theories and methodologies

Eccentric Periodization: Comparative Perspectives on the Enlightenment and the Baroque

LOIS PARKINSON ZAMORA

There is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and conjectural. . . . But the impossibility of penetrating the divine scheme of the universe cannot dissuade us from outlining human schemes, even though we are aware that they are provisional.

—Jorge Luis Borges, "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins" (104)

OUR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE OF GROUPING CULTURAL PRODUCTS INTO HISTORICAL CATEGORIES HAS RECENTLY BEEN THE SUBJECT OF lively critical discussion, as well as some consternation.[1] Here I want to consider how, and how well, periodization organizes knowledge in the field of comparative literature. Organizing knowledge is what scholars do in all disciplines, of course, but the organizational models differ according to our objects of study. Historians may be the most dependent on schemata of periodization, but literary scholars aren't far behind.[2] Literature curricula in United States universities are largely organized according to diachronic historical categories, whether they are labeled by centuries or by rubrics tied to a historical period's style or ideology or political circumstances. This is not surprising since European periodic categories long precede the establishment of curricula in the United States. Periods are powerful because they carry with them their own historical accumulations and applications, and they become dialectical as we engage their diverse cultural and historical meanings. For this reason, they can be particularly useful to comparatists. Indeed, to speak of any period at all is to make a comparative statement. One period necessarily implies others, each period a part that exists in relation to other parts and to an implied whole—a provisional "classification of the universe," to quote from the passage by Jorge Luis Borges that I take as my epigraph.

In most cases, periodization functions as metaphor, conveying aesthetic information about styles and themes, as well as proposing historical parameters. Periodic categories pretend to analogy, if not identity, among the cultures and regions they encompass, and this is the cause for consternation that I mentioned above. Periodization

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will inevitably create artificial alignments among what may otherwise be markedly different cultural products and practices. If injudiciously imposed, periodic categories will erase local differences in favor of metropolitan similarities and thus curtail or remove cultural agency except as it conforms to European conventions. We must begin to critique our own practice of periodization by acknowledging the potential dangers of appropriation at the outset and by employing comparative strategies to differentiate among cultures, histories, and intentions.

Latin American intellectuals and writers have been engaged in this project since the 1930s, rethinking European periodic categories according to local imperatives. I refer below to several theorists who developed alternative schemata of periodization and, indeed, alternative ways of thinking about the nature of tradition—the nature of continuity, rupture, originality, transculturation, and incorporation. I follow their lead in refusing the premise that periodization must imply (or impose) uniformity and, further, the idea that European categories have been or could be imposed in Latin America without cultural or critical revision. To the contrary, European periodic denominators, when transposed to Latin America, have tended to highlight differences as well as continuities and have thus foregrounded the distinctive histories and cultures of Latin America vis-à-vis Europe. This process, which I will call eccentric periodization, has provided ample grounds for comparative critique; after all, what more comparative task could we undertake than uncovering distinct cultural processes and products beneath identical periodic labels? Here, then, I take the opportunity to look briefly at two related instances of this eccentric periodization in Latin America: the enlightenment and the baroque.

Enlightenment is translated in Spanish as *la ilustración*, meaning literally "illumination" and, by metaphoric extension, a period of learning, erudition, intellectual clarity, and, yes, enlightenment. The metaphor of light continues in the translation of the Enlightenment's kindred label *age of reason*, which in Spanish is *el siglo de las luces* ("the century of lights"). Cultural historians regularly refer to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Mexico as *la ilustración* and intellectuals of the time as *los ilusos* ("illuminated ones"), but this did not stop the Mexican essayist and poet Octavio Paz from declaring that neither Spain nor Mexico had an Enlightenment. In *Los hijos del limo* (*Children of the Mire*), Paz's essential comparative essay on the asymmetries of European and Latin American periodization, he states that Spain had "ni razón crítica ni revolución burguesa. Ni Kant ni Robespierre" ("neither critical reason nor bourgeois revolution, neither Kant nor Robespierre"; *Los hijos* 121; *Children* 82). And Mexico, according to Paz, followed Spain in having missed a critical philosophy consonant with the European definition of enlightenment.

Perhaps, but another Mexican literary intellectual, Gonzalo Celorio, takes adamant exception, challenging Paz's assertion by drawing attention to the different nature of Mexico's eighteenth-century *ilustración*, with its Jesuit erudition and its continuing passion for the baroque. In Celorio's own brilliant comparative essay of eccentric periodization, titled "Del barroco al neobarroco" ("From the Baroque to the Neobaroque"), he contrasts the encyclopedic universalism and rationalism of the European Enlightenment to the more local interests of eighteenth-century Mexican intellectuals, who were engaged in affirming the values of an incipient Mexicanness. Celorio writes about these intellectuals:

> Así, al estudiar la historia antigua de México, como Clavijero; al cantar sus bellezas naturales y sus costumbres, como Landívar; al compendiar sus referencias bibliográficas, como Eguiara y Eguren, estos hombres, más que a la Ilustración, pertenecen al barroco. . . . Si, amparados en la tesis de Edmundo O'Gorman, aceptamos que América se incorpora

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> al repertorio de ideas y de valores en que se sustenta la cultura occidental, habría que fijar su identidad en las peculiaridades de tal incorporación. (91–92, 94)
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> [Francisco Javier] Clavijero, who studied the ancient history of Mexico, [Rafael] Landívar, who sang the praises of its natural beauty and customs, and [Juan José] Eguiara y Eguren, who collected its bibliographical references, belonged more to the Baroque than to the Enlightenment. . . . If, based on the theories of Edmundo O'Gorman, we accept that America is incorporated into the repertory of ideas and values that sustain Western culture, then our identity will have to be defined according to the specific way in which this incorporation has taken place. (499, 500)

European universalism encountered the particularism, and particularities, of New Spain and was eventually incorporated into an ongoing baroque—an enlightened baroque, if you will. Celorio concludes his challenge to Paz as follows: "De nuestra excentricidad no se desprende, pues, que no tengamos tradición crítica sino que precisamente por tal excentricidad nuestra crítica adopta modalidades específicas, toda vez que en nuestra historia las luces alternaron amigablement con el barroco" ("From our eccentricity, then, we must conclude not that we lack a critical tradition but that, precisely because of our eccentricity, we adopt critical structures of our own. So we recognize in our past an amicable alternation between the values of the Enlightenment and those of the Baroque"; 95; 501). In Mexico periods have not been successive but simultaneous, continuous, intertwined, and multilayered, as they remain today, an inseparable union, says Celorio, of criticism and passion.

Celorio's analysis reflects the critical recuperation and revalidation of the New World baroque as a historical period and, more important, as a cultural ideology. This process began in the 1930s, most explicitly in an essay by the Argentine art historian Ángel Guido, written in 1936 and titled "América frente a Europa en el arte" ("America's Relation to Europe in the Arts"). This is the first time that a Latin American cultural critic had directed attention not to the *reproduction* of European baroque models but rather to the *departures* from those models: different materials and techniques, different authors and audiences, different indigenous and African iconographies, and, not least, a different time frame—baroque artifacts in the Americas were produced over a longer period of time than were those in Europe (roughly a century and a half, from 1640 in New Spain to 1810 in some parts of Brazil). The Cuban author José Lezama Lima had surely read Guido's essay, because in *his* essential essay on the subject, "La curiosidad barroca" ("Baroque Curiosity"), he cites the same examples of New World baroque architecture as Guido—Peruvian and Brazilian examples, as it happens. The baroque is no longer an instrument of conquest, then, but rather, in Lezama's term, an instrument of counterconquest; the New World baroque had become a *retort* to European impositions rather than a *reflection* of them. So the European baroque is transformed, and the New World baroque—*el barroco de indias*, *el barroco novomundista*—becomes a concept as well as a historical period.

Another Cuban author, Alejo Carpentier, joins Lezama in theorizing the New World baroque. Carpentier starts with the European baroque and then universalizes it with examples from an array of diverse cultures and periods. He argues that the baroque is not a period but a spirit, a human constant, and yet this spirit is particularly suited to Latin America. So he famously asks, "¿Y por qué es América Latina la tierra de elección del barroco? Porque toda simbiosis, todo mestizaje, engendra un barroquismo" ("And why is Latin America the chosen territory of the baroque? Because all symbiosis, all *mestizaje*, engenders the Baroque"; "Lo barroco" 126; "Baroque" 100). In essays written in 1964 and 1975, Carpentier includes indigenous Ameri-

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can forms of expression alongside imported European ones: the pyramids at Teotihuacán in Mexico, the sculpted Mexica goddess Coatlicue, the ceremonial site of Mitla, in Oaxaca, which are, for him, as baroque as the facades and altarpieces of the churches built by Catholic colonizers. The coexistence of European, indigenous, and African cultures has produced a "superimposición de estilos . . . ese *estilo sin estilo* que a la larga, por proceso de simbiosis, de amalgama, se erige en un barroquismo peculiar" ("superimposition of styles . . . *a style without a style* that in the long run, through a process of symbiosis and amalgamation, became a peculiar kind of Baroque"; "Ciudad" 62–63; "City" 246). This baroque "style without a style" is dynamic and dramatic in its impulse to accumulate and include: cultural syncretism is central to Carpentier's theory of the New World baroque and to the ongoing influence of his theory among Latin American writers and critics.

It is ironic, then, that the source of Carpentier's theory is European. Eugenio d'Ors, a Catalonian art historian, published a treatise on the baroque in 1935, written in French and titled *Du baroque* (he would publish it in Spanish in 1944 as *Lo barroco*). D'Ors was working in Paris during the 1930s, and Carpentier, too, was in Paris and would have read d'Ors's treatise then. D'Ors dismisses the usual periodization of the baroque and, indeed, the usual definition of period; instead, he writes of "eons" produced by metaphysical and stylistic tensions in every age and culture. For d'Ors, baroque eons are characterized by "esquemas multipolares en vez de unipolares; fundidos y continuos, no discontinuos y recortados" ("multinuclear schemas instead of single-centered ones, their elements merged and continuous rather than discontinuous and separate"; "Querella" 87; "Debate" 87). Baroque media are always intertwined—architecture speaks to sculpture, painting to poetry, mathematics to music; the interaction of expressive forms disrupts fixed categories and creates fresh comparative contexts (as it may do in our own professional practice). Baroque eons are not only multilingual but also multiple: d'Ors identifies twenty-two distinct baroques—Macedonian, Gothic, Nordic, Palagian, Manuelino, and so on ("Querella" 93)—though he totally ignores the baroque in Latin America. Nonetheless, three decades later Carpentier will adopt d'Ors's conception of baroque morphology to theorize Latin America's "multinuclear schemas." Indigenous, European, and African elements, ancient and modern, "high" and "low," circulate in dynamic spatial relation, organized and impelled by what Carpentier alternately calls "núcleos proliferantes," "focos proliferantes," and "células proliferantes" ("proliferating nuclei," "proliferating foci," "proliferating cells"; "Barroco" 117, 118, 120; "Baroque" 93, 94, 97). Baroque structures embrace disparate fragments and forms, and project them centrifugally till they breach their boundaries. So Carpentier, following d'Ors, transforms historical duration into dynamic space.

I don't know if these two eccentric periodizers ever met, but I would assume they did, since Carpentier often quotes d'Ors and gives him credit for his conception of the baroque. Their meeting would have been in the early 1930s in Paris, and I can imagine the much younger Carpentier's fascination with d'Ors's ideas as he searched for his own ways to represent Latin America's historical experience. (D'Ors was born in 1881 and Carpentier in 1904.) In fact, d'Ors had his own reasons for seeing matters eccentrically. He was a Catalonian who left Barcelona for Madrid in 1922 at the age of twenty-one and began writing in Spanish (even though his reputation as a literary intellectual was already established in Catalan) as part of the Catalonian aesthetic movement that d'Ors had named *noucentisme*. In 1927 he was sent from Madrid to Paris as the Spanish representative in an international organization devoted to intellectual cooperation, and in 1931, in the abbey

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of Pontigny, he convened the seminar that would result in the 1935 publication of *Du baroque*. He remained in France until the Spanish Civil War impelled his return to Spain in 1937. In 1938 he was named national director of fine arts, and he worked under the Franco dictatorship to recuperate works of art that had been removed from Spain for safekeeping by the republican government. His collaboration with the Franco dictatorship, his support of Mussolini, and his friendships with Karl Schmitt, Osbert Sitwell, and Filippo Marinetti, among others, are probably part of the reason for his obscurity, but there are other reasons as well. With the exception of *Lo barroco*, which, as we have seen, was wonderfully revitalized in Latin American surroundings by Carpentier, d'Ors's many essays and *glosas* ("glosses," as he called his literary fragments) remain strangely limited by and to their author's personality and immediate ambit.

There is, however, another exception, a small volume written by d'Ors in 1922 in Spanish and titled *Tres horas en el Museo del Prado* ("Three Hours in the Prado Museum"). In it d'Ors strolls through the galleries of the Prado, speaking as a guide to an ideal visitor, explaining his intention: "olvidar la cronología y clasificar autores y obras por su actitud estética únicamente" ("to forget chronology and classify artists and works solely according to their aesthetic attitude"; 49; my trans.). We must remember that museums at the time hung paintings floor to ceiling and side by side, with little space between frames, grouping works, large and small, by a given artist. As we accompany d'Ors on his visit, then, we imagine ourselves in surroundings very different from those of today's Prado. Moving from room to room, d'Ors observes affinities among artists and makes connections among frames—often unexpected ones, between Poussin and Goya, for example. It is as if the stroll itself—his own kinetic activity, his spatial displacements—allowed him to intuit cultural and aesthetic relations in their "multinuclear schema." He disrupts historical progression and succession, rethinks causes and consequences, in order to play freely with time. So, in his walk through the Prado, d'Ors exercises his predilection for unfixed fragments, multiple meanings, and comparative possibilities.

D'Ors's effort to reconceptualize periodization eighty years ago in the Prado is almost touching, given that this museum was and remains unusually rigid in its historical organization. Most museums are periodically organized, but the Prado is even more so because it is the royal collection. Monarchs follow predictably one after another; they and their families grow up, grow old, and are succeeded, their court painters indefatigably documenting time's passing, first for the Hapsburgs, then for the Bourbons. Who doesn't know what Philip IV looks like, with Velásquez's amazing renderings of that long Austrian jaw, or Charles IV, the rotund Bourbon with his large family in Goya's successive portraits? No wonder d'Ors felt the need to create comparative constellations that related to one another in "multinuclear" ways—merging and continuous, rather than sequential and separate. The Prado is not short on baroque masterpieces, so it may have been there that his first inkling of the expansive capacities of the baroque began to take shape.

In 2012–13 there was an exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, of more than one hundred major works from the Prado. And guess what? The Prado's curators struggled to do exactly what d'Ors did in his three-hour stroll in the museum in 1922: break up the march of decades and dynasties. Works were grouped according to genres and themes (religious, historical, and mythological scenes; court and bourgeois portraits; still lifes; landscapes; genre scenes), and several paired works were hung side by side to show similarities, differences, influences, and shared techniques across centuries. The result was a satisfying eccentricity, where painters

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created their precursors, Borges-d'Ors style, and viewers were encouraged to create traditions of our own.

I would note one more eccentricity in the application of the baroque as a periodic category, and that is its absence from English literary and cultural histories. England's seventeenth century is periodized according to a welter of terms referring to specific political circumstances (Elizabethan, Jacobean, Caroline, Restoration) and styles and groups (metaphysical, Cavalier, Puritan, Augustan, some of these coined in less-than-celebratory hindsight). The fact that the baroque was, in the seventeenth century, the prominent style of the Catholic Counter-Reformation would have influenced its banishment as a category from Anglo-Protestant literary studies, despite obvious comparabilities of styles and themes in, say, Jacobean and Golden Age theater or the *culteranismo* of Francisco de Quevedo and John Donne or the baroque *coincidencia oppositorum* and the metaphysicals' impulse to "amalgamate disparate experience" (247).[3] The phrase is T. S. Eliot's. Eliot and his contemporary Mario Praz revived interest in English baroque poetry during the 1920s. Eliot doesn't use the term *baroque*, and although Praz does, most notably in his later essay "Baroque in England," the category remains largely beyond the pale of English literary and cultural studies.

The rarity of comparative studies of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English and Spanish literary cultures may be incidental to the nonalignment of their systems of periodization, but, as I have said, periodic denominators are powerful; they accrue weight over time as they are defined, developed, and applied, and thus they come to organize knowledge in their areas. This assertion is amply demonstrated in René Wellek's landmark essay "The Concept of Baroque in Literary Scholarship." Wellek is rigorously historical and geographic; his subject is the European baroque in the seventeenth century, and his concern is how periodization supports and enriches comparison. In this context, he addresses the idiosyncrasies of English periodic categories, insists that they are isolating because they are unique, and calls for greater critical definition of the English baroque in order to facilitate their comparative study:

> In spite of the many ambiguities and uncertainties as to the extension, valuation, and precise content of the term, baroque has fulfilled and is still fulfilling an important function. It has put the problem of periodisation and of a pervasive style very squarely; it has pointed to the analogies between the literatures of the different countries and between the several arts. It is still the one convenient term that refers to the style which came after the Renaissance but preceded actual neoclassicism. For a history of English literature the concept seems especially important since there the very existence of such a style has been obscured by the extension given to the term Elizabethan and by the narrow limits of the one competing traditional term: "metaphysical." . . . The indubitable affinities with contemporary Continental movements would stand out more clearly if we had a systematic study of the enormous mass of translating and paraphrasing from Italian, French, and Spanish which was going on throughout the [English] seventeenth century even from the most baroque Continental poets. Baroque has provided an aesthetic term which has helped us to understand the literature of the time and which will help us to break the dependence of most literary history from periodisations derived from political and social history. (107–08)[4]

Wellek's concern with England's nonalignment ("periodisations derived from political and social history") demonstrates his thesis: the purpose of periodization is to place contemporaneous styles and intentions in comparative relation. Without coherent categories, comparative study will be deterred, if not derailed.

So Wellek's essay challenges us to a kind of eccentric periodization different from the

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one we have seen in our Latin American theorists. For Wellek the challenge is not to discover diverse cultural products operating under an identical periodic label, as in the New World baroque, but rather to discover similar products operating under different periodic labels, as in the case of the English seventeenth century. The baroque is attractive to him not because it offers the fluidity and diversity of Carpentier's "proliferating nuclei" but rather because "it is a term which prepares for synthesis" (108). Born in Vienna and educated in Prague, Wellek published his study of the baroque six years after immigrating to the United States, having left Europe after the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1939. His first teaching job was at the University of Iowa, where he would have written this essay while watching Europe burn. He went from Iowa to Yale in 1946, where he was to become so central to our academic discipline that we tend to forget his eccentric trajectory. We shouldn't, because it enriches our understanding of this exiled scholar's attention to the unifying capacity of baroque periodization and to the inclusive potential of comparative literary study as such.

Wellek's synthetic European baroque, Carpentier's and d'Ors's transhistorical baroque, Celorio's enlightened Mexican baroque—each of these baroques reflects particular cultural and historical imperatives, and together they provide comparative challenges and opportunities, along with the cultural products to which they refer. They are provisional, as Borges noted in "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," and they are also necessary.

Notes

1. See, e.g., the essays in *PMLA*'s Theories and Methodologies section titled "The Long and the Short: Problems in Periodization" (127.2 [2012]: 301–56).

2. With the growth of world history as a discipline, historians are also interrogating received periodic schemata. See the essays in Pomper, Elphick, and Vann, in particular Green's.

3. See Kaup on Eliot as a neobaroque poet and theorist.

4. In 1962 Wellek added a postscript to his 1945 essay, in which he repeated and intensified his call for greater recognition of the baroque in English literary studies.

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