essence forces the reader to pay attention to the processes of signification which writing and reading entail. Just as the dual foci of the ellipse give the lie to the idea of a single emanating center of authority, so the repeated instances of the same passage deny meaning by multiplying it—for if the same words can signify quite different things, it follows (or seems to for Sarduy) that they contain very little meaning of their own. At the same time, however, the content of this passage points to something different: the irreducible, inalterable materiality of Cobra’s feet, which, no matter what the context, cannot *not* reveal—i.e., signify—her masculinity. Cobra’s subsequent search over the following hundred or so pages to shrink her feet might be seen as an attempt to change their meaning, to struggle against a fact which precedes her and escapes her



intention. In this sense she attempts to do what Sarduy does: to change the meaning of the “text” of her body.

In other ways, too, the story refuses to adhere to a single meaning. When one of Cobra’s foot-reduction treatments accidentally shrinks her and her madame, the text partly backtracks, allowing the original-sized characters to coexist with their miniature doubles—at least until the narrator decides that the madame’s miniature has no role to play in the story, and quickly dispatches her. On the level of the sentence, too, Sarduy gives several mutually exclusive options (a technique Gustavo Pellón calls “paradigmatic indecision”).<sup>43</sup> For example, as the madame tries to help Cobra reduce her footsize, she takes on many largely contradictory attributes of a penitent:

She walked / barefoot, dragging censers  
/ smeared with black oil crosses  
/ in Carmelite habits, made of burlap, a yellow rope  
around her waste  
/ wrapped in white damask and cloth, with a broad-  
brimmed hat and a rod  
/ naked with open sores, under a pointed hood<sup>44</sup>

...and so on. Sarduy makes a sustained attempt to avoid convention. Alicia Rivero-Potter notes that this strategy forces the reader to take an active role: “The text and reader are what is fundamental, instead of the author; the reader is co-writer of the work.”<sup>45</sup> Sarduy appears to suspect these techniques might eventually grow wearisome, and thus constantly—even frantically—finds new strategies to interrupt narrative coherence. During the police raid the other bikers seem to disguise themselves as Buddhist monks—or have we suddenly shifted scenes to India? Cobra’s funeral rites are explained before his death, a minor transposition that nonetheless disrupts the narrative. And after Cobra’s death, the text abandons narrative altogether in favor of a series of short texts—prayers, erotic letters or tantric instructions—addressed to each member of the gang (or sect). The novel ends with the *Diario indio*, thirty or so pages of discrete scenes, like snapshots from a Westerner’s trip to India—though they include a short section from Columbus’s diary of the other “Indies.” The only India that they reveal, we are invited to conclude, is one of error and misperception, a reflection of the traveler’s (or Sarduy’s) own origin. The drama that *De donde son los cantantes* enacts on the level of plot—Auxilio and Socorro’s unsatisfied desire for meaning—*Cobra* performs on the level of text itself, as the novel dissolves into incoherence.

Sarduy’s purpose with all this seems to be to overturn comfortable realist literary conventions. In fact, he makes this explicit on more than one occasion. Discussing the backstory of the Indian make-up artist—information that is wholly incidental to the plot—the narrator offers different versions follow, each one prefaced with a mock statement about the purpose and nature of writing. “Writing is the art of digression,” he states before one. “Writing is the art of re-creating reality,” he states on the next page. “No,” he rectifies later: “Writing is the art of restoring History.” After a number of competing stories, a pseudological deduction shows all but one of them to be false. “Only a moron,” we read, could believe the implausible other versions.<sup>46</sup> In any case Sarduy’s own writing conforms, it seems, to none of those precepts, or perhaps to all of them: by including them *all* in a single text, he undermines the pretension of *any* of them to being

dominant. He underscores this metafictional point with a footnote suggesting that the reader should give up on *Cobra* and stick to sex or to reading Boom novels:

Moronic reader: if even with these clues, clumsy as planks, you haven't figured out that this is a metamorphosis of the painter from the previous chapter—just consider how well the tricks of the trade suit him—abandon this novel and stick to screwing or to reading the Boom novels, which are much clearer.<sup>47</sup>

*Cobra* seems above all to be about precisely those processes of signification and their fundamental impossibility. To a much greater extent even than in *De donde son los cantantes*—and without the discussion of national identity—Sarduy repeatedly shows the fragility of the link between words and meaning, much as his protagonists reveal how even the brute fact of their bodies is mutable and unstable. As the narrative fades into a series of snapshots, the destruction of the story parallels that of the protagonist or protagonists: the first Cobra undergoes a painful castration procedure, while the second (who may be the same one) is killed. What motivates Auxilio and Socorro now moves the text itself: a desire for meaning that is whose failure is assured from the start.

González Echevarría has argued that *Cobra* is a sort of metanovel, a reflection on novelistic convention, with its assumption stable subjects with coherent gender or national identities. Taking these for granted, traditional novels—even the late modernist or postmodern works of the 1960s—repress other alternatives. “The Boom novel functions, as a discourse, on the basis of these tacit repressions,” writes González Echevarría. “*Cobra* tries to make them explicit. *Cobra* seeks to embody nothing less than the subconscious of Spanish American narrative.”<sup>48</sup> This line neatly encapsulates *Cobra*'s apparent aims: with an army of sophisticated or jokey techniques it makes literary convention explicit. But why should it embody the subconscious of the *Spanish American* (or for that matter Latin American) novel? Such a conclusion makes much more sense in *De donde son los cantantes*, which deliberately mocks Cuban identity discourse, but in *Cobra* Latin America is, if not exactly absent, then simply not a focus of attention. Like the earlier novel, *Cobra* leads to a dissolution of or absence of meaning, and in fact it carries that processes to a new extreme. Yet the absence is that of the subject, of literary meaning—even of India, which is only present in a superficial or falsified form, as a fantasy of Western counterculture.

*Cobra* makes clear what the national themes of his previous novel had obscured: that the baroque, as a technique that Sarduy theorizes in his essays and practices in his fiction, is a self-conscious critical gesture, not a national or continental expression. He does of course deploy it on Cuban identity writing in *De donde son los cantantes*—and with devastating effect. And he finds the baroque's greatest exponents in figures from the Hispanic tradition: Góngora and Lezama. But Sarduy's neobaroque is above all a series of parodic or deconstructive mechanisms that can be practiced on any kind of received tradition or discourse, and which respond to a far-reaching epistemic groundlessness, an awareness that the old certainties of truth, meaning, originality, subjecthood, gender and nation have gone.

### **Lyrical messages**

What could come after *Cobra*? Sarduy had thoroughly dismantled the conventions of plot, character, narrative development, resolution, verisimilitude and even, on

occasion, sentence-level coherence; he had created a work that dissolved any semblance of order into a series of quotations and fragments. The techniques he deployed to this end could, in some cases, become a normal part of his repertoire as a writer, though more often, as Sarduy no doubt realized, their efficacy depended on an element of surprise, and would quickly grow tiresome or predictable. His subsequent writing moves in a markedly different direction. *Maitreya* (1978), *Colibrí* (1984), *Cocuyo* (1990) and the posthumous *Pájaros de la playa* (1993) are still not realist novels by any stretch of the imagination, and *Maitreya* in particular stages a vertiginous, frenetic plot whose express aim, it seems, is to disorient. But in the 1980s Sarduy's literary work begins to offer some of those readerly pleasures that *Cobra* had so deliberately withheld.

More than a rejection of his earlier aesthetic commitments, this move represents a tempering of them—the discovery of a more expressive or communicative idiom that could still foreground the process of signification, that would still point to meaninglessness or absence. Thus *Maitreya* follows a handful of characters around the globe as they embrace sects, subcultures, religions and cults: “They adopted other gods, eagles. They indulged rituals to the point of idiocy or tedium. In order to demonstrate the impermanence and emptiness of everything.”<sup>49</sup> A Buddhist principle of productive emptiness animates this and subsequent books, and he begins to make this emptiness palpable without the literary-theoretical pyrotechnics of *Cobra* or *De donde son los cantantes*. Gustavo Guerrero calls attention to “the presence of the void which guides [Sarduy's] thought and writing...and which will end up representing for him a whole conception of the world, the beginning and the end of the ultimate experience of reality.”<sup>50</sup> In his later work this absence—which underpins the extravagant techniques of the neobaroque—is not so much the lack of stable gender or national identities, but rather the insistent and inevitable presence of death.

Death becomes especially evident in the sonnets and *décimas* that Sarduy published in *Un testigo fugaz y disfrazado* (1985) and *Un testigo perenne y delatado* (1993). Bearing a strong resemblance to the verse of Góngora and Quevedo, the poems in these collections are in one sense the most recognizably “baroque” pieces Sarduy wrote, yet they display almost none of the formal features that Sarduy catalogued under that heading: the topics are evident, the metaphors straightforward, the meaning clear. For this reason, they cast a revealing light on Sarduy's neobaroque. His sonnets are compact, tightly woven sentences that nonetheless offer themselves quite easily to comprehension, and could even be unraveled into prose. Their power stems from the friction created when their metric constraints chafe against their bodily presence—for many of these poems are frankly sexual. Sarduy gestures here toward a baroque tradition of burlesque poetry, but his audacity feels entirely new, and outdoes even the master of seventeenth-century mock erotic verse, Damián del Cornejo.<sup>51</sup> Virtuositic descriptions of sex, at once transparent and encoded—“Aunque ungiste el umbral y ensalivaste” and “El émbolo brillante y engrasado” are revealing titles—combine with a relentless meditation on mortality or emptiness. For example:

Omítemela más, que lo omitido,  
cuando alcanza y define su aporía,  
enciende en el reverso de su día  
un planeta en la noche del sentido.

A pulso no: que no disfruta herido,

por flecha berniniana o por manía  
de brusquedad, el templo humedecido  
(de Venus, el segundo). Ya algún día

lubricantes o medios naturales  
pondrás entre los bordes con taimada  
prudencia, o con cautela ensalivada,

que atenúen la quema de tu entrada:  
pues de amor y de ardor en los anales  
de la historia la nupcia está cifrada.<sup>19</sup>

Low humor plays off elevated language: the phrase “the moistened temple / (of Venus, the second)” is typically, even archetypically baroque in its syntactic reversal and its allusion to the classical pantheon, but it works in dissonant counterpoint to its humble referent. What makes the poem more than a clever parody is the way the sexual language reinforces, and is reinforced by, an obsession with meaninglessness. “Omítemela más” is a riff on the familiar expression “métemela más” (“give it to me”) that condenses, more than any single line in his work, all of Sarduy’s aesthetic, erotic, intellectual and religious concerns; it shows how plenitude and lack, presence and absence are not only inseparable but in an important sense one and the same. After all, sex is as much a series of withdrawals as it is a series of thrusts.

The poem thus foregrounds how lack and omission create meaning—and vice versa: what is omitted “ignites in the reverse of its day / a planet in the night of meaning.” These lines call to mind a point of illumination against the backdrop of a night sky, but also, more troublingly, the opposite notion that meaning itself is a vast, undifferentiated darkness to which only emptiness—a void of meaninglessness—can bring clarity. At any rate, this reading aligns with something Sarduy repeated in many of his theoretical writings: the notion that, as Guerrero writes, “zero and whiteness can constitute founding and generative principles.”<sup>52</sup> And a similar dualism is at work in elsewhere in the poem, as pleasure and its opposite, burning or “ardor,” must coexist in the proper balance for their happy union to be written into the annals of history.

What this poem (and others) do not do is perform the fragmentation or dispersion of meaning that for Sarduy defines the baroque aesthetics of the twentieth-century—an aesthetic program that he so masterfully and exhaustively put into practice in *Cobra*. Formally, little about it could be called revolutionary. In fact, the poem is grammatically unambiguous, and could easily be recast as prose, something that cannot always be said about his avant-garde predecessors, or even his most stridently experimental contemporaries. Unlike Lezama’s haunting incantations, which seem to point to an otherworldly coherence, and unlike, too, Gerardo Diego’s imagistic collages, which invite

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<sup>19</sup> Omit it to me more, for what’s omitted, / when it reaches and defines its aporia, / ignites on the other side of its day / a planet in the night of meaning. // Unaided, no: there’s no enjoyment, when wounded / by a Berninian arrow or a zealous / brusqueness, for the moistened temple / (of Venus, the second). Some day // lubricants or natural means / you’ll put between the sides with crafty / prudence, or with saliva’d caution, // to attenuate the burning of your entry: / for of love and ardor in the annals / of history the nuptials are written.

comparison with Cubist painting, Sarduy's poems combine formal rigor and thematic boldness in an often devastating *memento mori*—without abandoning the realm of the intelligible. Even the less explicitly sexual poems give death an unsettlingly corporeal presence, as in the following meditation on what remains after the final breath:

Ni firmas, ni firmamento,  
ni el mar con su gris sereno,  
ni ruinas, sueños, veneno,  
gozo, quejido, contento.  
Todo se lo lleva el viento  
con su rauda polvareda.  
Huesos sí. Mas no remeda  
la minuciosa armadura  
más que el rostro y la figura:  
uñas y pelo, eso queda.<sup>20</sup>

A gloomy fixation on death is a cornerstone of the historical baroque. Yet this sort of composition is a far cry from the baroque as Sarduy initially defined it, the poetics of proliferation and substitution he found so thrilling in Lezama and Góngora. François Wahl registered surprise at Sarduy's avowed preference for Góngora, when his own poetry struck a distinctly more Quevedian note.<sup>53</sup> For all their "conceptist" complexity, his compositions can easily be broken down into straightforward statements. They are, in other words, "lyrical messages"—perhaps not unlike those demanded by the exasperated "reader" in *De donde son los cantantes*. And this would seem to present a problem: for if the baroque sentence loses its thread in the labyrinth of its own subordination—if it is "revolutionary" in its very syntax—then can these poems, or others like them, be considered properly baroque? Are Sarduy's poems merely an exception to his aesthetic program?

This divergence from the deliberately difficult or fragmentary aesthetics he advocated appears most clearly in these poems, but in fact it runs throughout his aesthetic work. As stated above, Sarduy writes in 1972 that the neobaroque, "in its incorrectness, in its 'not landing on its feet' and its loss of agreement," reflects a loss of faith in the certainties of truth, god, the individual, and so on. Yet while such a description may fit Lezama's often exasperating prose (which is after all the subject of the above line), Sarduy's is quite different: his words always land on their feet. The reader can easily lose the thread in his narratives, but never in a single sentence, for even when these follow multiple tangents, digressions, parentheses and dashes, they maintain a perfect, even classical poise—a feature which the sonnets and *décimas*, in their brevity, merely underscore. In other words, while Sarduy undoubtedly practiced what he preached, he did not do so on the level of the sentence. And this fact casts light on a final aspect of his neobaroque and its revolutionary thrust: the central place that he accords Lezama.

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<sup>20</sup> No signatures, no firmament / no sea with its serene gray, / no ruins, dreams, poison / pleasure, moan, contentment. / The wind carries everything away / in its swift dust cloud. / Bones, yes. But the detailed frame / mimics only / the face and figure: / nails and hair, that stays.

## The Baroque Inheritance

It is a measure of Sarduy's success that Lezama now sits comfortably and unquestionably in the neobaroque pantheon. Critics had of for a long time and with varying degrees of enthusiasm described him as baroque, but it was not until Sarduy that Lezama came to be seen as the founder of a new mode or movement of writing, a specifically Latin American neobaroque movement. If the neobaroque, as a critical concept, would be unthinkable without Sarduy, it would also be unthinkable without Sarduy's unique way of "inheriting" Lezama.

Asked in 1986 how his baroque differed from Lezama's, Sarduy responded that his baroque represented an "enderezamiento" of his predecessor's—literally a "straightening." The word strikes an odd note in Spanish, and as is often the case, he seems to have a French word in mind: *redressement*, with the extended sense of "a correction, refinement, setting right" seems more apropos. Sarduy's writing implicitly refines Lezama's more unkempt, shaggier syntax by creating something more carefully trimmed. More importantly, he revises Lezama by elevating him to the status of founder of the neobaroque—and by claiming himself as Lezama's successor.

Thus Sarduy makes Lezama fundamental to his theory, but not exactly out of any stylistic affinity. Lezama's importance is rather of a theoretical or strategic nature: through him Sarduy gives his own aesthetic project, the neobaroque, an eminently Cuban pedigree that nevertheless transcends the confines of narrow nationalism or party orthodoxy. In other words, Sarduy asserts a continuity between his work and Lezama's, even though formally the two writers have little in common. González Echevarría notes that Sarduy's work involves an incorporation and, significantly, a transformation of his idol. "In the seventies Sarduy undertakes a meticulous and audacious recuperation of Lezama," he writes. Instead of the one admired in Cuba, however, Sarduy's is "a much more revolutionary Lezama, much more international in scope. It is at once a more secret and more corrosive Lezama, because he is missing a certain Catholic priggishness...that his first disciples were unable to strain out."<sup>54</sup> It is this Lezama that Sarduy celebrated—and made central to his aesthetic project. In 1972 he described the neobaroque largely in terms of *Paradiso*, and he cannily presented himself as Lezama's aesthetic and intellectual heir.

This is not as cynical as it sounds. When *Paradiso* was published in 1966, it caused a scandal in Cuban literary circles: its homoeroticism and lack of any obvious concern for the events after 1959 made it incompatible with the cultural policies of the new government. Yet Lezama's stature made it impossible to censor or ignore, and furthermore the novel found prominent supporters inside and outside of Cuba—above all Julio Cortázar, who edited a corrected edition of the novel and wrote an important essay, "Para llegar a Lezama Lima," defending it and explaining its merits.<sup>55</sup> While Cortázar's essay is lucid and not noticeably partisan, it presents an image of Lezama that must have seemed more palatable to the revolutionary government—it passes over in silence, for example, the novel's homosexual themes.

Sarduy published his own essay on Lezama in *Mundo Nuevo* in 1968 (and reprinted it one year later in *Escrito sobre un cuerpo*). In it, he not only presents a very different vision of Lezama, but also provides the outlines of what a few years later he would call the neobaroque. The essay is titled "Dispersión: falsas notas / Homenaje a Lezama," and it consists, in effect, of a series of disperse "notes," some written by himself, some quoting others. In one of them Sarduy writes that "*Paradiso* would be, in order of adjectives, a

novel that is *baroque*, *Cuban*, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ and *homosexual*. Find those terms. Fill the banks.”<sup>56</sup> Which words would fill those blanks is left to the reader’s imagination, though it is tempting to think, in view of what he would write just four years later, that one of those blanks might be “revolutionary.” Either way, in calling attention to the novel’s homosexuality and its fundamental Cubanness in the same breath, Sarduy pointedly defines Lezama in terms the Cuban regime would find unacceptable. It is Cuban *and* homosexual—as well as baroque, a word he had already begun to use to mean difficult, reflexive, syntactically confused and semantically unproductive. Sarduy sees in Lezama a way of being Cuban that does not include toeing the party line. He drives this point home by including “notes” of protest from an imagined reader and a “progressive critic,” who writes:

The Franco-Cuban writer Severo Sarduy, locked away in the intricacies of his Byzantine thought, freed from historical evolution and converted, so to speak, into a literary entelechy, is a victim of the cold abstractions of his ivory tower... If *Paradiso* reflects anything it is a fierce denunciation of the corruption of consumer society, a trenchant critique of the supply and demand system. How long will he remain devoted to chasing syntheses and metaphors? Come on! Such frivolity! Such decadence!<sup>57</sup>

With mordant sarcasm, Sarduy echoes (and even quotes verbatim) the language with which Ambrosio Fornet had attacked him the previous year, and he leaves no doubt about what he thinks of such hamfisted political readings of *Paradiso*. (To be fair, mainstream Cuban critics did not make such simplistic arguments, even if they did downplay or explain away certain uncomfortable elements, such as the homosexual scenes.) Sarduy advances an interpretation of Lezama as an authentically and boldly innovative—even revolutionary—writer, one whose ideas and achievements do not conform to the reigning revolutionary orthodoxy. And he subtly suggests that it is he, and not critics like Fornet, Retamar or others, who has understood what is most truly revolutionary about Lezama.

Twenty years later he made this point less subtly in an essay entitled “El hereadero” (1988). As the title suggests, here Sarduy explicitly declares himself Lezama’s literary heir. For him, Lezama’s originality outstrips anything possible in the present; rather than looking out from the past, he thus in a sense returns from the future. He represents a radically innovative, revolutionary aesthetic project, in Sarduy’s view, and inheriting such a legacy entails an act of interpretation. “An heir is one who deciphers, one who reads,” he writes. “The inheritance, more than an endowment, is a hermeneutic obligation.”<sup>58</sup> By reading him most productively, by seeing most clearly what is revolutionary and ahead of its time in his work, Sarduy says he can rightfully claim Lezama’s legacy. He goes on to suggest another, quite different way to legitimate his claim—namely the ostracism that he, like Lezama, suffered at the hands of the Cuban government. The passage is revealing:

Perhaps inheriting Lezama means, above all, taking on his *passion*, in both senses of the term: devotion, unshakable calling, and suffering, agony. With the knowledge that the decipherer contests

and perturbs the established code, and for that very reason is condemned to indifference, or to something which is worse than open aggression or frontal attack: derision. Any detail can serve the detractors as a bloodied banner—his sexuality, for example; any one of his texts, the fruit of sleepless nights, years of seclusion and silence, can be written off as a *mariposeo* or “fluttering,” any reluctance as an intrigue.<sup>59</sup>

That word *mariposeo* stands out, for it is the same word that Retamar, in *Caliban*, had used to discredit Sarduy—not Lezama. Who is Sarduy ultimately speaking about? Both encountered official marginalization for their homosexuality, though as an exile Sarduy did not face the threat of imprisonment that Lezama must have known. In any case, beyond the conflation of Lezama’s experience with his own, in this passage Sarduy lays claim to the mantle of the Cuban literature. And even more than that, he asserts that a writer such as Lezama can be aesthetically revolutionary, not to mention fully Cuban, without remaining confined to the boundaries of narrowly defined national, sexual or political identities.

But to return to the question of form: if Lezama’s fiction and poetry were undeniably different from his own, what did it mean to “inherit” him? And how can one inherit a creation so rich and varied that it encompasses and in a sense surpasses the present? Sarduy’s answer is illuminating: “Perhaps by *deciphering against the grain*, making his words appear through reading, so that the future turns into present, into presence.”<sup>60</sup> Deciphering Lezama against the grain might entail taking him beyond not just the limits of a certain “establishment” interpretation, but also beyond how he understood his own creation. For Sarduy it can mean, in other words, making Lezama part of his own aesthetic project. Significantly, the example Sarduy offers is his own novel *Maitreya*, which takes a very minor character from Lezama’s *Paradiso* and makes him a central part of his novel.

Sarduy’s method of inheritance is, in short, the neobaroque. It is an interpretation of Lezama capacious enough to include Sarduy. After all, Lezama had often been compared to Góngora, and discussions of his work often brought up the word “baroque”; Sarduy seizes that word and takes it in a different direction. Quite different, in fact, for Lezama did not share Sarduy’s atheism, or his method of dismantling the certainties of truth or religion in response to an epistemic groundlessness. The neobaroque reading of Lezama is thus somewhat distorted, but its value lies in its attempt to move Lezama, and a larger literary tradition, beyond the limits of a cultural establishment that preferred to see in both of them a parochial nationalism or an unquestioning party allegiance. Sarduy’s reading of Lezama suggested that the most truly revolutionary writing on the island had little to do with the cultural policies of the Cuban government.

Defending Lezama in the early 1970s as the bearer of a truly revolutionary literary culture—which is in effect what Sarduy’s neobaroque does—had a sharp and unmistakable political valence: it placed true revolution outside the Revolution, and no doubt this gesture made it immensely attractive to intellectuals who, after the Padilla affair, could no longer support the regime. Now, however, the neobaroque’s political valence has faded, as have the cultural polemics that framed the concept’s emergence. What remains is, curiously, an emphasis on continuity and identity.



Earlier I noted that once Retamar's Calibanism, regionally bound as it was, converged with Sarduy's neobaroque, it became easier to assume that the neobaroque, too, was anchored in Latin American identity—despite the fact that Sarduy himself made few explicit comments to that effect, and many statements saying the opposite. The fact that Sarduy placed so much emphasis on Lezama, and on himself as his heir, no doubt also helped further the neobaroque's ties to identity.

But what Sarduy proposes with the baroque is ultimately much more radical and far-reaching: it is an aesthetic that transcends the confines and comfortable certainties of nation, gender and individuality, and embraces instead an unstable world whose traditional grounding is absent. His neobaroque, traced around an empty center, responds to a loss of epistemic stability, a sense of groundlessness that is constitutive of modernity. And rather than fill that center with an affirmation of truth, liberation, identity or nationality, he formulated an aesthetic program that acknowledged its absence. It is this acknowledgment that makes Sarduy's neobaroque unflinchingly revolutionary.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “Declaración del Primer Congreso de Educación y Cultura,” in *El caso Padilla: literatura y revolución en Cuba. Documentos*, ed. Lourdes Casal (Miami: Universal, 1971), pp. 111-12: “Condenamos a los falsos escritores latinoamericanos que después de los primeros éxitos logrados con obras en que todavía expresaban el drama de estos pueblos, rompieron sus vínculos con los países de origen y se refugiaron en las capitales de las podridas y decadentes sociedades de la Europa Occidental y los Estados Unidos para convertirse en agentes de la cultura metropolitana imperialista. En París, Londres, Roma, Berlín Occidental, Nueva York, estos fariseos encuentran el mejor campo para sus ambigüedades [!], vacilaciones y miserias generadas por el colonialismo cultural que han aceptado y profesan. Sólo encontrarán de los pueblos revolucionarios el desprecio que merecen los traidores y los tráfugas.”
- <sup>2</sup> The controversies around Padilla began in late 1967, when he published an article attacking Lisandro Otero’s novel *Pasión de Urbino* and defending Guillermo Cabrera Infante’s *Tres tristes tigres*. For this reason some critics, like Roberto González Echevarría, prefer to speak of two Padilla affairs. For more information Casal’s book, cited above, which includes relevant documents from 1968 to 1971.
- <sup>3</sup> Emir Rodríguez Monegal, “La nueva novela vista desde Cuba,” *Revista Iberoamericana* 41:92-93 (July-December 1975): p. 648: “la abrumadora mayoría de la *intelligentsia* latinoamericana se puso al servicio de la revolución,” and later, “la cultura latinoamericana pierde una condición que tantos lamentaran en una época, la dispersión, la incomunicación...para ofrecer en cambio el fenómeno de una cultura ideológicamente centralizada, una cultura que tiene una sede: La Habana, y una ideología, la de Cuba revolucionaria.”
- <sup>4</sup> José María Castellet apparently used this felicitous phrase in the 1970s, a fact I discovered with some disappointment after thinking I had found it myself.
- <sup>5</sup> In 1984 he participated in *Conducta impropia*, Néstor Almendros’s documentary about the regime’s brutal treatment of homosexuals, and while his scene was cut from the final edit, it was included in the accompanying book: Néstor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez-Leal, *Conducta impropia* (Madrid: Playor, 1984). It is just as well that he did not make it into the final version, as his generalizations about African tribalism and Chinese accents have not aged well.
- <sup>6</sup> Roberto González Echevarría, “Plumas, sí: *De donde son los cantantes y Cuba*,” in Sarduy, *Obra completa*, vol. 2, p. 1588: “En agudo contraste con otros exilados latinoamericanos en el París de los sesenta, Sarduy vivía excluido del país que para éstos se había convertido en foco de convergencia de una especie de supranacionalidad continental: la Cuba revolucionaria. Entre éstos, y con no poco sufrimiento, Sarduy era un exilado a la segunda potencia.”
- <sup>7</sup> María Eugenia Mudrovcic, *Mundo Nuevo: cultura y guerra fría en la década del 60* (Rosario: Beatriz Viterbo, 1997), p. 95: “Sarduy fue una suerte de institución dentro de la otra institución que fue la primera época de *Mundo Nuevo*. A través de las páginas de la revista parisina, importó teorías, modeló gustos, promocionó a ciertos autores, impugnó a ciertos otros, tradujo obras, relacionó a críticos, artistas y escritores y arrasó con circuitos editoriales tradicionalmente impenetrables para otros novelistas jóvenes y extranjeros.”
- <sup>8</sup> Severo Sarduy, “El barroco y el neobarroco,” in *América Latina en su literatura*, ed. César Fernández Moreno (Mexico: UNESCO: Siglo XX), p. 184: “Barroco que en su acción de bascular, en su caída, en su lenguaje *pinturero*, a veces estridente, abigarrado y caótico, metaforiza la impugnación de la entidad logocéntrica que hasta entonces lo y nos estructuraba desde su lejanía y su autoridad; barroco que recusa toda instauración, que metaforiza al orden discutido, al dios juzgado, a la ley transgredida. Barroco de la Revolución.” Here *bascular* seems to carry the French sense of *basculer*, to tip over, fall down. As for *paintery*, Sarduy’s italics point to the fact that *pinturero* is a Lezamian version of *malerisch*—one of the characteristics of baroque art, according to Wölfflin—which is typically translated in Spanish as *pictórico* and English as *painterly*.
- <sup>9</sup> Fidel Castro, “Discurso de clausura del Primer Congreso Nacional de Educación y Cultura,” in Casal, ed., *El caso Padilla*, p. 119: “Nuestra valoración es política. No puede haber valor estético sin contenido humano. No puede haber valor estético contra el hombre. No puede haber valor estético contra la justicia, contra el bienestar, contra la liberación, contra la felicidad del hombre. ¡No puede haberlo!”
- <sup>10</sup> Severo Sarduy, *Nueva inestabilidad* (Mexico: Vuelta, 1987), p. 53: “Evitaremos las analogías simplotas según las cuales la acumulación, el despilfarro o la complejidad, el juego de curvas o el centro ausente bastarían para definir un lenguaje como barroco. Asimismo, las obras tautológicas, las *mises en abîme*,

- todas las estructuras simbólicas cuya fuente o generación se encuentran explícitas en la propia obra, como algo visible en la superficie significativa, se encuentran, por definición, fuera de lo que pudiera llamarse una *retombée* neobarroca.”
- <sup>11</sup> Sarduy, “El barroco y el neobarroco,” pp. 181-82: “El espacio barroco es el de la superabundancia y el desperdicio. Contrariamente al lenguaje comunicativo, económico, austero, reducido a su funcionalidad—servir de vehículo a una información—, el lenguaje barroco se complace en el suplemento, en la demasía y la pérdida parcial de su objeto.... El suplemento—otra voluta, ese ‘jotro ángel más!’ del que habla Lezama—interviene como constatación de un fracaso: el que significa la presencia de un objeto no representable, que se resiste a franquear la línea e la Alteridad.”
- <sup>12</sup> Severo Sarduy, *Barroco* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1974), p. 56: “ahora, la figura maestra no es el círculo, de centro único, irradiante, luminoso y paternal, sino la elipse, que opone a ese foco visible otro igualmente operante, igualmente real, pero obturado, muerto, nocturno, el centro ciego, reverso del *yang* germinador del Sol, el ausente.”
- <sup>13</sup> Sarduy, *Barroco*, p. 39, n. 25: “Hay un ‘décalage’ de corte epistemológico [...] La *retombée* puede realizarse, no respetando las causalidades...sino, paradójicamente, barajándolas, mostrando sobre una mesa, en *dépít du bon sens*, su autonomía, que a veces...las anula, o su co-operación.”
- <sup>14</sup> Sarduy, *Barroco*, p. 32: “modifica el sistema, no lo subvierte; no revoluciona, reforma.”
- <sup>15</sup> Sarduy, *Nueva inestabilidad*, p. 52: “La misión del curioso de hoy, la del espectador del barroco, es detectar en el arte la *retombée* o el reflejo de una cosmología para la cual el origen es casi una certeza pero las formas que lo sucedieron un hiato inconcebible, casi una aberración.”
- <sup>16</sup> Sarduy, *Nueva inestabilidad*, p. 53: “la materia fonética y gráfica en expansión accidentada constituiría la firma del segundo. Una expansión irregular cuyo principio se ha perdido y cuya ley es informulable. No sólo una representación de la expansión” ... “un neobarroco en estallido en el que los signos giran y se escapan hacia los límites del soporte sin que ninguna fórmula permita trazar sus límites o seguir los mecanismos de su producción. Hacia los límites del pensamiento, imagen de un universo que estalla hasta quedar extenuado, hasta las cenizas. Y que, quizá, vuelve a cerrarse sobre sí mismo.”
- <sup>17</sup> Severo Sarduy, *La simulación* (Caracas: Monte Ávila, 1982), p. 77: “Ese barroco furioso, impugnador y nuevo no puede surgir más que en las márgenes críticas o violentas de una gran superficie—de lenguaje, ideología o civilización—: en el espacio a la vez lateral y abierto, superpuesto, excéntrico y *dialectal* de América: borde y denegación, desplazamiento y ruina de la superficie renaciente española, éxodo, trasplante y fin de un lenguaje, de un saber.”
- <sup>18</sup> The essay appeared as part of the catalogue for the 1997 Paris Biennale, whose theme was Latin America; it is telling that the two essays that most directly tie the baroque to Latin American identity or culture, “Barroco furioso” and “El barroco y el neobarroco,” were in fact commissioned as statements about Latin America, rather than the about baroque.
- <sup>19</sup> Roberto Fernández Retamar, “Caliban,” in *Todo Caliban* (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 2000), pp. 31-32. “Nuestro símbolo no es pues Ariel, como pensó Rodó, sino Caliban [*sic*]. Esto es algo que vemos con particular nitidez los mestizos que habitamos estas mismas islas donde vivió [32] Caliban: Próspero invadió las islas, mató a nuestros ancestros, esclavizó a Caliban y le enseñó su idioma para entenderse con él. ¿Qué otra cosa puede hacer Caliban sino utilizar ese mismo idioma para maldecir, para desear que caiga sobre él la ‘roja plaga’? No conozco otra metáfora más acertada de nuestra situación cultural, de nuestra realidad.” The original essay is from 1971 and written *Calibán*; in this slightly revised edition he eliminates the accent.
- <sup>20</sup> Fernández Retamar, “Caliban,” p. 75: “Ariel, en el gran mito shakespeariano que he seguido en estas notas, es, como se ha dicho, el intelectual de la misma isla que Caliban: puede optar entre servir a Próspero—es el caso de los intelectuales de la anti-América—, con el que aparentemente se entiende de maravillas, pero de quien no pasa de ser un temeroso esclavo, o unirse a Caliban en su lucha por la verdadera libertad.”
- <sup>21</sup> Fernández Retamar, “Caliban,” p. 77: “El que algunos de esos sobresaltados hubieran hecho el elogio de Fanon...y ahora atribuyan a deformación o a influencia foránea una actitud que está en la raíz misma de nuestro ser histórico, puede ser prueba de varias cosas. Entre ellas, de total incoherencia. También de desconocimiento—cuando no de desprecio—de nuestras realidades concretas, tanto en el presente como en el pasado. Lo cual, por cierto, no los autoriza para tener mucho que ver con nuestro porvenir.”
- <sup>22</sup> Severo Sarduy, *Escrito sobre un cuerpo* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1969), pp. 19-20: “Lo único que la burguesía no soporta, lo que la ‘saca de quicio,’ es la idea de que *el pensamiento pueda pensar sobre el*

- pensamiento*, de que *el lenguaje pueda hablar del lenguaje*, de que un autor *no escriba sobre algo, sino escriba algo* (como proponía Joyce). Frente a esta transgresión...se encuentran, repentina y definitivamente de acuerdo, creyentes y ateos, capitalistas y comunistas, aristócratas y proletarios, lectores de Mauriac y de Sartre. La desconfianza y la agresividad que suscitan las búsquedas críticas actuales ilustran la *unidad* de las ideologías más opuestas.”
- <sup>23</sup> Sarduy, “El barroco y el neobarroco,” pp. 183-84: “Sintácticamente incorrecta a fuerza de recibir incompatibles elementos alógenos, a fuerza de multiplicar hasta ‘la pérdida del hilo’ el artificio sin límites de la subordinación, la frase neobarroca—la frase de Lezama—muestra en su incorrección (falsas citas, malogrados ‘injertos’ de otros idiomas, etc.), en su no ‘caer sobre sus pies’ y su pérdida de la concordancia, nuestra pérdida del *ailleurs* único, armónico, concordante con nuestra imagen, teológico en suma.”
- <sup>24</sup> Fernández Retamar, “Caliban,” pp. 76-77: “...la intelectualidad que se considere revolucionaria debe romper sus vínculos con la clase de origen (con frecuencia, la pequeña burguesía), y *también* debe romper sus nexos *de dependencia* con la cultura metropolitana que le enseñó, sin embargo, el lenguaje, el aparato conceptual y técnico. Ese lenguaje, en la terminología shakespeareana, le servirá para maldecir a Próspero.”
- <sup>25</sup> Retamar in fact includes Lezama in his list of intellectuals allied with Caliban. Chiampi used Retamar’s concept in 1985 in an interpretation of Lezama. See Irlemar Chiampi, “*La expresión americana* de José Lezama Lima: la dificultad y el diabolismo del caníbal.” *Escritura*, 10:19-20 (1985): 103-15.
- <sup>26</sup> Severo Sarduy, *De donde son los cantantes* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1980), p. 151: “Tres culturas se han superpuesto para constituir la cubana—española, africana y china—; tres ficciones que aluden a ellas constituyen este libro.”
- <sup>27</sup> Enrico Mario Santi, “Textual Politics: Severo Sarduy.” *Latin American Literary Review* 8:16 (Spring 1980): 156.
- <sup>28</sup> Jacobo Machover, “Conversación con Severo Sarduy,” in *Le Néo-baroque cubain* (Paris: Presse de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1998), pp. 70-71: “Debatíamos, después de la revolución, lo siguiente: ¿existe la cultura cubana?, ¿existe la cubanidad? Algo que, por ejemplo, un argentino nunca se plantearía [!]. Ellos están seguros de que tienen una entidad, literaria al menos. Allí se planteaba mucho ese problema. Yo siempre respondí: el hecho de que el problema se plantee ya es una garantía de la existencia de esa cultura.” The interview is dated 1986.
- <sup>29</sup> Ambrosio Fornet, “*New World* en español,” *Casa de las Américas* 40 (1967). The complete sentence, on pp. 111-112, is revealing: “En el segundo número de *Mundo Nuevo*, Rodríguez Monegal entrevista al escritor francocubano Severo Sarduy: la entrevista, que aparece bajo el increíble título de “*Qué es Cuba*,” debió titularse “*Qué sería Cuba*,” pues en este escamoteo prodigioso apenas se alude a lo ocurrido en Cuba ¡durante los últimos siete años!”
- <sup>30</sup> Emir Rodríguez Monegal, “Severo Sarduy,” in Sarduy, *Obra completa*, vol. 2, p. 1802: “Le puedo decir como lector absolutamente ingenuo que soy...que cuando llegó el momento de la aparición de la fábrica de kirsch, me dije a mi mismo: ¡Pensar que hay fábricas de kirsch en Cuba! Luego, cuando empecé a notar una flora y una fauna extrañas, y sobre todo cuando vi el subterráneo en La Habana, descubría que no sabía nada de Cuba. Luego mi di cuenta, por suerte, que no era que no supiera, sino que la de su novela era una Cuba totalmente metaforizada y sintetizada.”
- <sup>31</sup> Duanel Díaz, *Palabras del trasfondo: intelectuales, literatura e ideología en la Revolución Cubana* (Madrid: Colibrí, 2009), p. 143: “Ahí, en el gusto por la superficie, por el decorado escenográfico, en el extrañamiento de esa Cuba de postalita o *papier mâché*, radicaba la auténtica subversión, aquello que por fuerza convertía a esta novela en un escándalo para una estética de inspiración realista-socialista.”
- <sup>32</sup> Roberto González Echevarría, *La ruta de Severo Sarduy* (Hanover, NH: Ediciones del Norte, 1987), p. 102: “‘De donde son los cantantes,’ sin acento en el ‘donde,’ es una afirmación hecha en el molde usual de una pregunta. Es decir, que ‘De donde son los cantantes’ tiene la rara cualidad de ser simultáneamente pregunta y afirmación.”
- <sup>33</sup> González Echevarría, *La ruta de Severo Sarduy*, p. 102: “lo no dicho, lo que se rodea, lo que se esquivo, es el significado inicial y final: Cuba.”
- <sup>34</sup> Sarduy, *De donde son los cantantes*, p. 49: “El Lector (*cada vez más hipotético*) de estas páginas —Bueno, pónganse de acuerdo: una versión o la otra. Lo que quiero son hechos. Sí, hechos, acción, desarrollo, mensaje, en suma. ¡Mensaje lírico!”

- <sup>35</sup> González Echevarría, *La ruta de Severo Sarduy*, p. 102: “En realidad no hay obra más preocupada por el significado que *De donde son los cantantes*, sólo que esa preocupación incluye la pregunta sobre cómo se produce el significado pero esto último no domina la obra a expensas del significado, ya que proponer tal cosa equivale a decir que la producción ya se ha convertido en significado.”
- <sup>36</sup> Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), p. 17: “C’est la gageure d’une jubilation continue, le moment où par son excès le plaisir verbal suffoque et bascule dans la jouissance.”
- <sup>37</sup> González Echevarría, *La ruta de Severo Sarduy*, p. 155: “Al recorrer el texto de *Cobra* tenemos la sensación de que falta un foco de sentido que cohesionen los elementos que lo arman.”
- <sup>38</sup> Emir Rodríguez Monegal, “Las metamorfosis del texto,” in *Severo Sarduy*, ed. Julián Ríos (Madrid: Espiral, 1976), pp. 36-37: “Y es...una serpiente de la India, fálica e insaciable que se enrosca sobre sí misma para morderse la cola cuando no está devorando viva (todos los orificios son viables para ella) alguna víctima cómplice, y es...el anagrama de un grupo de pintores (Appel, Aleschinsky, Corneille, Jorn) que provenía simultánea y sin duda sucesivamente de Copenhague, Bruselas y Amsterdam (lo que da COBRA); y es, en español al menos, voz del verbo *cobrar*, aunque esto sólo tenga importancia al nivel de una reinterpretación del capitalismo burgués y su horror al *gaspillage* (es decir, al barroco, es decir, al sexo, es decir, al arte); y es, finalmente (por ahora), nombre que alude por contigüidad a la palabra española *cobre* que en la mitología cubana es el emblema de Ochum, la diosa yoruba y de su equivalente católica, la Caridad del Cobre.”
- <sup>39</sup> González Echevarría, *La ruta de Severo Sarduy*, pp. 168-69.
- <sup>40</sup> Severo Sarduy, *Cobra* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1972), p. 180: “TOTEM: ¿Cuál es el mejor ejercicio espiritual? / EL GURÚ: Siéntese. Ponga el pie izquierdo sobre el muslo derecho y el derecho sobre el izquierdo. Cruce los brazos por detrás de la espalda. Con la mano derecha agárrese el pie izquierdo, con la izquierda el derecho. Mírese el ombligo. Y luego trate de desenredarse...”
- <sup>41</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, p. 15: “Los encerraba en hormas desde que amanecía, les aplicaba compresas de alumbre, los castigaba con baños sucesivos de agua fría y caliente. Los forzó con mordazas; los sometió a mecánicas groseras. Fabricó, para meterlos, armaduras de alambre cuyos hilos acertaba, retorciéndolos con alicates; después de embadurnarlos de goma arábiga los rodeó con ligaduras: eran momias, niños de medallones florentinos.  
Intentó curetajes.  
Acudió a la magia.  
Cayó en el determinismo ortopédico.”
- <sup>42</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, p. 29: “Anclas planas la fijaban a la tierra: dejaban que desear los pies de Cobra, ‘eran su infierno.’”
- <sup>43</sup> Gustavo Pellón, “Severo Sarduy’s Strategy of Irony: Paradigmatic Indecision in *Cobra* and *Maitreya*,” *Latin American Literature Review* 12:23 (1983): 7-13.
- <sup>44</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, p. 23:  
Iba / descalza, arrastrando incensarios,  
/ virriajada [??] con cruces de aceite negro,  
/ en hábitos carmelitas, de saco, un cordón amarillo a la cintura  
/ envuelta en damascos y paños blancos, con un sombrero de alas anchas y una vara,  
/ desnuda y llagada, bajo un capirote
- <sup>45</sup> Alicia Rivero-Potter, *Autor/Lector: Huidobro, Borges, Fuentes y Sarduy* (Detroit: Wayne State Press, 1991), p. 100: “El texto y el lector son lo primordial, en vez del autor; el que lee es coescritor de la obra.”
- <sup>46</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, pp. 15-20: “La escritura es el arte de la elipsis” (15); “La escritura es el arte de la digresión” (16); “La escritura es el arte de recrear la realidad. Respetémoslo” (17); “No. La escritura es el arte de restituir la Historia” (18); “La escritura es el arte de descomponer un orden y componer un desorden” (20).
- <sup>47</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, pp. 26-27: “¡Sólo un tarado pudo tragarse la a todas luces apócrifa historieta del pugilista que, de buenas a primeras, aparece en un cuadro flamenco y renuncia a su fuerza de macho de pelo en pecho nada menos que para encasquetarse un bonete verde y ponerse a traficar florines! ¡Vamos hombre!”
- <sup>48</sup> Sarduy, *Cobra*, p. 66, n. 1: “Tarado lector: si aun con estas pistas, groseras como postes, no has comprendido que se trata de una metamorfosis del pintor del capítulo anterior—fíjate si no cómo le han quedado los gestos del oficio—abandona esta novela y dedícate al templete o a leer las del Boom, que son mucho más claras.”

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- <sup>48</sup> González Echevarría, *La Ruta de Severo Sarduy*, p. 155: “Cobra intenta hacerlas explícitas. Cobra pretende encarnar nada menos que el subconsciente de la narrativa hispanoamericana.”
- <sup>49</sup> Severo Sarduy, *Maitreya* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1978), p. 187: “Adoptaron otros dioses, águilas. Mimaron ritos hasta la idiotez o el hastío. Para demostrar la impermanencia y vacuidad de todo.”
- <sup>50</sup> Gustavo Guerrero, “The Religion of the Void,” in *Between the Self and the Void: Essays in Honor of Severo Sarduy*, edited by Alicia Rivero-Potter (Boulder: Society of Spanish and Spanish-American Studies, 1998), p. 33.
- <sup>51</sup> Sadly, Damián del Cornejo has been consigned to the most complete oblivion. Some of his poems can be found, however, in a curious volume of ribald verse from 1895 entitled *Cancionero moderno de obras alegres*, reprinted in 1985 by Visor.
- <sup>52</sup> Guerrero, “The Religion of the Void,” p. 38.
- <sup>53</sup> François Wahl, “Severo de la rue Jacob,” in Sarduy, *Obra completa*, p. 1459
- <sup>54</sup> González Echevarría, *La ruta de Severo Sarduy*, pp. 52-53: “En los setenta Sarduy emprende una recuperación minuciosa y audaz de Lezama, no del Lezama de *Orígenes* asimilado por epígonos como Vitier, sino de un Lezama mucho más revolucionario, mucho más internacional en alcance. Es a la vez un Lezama más secreto y más corrosivo, porque está [53] ausente de él cierta beatería católica (burdamente trasvasada por ciertos oportunistas al plano político) que sus primersos discípulos no supieron decantar.”
- <sup>55</sup> Julio Cortázar, “Para llegar a Lezama Lima,” in *Recopilación de textos sobre José Lezama Lima*, edited by Pedro Simón (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1970), pp. 146-68. The article originally appeared in 1966.
- <sup>56</sup> Sarduy, *Escrito sobre un cuerpo*, p. 66: “*Paradiso* sería, por orden de adjetivos, una novela *barroca, cubana*, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ y *homosexual*. Encontrar esos términos. Llenar los blancos.”
- <sup>57</sup> Sarduy, *Escrito sobre un cuerpo*, p. 84: “El escritor francocubano Severo Sarduy, encerrado en las filigranas de su pensamiento bizantino, liberado del devenir histórico y convertido, por decirlo así, en una entelequia literaria, es víctima de las frías abstracciones de su torre de marfil, pues en este escamoteo prodigioso apenas se alude a la realidad. [more 84? or 85?] Si algo se refleja en *Paradiso* es una denuncia feroz de la corrupción de la sociedad de consumo, una crítica acérrima del sistema de la oferta y la demanda. ¿Hasta cuándo seguirá dedicado a perseguir esas síntesis y metáforas? ¡Vamos, hombre! ¡Qué frivolidad! ¡Qué decadencia!”
- <sup>58</sup> Severo Sarduy, “El Heredero,” *Obra completa*, p. 1411: “Heredero es el que descifra, el que lee. La herencia, más que una donación, es una obligación de hermenéutica.”
- <sup>59</sup> Sarduy, “El Heredero,” p. 1413: “Pero quizás heredar a Lezama sea, sobre todo, asumir su *pasión*, en los dos sentidos del término: vocación indestructible, dedicación, y padecimiento, agonía. Saber que el descifrador, precisamente porque impugna y perturba el código establecido, está condenado a la indiferencia, o algo que es peor que la franca agresión y el ataque frontal: la sorna. Cualquier detalle puede servir de enseña ensangrentada a los detractores—su sexualidad, por ejemplo—; cualquier de sus textos, fruto de noches sin noche, de años de retiro y silencio, puede ser asimilado a un ‘mariposeo,’ cualquiera de sus evasiones a una intriga.”
- <sup>60</sup> Sarduy, “El heredero,” p. 1412: “Pero si Lezama, como Hölderlin, es el antecesor, el adelantado, el que vuelve desde el porvenir, ¿cómo heredar no lo que nos precede, sino lo que nos sucede, lo que vendrá después de nosotros y que nadie puede sobrepasar? Quizá, *descifrando a contracorriente*, haciendo con la lectura que su palabra advenga para que el porvenir se convierta en presente, en presencia.”

## Conclusion

Severo Sarduy's insistence on the baroque's revolutionary potential signals a view of politics and literature that I have alluded to more than once over the preceding pages: that literature (or art) has a political force that, paradoxically, stems from freedom from political concerns. Sarduy found the officially sanctioned aesthetics of the Cuban regime stultifying and ultimately conservative, despite its defenders' insistence on the contrary. The neobaroque, for Sarduy, offered a more radical alternative, for it aimed to do away with the quasi-religious belief in truth, identity or freedom, and to unmask the intolerance that underlay even the rhetoric of radical liberation.

José Lezama Lima provided the model for Sarduy's theory, but for all his poetic boldness he did not really share Sarduy's radicalism, and in fact his religious and political views followed a much more conservative path. Like Sarduy, however, he believed that art stood at its most compelling and powerful when it did not bend to parochial political concerns. He perceived that explicit commitment could spell irrelevance outside of an immediate historical or national context. His baroque, moreover, did not imply the contestatory stance that later critics tend to give it. Unlike Sarduy, who saw the baroque as an aesthetics of epistemic groundlessness, Lezama viewed it as a uniquely fruitful moment from the past in which Latin America absorbed multiple outside influences and fashioned them into something new.

Gerardo Diego's view of the baroque lies much closer to Lezama's than to Sarduy's. He found in Góngora a model of aesthetic audacity, a poet who showed that Spanish literature could be unapologetically modern. For that very reason, Góngora held immense relevance for the poets of the 1920s who sought to move beyond the previous generation's national obsession. That Diego and his companions were recast, in the 1940s, as having merely memorialized those obsessions is a sad irony—and one that echoes the fates of Lezama and Sarduy.

In all three cases, the worldly, inclusive perspectives they found in the baroque have been elided and recast a small set of nationalist concerns. Thus Diego's interest in Góngora becomes the "renewal" of a timeless Spanish tradition, Lezama's *mestizaje* becomes an assertion of Latin American rebellion, and Sarduy's neobaroque is remembered as a regional alternative to postmodernity. The political contexts of their reinterpretations vary, almost as much as the content of their thought and their definitions of the baroque. Yet more striking are the parallels: in each case the baroque constituted an argument for the wider relevance of Hispanic and Latin American literature—and in each case it has retrospectively been redefined as a narrow identity project. This identitarian view of the baroque has, moreover, become dominant.

Hence the importance of revisiting the thought of these three writers. Over these five chapters I have argued that Diego, Lezama and Sarduy offer a more productive and inclusive alternative to the dominant view of the baroque. Against a critical consensus that considers it a regional sensibility divergent from, or opposed to, the main currents of modern culture, these writers find in the baroque a way to highlight Spain and Latin America's relevance for the modern world. They highlight, in other words, how the

Hispanic world participates in the trends and debates that define what it means to be modern. This does not mean that they overlook their specific cultural heritage or geographic reality—or indeed, of the often marginal place that Spain and Latin America have occupied on the world’s political or economic stage. But they do refuse to let these facts constrain them: they insistently lay claim to a place for themselves, and for the Hispanic world more generally, in the cultural panorama of the twentieth century.

To reiterate, neither Diego, nor Lezama, nor Sarduy suggests that the Hispanic world is merely “the same” as Europe or North America, nor that its literature blandly conforms to a pre-existing definition of modernism or the avant-garde. But then participation does not mean conformity, and reinserting Spain and Latin America into a picture of international modernity would mean changing that picture. To take only some examples studied here: Diego’s choice of classical form as a vehicle for poetic abstraction might complicate our picture of the avant-garde, Lezama’s theory of cultural appropriation could offer an alternative to the familiar story of modernist novelty and rupture, and Sarduy’s notion of an aesthetic revolution might open a window onto the cultural landscape of postwar Europe and Latin America. As they insist, their work and that of their peers deserves to be heard beyond their linguistic and geographic borders.

If I have reiterated this point so often, it is because Spain and Latin America remain often strikingly absent from global discussions of modern literature. A notorious example is Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane’s canonical survey *Modernism 1890-1930*, which omits Latin America entirely and reduces Spain to a few passing nods to Unamuno and Lorca. More recent work likewise tends to minimize if not omit cultural production in Spanish. Of course, critics Bradbury and MacFarlane do not exclude the Hispanic world on the grounds that it is baroque, but more likely out of an assumption that Spain and Latin America simply do not have much of a place in the modern world. One place to begin undoing that assumption, however, is with the conceptual tools used in Hispanic and Latin American studies—and especially those that reinforce it. Of these, the baroque is one of the most prominent, and one of the most problematic. More often than not, it lets critics claim that the Spanish-speaking world does not, in fact, belong to the same modernity as its cultural peers.

What Diego, Lezama and Sarduy make clear, however, is that the conceptual tool of the baroque can be used in more productive and inclusive ways. As they show, it can offer a way to reinsert Spain and Latin America into the wider world. And it is to this larger project that I hope the preceding chapters can contribute.



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