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978-0-521-15275-4 - The Baroque Narrative of Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora: A New World Paradise

Kathleen Ross

Excerpt

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Introduction

Is the idea of a Spanish American baroque an oxymoron? Is this combination of a geography and a style one which by definition must be self-contradictory? Was the phenomenon of baroque writing in colonial Spanish America – the *barroco de Indias*, or baroque of the Indies, as the colonies were known – only an imitation of the metropolis, or did it create something new and different? These are the questions I explore in this study. They have been posed to me by colleagues in fields of literature outside Hispanic studies, by students in my classes, and even by Hispanists not directly engaged in colonial research. In my view, these questions go back to an ambiguity that is as old as the term itself and has never been convincingly resolved: What do we mean by the term *barroco de Indias*? Why not just call it “baroque”? What, finally, is the difference here?

The idea of “difference” has special meaning for literary criticism. In the terminology of deconstruction, it is a translation of Derrida’s *différance*, pertaining to the multiplicity of meanings inherent in language and the text. This difference, as it was narrowly defined by early poststructuralists, has little to do with the author or with historical circumstance. To feminist and cultural critics, however, what makes a text “different” has everything to do with who wrote it, and where and when. This creates an impasse that, particularly among feminist scholars, has defined rival camps of criticism (theoretical or empirical, French or Anglo-American) that would seem to be mutually exclusive.

North American and European feminist critics of French literature have done much to bridge this gap and expand the concept of poststructural difference as it relates to the social construct of gender.¹ As for language-based criticism that takes cultural and historical difference into account, scholars of Latin

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American literature have been in the vanguard. Precisely because of the playfulness of language in Latin American texts, alongside the marginality of the writer whose culture is not that of the Western center, this intersection of linguistic and cultural concerns is unavoidable. Critics examining writing in Latin America since independence have always given history primary importance; the question of national, regional, or ethnic identity is posed over and over again. The experimental, playful language of the great novels of the 1960s and 1970s – the “Boom” – is likewise often studied from within a cultural framework. The heterogeneity of Latin American culture and the challenge of its literature to European theory of necessity make the best critical work an enterprise not limited to language alone.

As for colonial Spanish American writing, its study was largely descriptive until poststructuralist theory came along. Earlier criticism followed two general routes: the historical, in which scholars did archival work, and the literary, in which they looked for telltale signs of modern fictional modes in colonial texts. In the most influential literary histories, the two routes merged and defined colonial writing for the majority of readers, as literary histories generally were read in lieu of the texts themselves.² However, since the emergence of theory as an analytical tool beginning in the late 1960s, it is fair to say that there has been a revolution in the way colonial literature is read and studied. History and culture, in this case, were never forgotten – indeed, work on colonial texts is often an interdisciplinary effort closely tied to historical or anthropological method. But by concentrating on the language of the text, we have been able to place the writing of sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century America in a contemporaneous context. Instead of reading only with twentieth-century eyes, we have examined what the rules for writing were for authors and texts in the world they themselves inhabited. Moreover, by inquiring just why colonial writing has been evaluated for so long according to Romantic or post-Romantic standards, the most recent colonial criticism is rewriting Spanish American literary history, enriching the entire field with its findings.³

Thus the gap between critical and historical scholarship has never been so broad as far as Latin American literature is con-

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cerned, and difference as a category of inquiry has never been without its cultural component. In a similar vein, the current, hotly debated movement toward revision of the canon of Western literature, which focuses on the value of “nonliterary” texts for study and questions the worth of aesthetic appraisals that emphasize the universal rather than the local, is something already familiar to the field of Latin American literary studies. A canon, largely exclusive of Indian, black, and women writers, exists in our field too, but it is being more rapidly broken down because the underlying foundation is a new one.

It is especially important for scholars of colonial texts to refine knowledge of this foundation in order to further challenge the canon. Built in the nineteenth century and based on the written production of a colonial society far from the metropolis, this tradition is easier to uproot because of its marginal character. Indeed, by examining writing that is not conventional “literature,” the very practice of colonial criticism stands for change in the works we read, the way we read them, and the manner in which we historicize them.⁴

My inquiry into American difference challenges modern readings of an important timespan – the seventeenth century. Critical work on the baroque in Spanish art and literature is abundant, since such art was the richest product of a politically and economically depressed era. The contrast between artistic boom and imperial bust is so notable, in fact, that social theories explaining baroque aesthetics and style – principally referring to the religious orthodoxy of the Counter-Reformation – have been advanced by critics for decades.⁵ The situation obtaining across the Atlantic is much more problematic. In the New World the phenomenon of the baroque – *barroco de Indias* – arrived a bit late but stayed for a very long time, pervading literature, painting, architecture, and popular art. Yet though the poetry of this century, especially that of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, has received attention, the narrative remains neglected. This situation mirrors the state of research in history, which has concentrated on the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in Spanish America to the detriment of the seventeenth. In the last two or three decades, however, this gap in the historical literature has been steadily addressed from several different angles, especially the economic and social.

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I see an acute need for scholarship relating literature, and particularly the narrative, to current historical evidence, and my study is an exercise in such an interdisciplinary approach to the “forgotten century,” as it was dubbed by Leslie Byrd Simpson. This era receives short shrift from both camps, for its complexities are daunting. Yet the ferocious polemics raging amongst literary critics and historians alike indicate just what is at stake: an understanding of the forces at work in the first full century of Spanish American colonial life, a time that defined society for many years afterward.

In his now-classic essay “Literatura de fundación,” Octavio Paz writes that the Spanish tree planted in American soil has become another, with greener leaves and more bitter sap (Paz 1972, 15). Following this metaphor, we could ask whether the tree of the American baroque is a hybrid or a transplant. Around this issue, critics have expressed almost opposing notions of seventeenth-century writing. The proponents of the hybrid theory – Paz among them – lean heavily toward a symbolic analysis, positing an identification of aesthetic with identity in a heterogeneous society. Those critics who call it a transplant take a materialist view, arguing that the literature of a colonial elite is per se a mimetic exercise based on the class identification of the colonized with the colonizer. Both tendencies claim to describe the baroque literature of the colonies in relation to the world surrounding it; but each sees the relation of the individual writer to the world in a way opposed to the other.

José Lezama Lima postulates in his book *La expresión americana* that the baroque is the foundation of Spanish American literature, for it provided the vehicle to express a new culture that was more a mixture of disparate elements than a synthesis. Since the aesthetic standard of baroque art did not value order, measure, or symmetry, but rather complexity and excess, the cacophony of America could be well represented through such a style (Lezama 1957, 45–52). Lezama, and Paz after him, stand the question of an oxymoronic American baroque on its head: for them the baroque in the New World becomes truly new, breaking with its European master. Far from being a slave to forms defined by the metropolis, the *barroco de Indias* is the point where American writing begins, the place where the tree sends down its own roots.

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In contrast, critics of the materialist school see the writers of the colonial period in concrete terms, strive to avoid idealization of the past, and stress the collective over the individual case. John Beverley, for example, examines the literature of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain alongside that of Spanish America during the same timespan, arguing that together they form the corpus of an “imperial era” (Beverley 1987, 13). Literary models imported from Europe are, according to Beverley, part and parcel of a system of domination, and writers are the products of that same system. The production of an author, in turn, depends on the specific material conditions of his or her sociohistorical moment, rather than on individual talent or genius.

In the terms of historical determinism as seen by the critics of this group, the colonial period and its literature respond to changing conditions that lead, eventually, to revolution. An American literature is born through the contradictions created when imposed European styles overlay what remains of indigenous traditions. Different groups and social classes take part in this struggle for American definition, which develops toward liberation as it breaks away from imperial power. Literature is a phenomenon to be explained in material terms.

I contend that both these explanations, the symbolic and the material, are inadequate. They purport a historical analysis, but in the end are informed mostly by modern thought and modernist aesthetics: Paz’s analysis, for example, tends toward existentialism, whereas Beverley professes a Marxist, globalizing ideology. Neither accurately portrays the culture of seventeenth-century Spanish America as current historical evidence presents it to us. My own investigation is indebted to these materialist and symbolic critiques, but I wish to go beyond the dichotomy that considers them mutually exclusive paradigms. A literary analysis that takes into account findings from history is a path out of this critical dead end.

The historical scholarship is, however, every bit as disputed as that of literature. In the 1950s, Woodrow Borah in his *New Spain’s Century of Depression* raised the issue of whether the European economic crisis of the seventeenth century had extended to Spanish America. Borah believed it had and that the depression was real, the result of various factors, and his

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hypothesis was generally accepted. Over the years, however, others published divergent views, and the debate has reached a peak since 1981, when John TePaske and Herbert Klein's "The Seventeenth-Century Crisis in New Spain: Myth or Reality?" inspired fierce discussion and a polarization of opinion. The evidence for a "mythical" or a "real" depression has to do with the identification of colonial Spanish America's relative dependency on Spain during the century under examination. Those who argue for the reality of the depression see the colonies as wholly dominated by Europe, suffering through a century of crisis with metropolitan origins; the postulators of a myth of depression hypothesize a gradual lessening of dependency, a growing self-sufficiency that reordered the economy of the Spanish empire. Different kinds of documents and data are called upon to attest to the claims of both sides in the argument. Most of the work has dealt with New Spain, but the rest of Spanish America has also been discussed.

This polemic provides a fruitful model for consideration by critics of colonial literature and culture. When a case is made for a materialist view of baroque writing, it argues for a hypothesis of economic and cultural dependency, whereas the symbolic interpretation looks for signposts of an existential reordering, a new way of seeing the world and Spanish America's place in it. We are discussing the same issues that historians do, although our evidence is based on language and text rather than statistics and documents.

In this book I restate the terms of the literary argument by incorporating some of the historians' dialogue. I do so in an effort to arrive at a broader understanding of the culture that produced the *barroco de Indias*, not because I believe that historical evidence is somehow privileged above textual readings. Indeed, my contention is that history and literature, bound together in the seventeenth century by rhetoric, remain so today, for both rely on language to persuade and convince, and both are subject to the reader's interpretation. By examining the efforts made by Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, seventeenth-century historian of New Spain, to disengage from literary models, I show just how much the cultural ideologies of colonial society in the age of absolutism were shaped through baroque literature, making such a discursive separation impossible.

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Baroque literature in Spanish America was not a liberating gesture, since those practicing it were colonized. Nor was it merely an exercise in slavish imitation of Spanish style, solely the expression of colonial domination; to say so ignores the evolution of colonial culture throughout three centuries of Spanish rule. Baroque literature in Spanish America was the vehicle through which the criollos, or American-born Spaniards, engaged in an intertextual dialogue with the sixteenth century and the writing of the age of Spanish conquest (c. 1492–1580), and thus with a literary history that had become their own as well as Europe's. As this group gained self-sufficiency, so did its literature gradually break from European models. The criollos – some of whom were not totally pure-blooded Spaniards – remained identified with Europe, but as colonized Americans they lived a multifaceted reality ordered by hierarchies of race, class, gender, and religion. Their literature shows a constant wavering of language from dominant to subordinate positions, resulting in subversions of European models even when those models are consciously being imitated. And above all, the great preoccupation is history: rewriting it to include the New World. This foundation was made for themselves and their colonial reality, not for the modern nations of Spanish America that formed after independence; but it was American and not European, even though we cannot yet point to a nationalist impetus.

Moreover, certain individual personalities – creative thinkers – did stand out among the criollos. Their genius, and particularly their literary production, can be recognized without losing sight of the miseries of their age, and of the privileged position they held in it. How did they come to create what they did? Through a dialogue with their particular historical circumstances and society, while at the same time defining that society themselves through their use of historical writing, some writers resisted the Spanish domination of language and culture, and they are the ones we remember today.

Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora's *Parayso Occidental*, the history of the foundation of one of Mexico City's first convents, is a text where all the defining characteristics of colonial society – religion, race, class, and gender – come into play. Sigüenza y Góngora combines these issues in his narrative as he rewrites

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the story of the discovery of America from a late seventeenth-century perspective, using the “paradise” of the convent as a metaphor for European colonization. A member of the criollo elite, his position in society has long concerned students of the period, for he was a man of many talents – a historian, mathematician, poet, and ethnographer. He himself studied indigenous civilizations, but was this intellectual a critic of peninsular power, or a collaborator? The same question has been raised with a slightly different cast by both historians and literary critics: was Sigüenza y Góngora a representative of baroque culture and the Spanish state, or a thwarted proponent of the Enlightenment and the nascent America of revolutionary ideas?

These kinds of dichotomous questions do little toward the work of describing the era that produced the *barroco de Indias*. They merely leave us with a portrait of the seventeenth century as a hole in time – a way station on the road to independence for some, the fulfillment of the genocide of the Conquest for others. This century is consistently defined by what went before and after it, and the reception of Sigüenza y Góngora’s work offers an illuminating example. My interest is to find new avenues of approach to the complexities of the era, avoiding easy reductions.

As I demonstrate with examples from other colonial writers, the narrative of the *barroco de Indias* can be seen as a product of the complex forces of the dynamic society that surrounded it. My object of study could thus be characterized as the baroque narrative and its cultural milieu. The work to be done here is a revision of literary history that will include the era of American baroque in all its glory and misery, as a time of intense class and racial stratification, religious orthodoxy, and misogyny, alongside new growth at the frontier, expansion in trade, and a wealth of artistic production.

Incorporating the findings of recent historical scholarship is one approach to seventeenth-century literature. Using the tools of inquiry honed by feminist and gender studies across the disciplines is equally crucial. Every field in the humanities and social sciences (as well as some in the biological and physical sciences) has been touched by this radical methodology that asks questions from an angle inclusive of women both as subjects

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and objects. Such questioning leads not only to knowledge of specific conditions for women, but also to challenges about knowledge as it is constituted in the disciplines themselves. The way in which knowledge is gathered, interpreted, and passed on to succeeding generations is undergoing intense scrutiny, the result being a fresh look at the local traditions of each field.

Parayso Occidental is a good example of a text that remains resistant to interpretation without the tools of feminist scholarship. Written to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the Mexican Convento de Jesús María, it is largely composed of the *vidas*, or spiritual life stories, of some of the institution's most pious nuns. These *vidas* appear in various forms: as biography written by male confessors, first-person oral history dictated to either a confessor or another nun, and written autobiography composed by the nuns themselves. All are included within the structure of *Parayso Occidental*, sometimes quoted directly by Sigüenza y Góngora, sometimes heavily edited and paraphrased by him. Being a work that in great part was written by women – though Sigüenza subsumes the nuns' own stories into his broader history – *Parayso* cannot be understood until the sexual politics of the text are brought into full view. By bringing a gender analysis to bear on the narrative, the pieces begin to fall into place: It is no longer a religious anomaly among Sigüenza's works, which deal mostly with more empirical topics such as comets, geography, and exploration, but a stage for the cultural preoccupations of baroque society that inspired all his writing. In establishing that underlying ideology by including women, we provide a new paradigm for questioning the dependency of seventeenth-century life in America. Asking "Where were the women?" – both within the text and without it – takes us into the heart of that daily life. When their story is told, there is a shift in perspective; they are the forgotten voices of the forgotten century.

The criollo elite to which Sigüenza y Góngora belonged was subject to a shifting reality of conformity and subversion, domination and power; it ruled at home but was second-class abroad. Any reading of the *barroco de Indias* must take this into account. The nuns of the Convento de Jesús María were also mostly criollas, but as women they were subordinate to men, and so fit differently into the hierarchy of power. The question

of cultural dependency that I have identified as being of paramount importance to this epoch will necessarily be answered differently for men and women, but neither answer is complete without the other.

Thus my approach to the religious life stories that make up so much of *Parayso Occidental* aims to place them in the context of a culture of men as well as women. Although the convent provided a place where some women could write, and encouraged literacy for religious purposes, it cannot be idealized as an autonomous space. I do not believe a community of women apart from men and the outside world was formed in the convent; the persistence of class and race divisions within its walls makes this evident. Postulating that an ideal women's culture could exist under such repressive conditions as those of seventeenth-century convents overlooks the reality of the surrounding society, for the convent depended on institutions run by men.

The *vidas* show us how religious women dealt with their culture through writing or through testimony. This response differed according to the stations of the individual women; some were poor, some privileged. Some women resisted the domination of male hierarchies, whereas others conformed. Moreover, some stories were dictated and so are oral narratives. All have in common an intensely personal orientation to events, combining autobiography with history. They describe the public sphere from the vantage point of the private.

In *Parayso Occidental*, the range of life stories recounts different responses to the limitations, and the possibilities, of the cloister. But matters are complicated by the larger structure of the text; Sigüenza's history encloses the convent narratives and uses them to its own ends. The narrative strategies and literary models called upon to perform this operation of textual domination are at the heart of my study, which lays bare the workings of the criollo historiography that inspires the narrative of the *barroco de Indias*. But without recognizing the importance of the feminine text to this process, and the ways in which it differs from Sigüenza's history, the heterogeneity of *Parayso Occidental* remains a mystery.

These women's voices do not exist in a female world cut off from the outside; they maintain a dialogue with the dominant sphere of male writing, with men's power and privilege. Besides