theories and methodologies

Baroque and Neobaroque: Making Thistory

ROLAND GREENE

AMONG THE MOST HISTORICALLY FIXED OF ART HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONCEPTS, THE BAROQUE ARISES AT THE INTERSECTION of early modern classicism, imperialism, and science—that is, out of the high Renaissance—to become a kind of antiprogram of resistances: to the absolutist state, the rise of empirical science, the pressures of empire, and other sixteenth-century signs of the gathering regimentation of knowledge. With a flourish of forms and a play of perspectives, the baroque embodies the recoil from such regimentation and the gathering sense that all these systems for organizing human experience fall short in the face of disorder, contingency, and death. Seen from certain vantages, the specimens of the baroque often seem complicit with the projects of absolutism, empire, and late humanism; but regarded in all their dimensions, such works are often complex reactions, critical and compromised, to those projects.[1]

Moreover, while the baroque is the original modern culture of spectacle in the West, its deployment of spectacle is both a mode of presentation—an environment of sensations—and a statement about what that mode represents. Baroque spectacle often seems to confirm its objects (monarchs or marriages or discoveries) in manner, but no less often it denaturalizes them in authority and substance. If the story of their power can be told, is such power a property of being or an effect of representation? If they can be rendered into light and shape and color, what is the nature of their reality? Posing such questions, the baroque leaves the early modern world in exquisite pieces, asking us to exchange their lost value—the whole they once made—for the novelty and wonder of the pieces themselves. As first conceived, the baroque not only spans the world that radiates outward from western Europe, from Poland to Sicily to Mexico City to Macao, but operates as one of the original cultural idioms across this world, bringing the wash of forms and ideas back to Europe. Unlike humanism, which belongs first to places such as Florence and Rotterdam, the baroque depends on—is an effect of—dispersal. Churches in Mexico City and northern Luzon show as much of the

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.1.150 Published online by Cambridge University Press

baroque's possibilities as anything in Italy or Spain. For an early modernist with an interest in the internal contradictions and resistances of our object, the baroque is one of the most intriguing chapters of the period.

But what is the neobaroque? We might gesture toward a definition by indicating what the neobaroque means in the setting of twentieth-century inter-American cultures. Without question, it is one of the most tangible and explicit reactions to early modern art and thought in living memory; the neobaroque embodies the obligation of early modernists to attend to their period not as a closed episode, like antiquity, but as an uncompleted script for the present. The neobaroque cannot be understood except as a revival, and often a parody, of the baroque. Much of its force comes from its projection of revived and reworked baroque habits of mind onto a modern world that already includes the baroque in its intellectual genealogy, from Bacon to Descartes to Pascal. Where humanism treated its distant models, the arts of Greek and Roman antiquity, as monuments to be transposed back into a process and made contemporary, the baroque receives humanism, its near antecedent, as already a process to be accelerated and twisted into reflexivity, turned onto itself, made into spectacle or parody or game. Oddly, the neobaroque finds in the baroque another model like the classicist-imperialist-scientific regime, separated from it by centuries and often languages and outlooks; but such a predecessor demands that it be honored only with an increased quotient of self-consciousness. Everything that precedes the neobaroque, especially residual elements of humanism and the baroque itself, is gathered into its procedure, with effects that range from an exaggerated austerity to a vertiginous exploitation of values like inwardness, perspectivism, and generic hybridity. The historical and intellectual relation that gives meaning to these concepts—humanism to baroque to neobaroque—overgoes any of them seen in its own light, inviting us, where any single instance appears, to remark the relation. For this reason early modernists should be the first to discuss the neobaroque, not the last. It belongs to early modernity conceived as a centrifugal event. Moreover, the neobaroque in spirit is a decisively American phenomenon, probably because this hemisphere provides a distance and delay from the original baroque that allows it to be critically refashioned. *Baroque* and *neobaroque* should be among the first nouns in a common language between the early modern past and the inter-American present.

As it happened, the critics and poets of the middle twentieth century who named the neobaroque were, in their own fashion, observers if not scholars of early modernity. The ambitious essays of Severo Sarduy, José Lezama Lima, and Haroldo de Campos demonstrate the relational scope of both concepts: that to speak of the baroque is to imply or discern its classicist antecedent, while to address the neobaroque is to descry its baroque genealogy; moreover, that to attend responsibly to the postmodern phenomenon is to address its linkage to the early modern past, while to speak of the original baroque is to notice its indirect but unmistakable relevance to the modern world.[2] Sarduy concludes the first part of his *Barroco* with a summary of the baroque's interventions into the classical and Christian values it received from humanism, describing a "baroque that challenges every instauration, that metaphorizes order under examination, God under judgment, the law being transgressed." Obliquely rendering the past present, the passage ends by affirming a "baroque of the Revolution" (212; my trans.). (Revolution in the sense of a turn in society and politics is a baroque concept, coming into common usage in most European vernaculars shortly after 1600.) Likewise, Campos conceives his account of the seventeenth-century episode that produces the baroque as an etiology of the Brazilian present:

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.1.150 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> For us the Baroque is the non-origin, because it is a non-infancy. Our literatures, which emerged with the Baroque, had no infancy (*infans*: he who does not speak). They were never aphasic. They were born adults (like certain mythological heroes), speaking an extremely elaborate international code: the Baroque rhetorical code (with late medieval and Renaissance traces, already distilled in the case of Brazil, by Camoenian Mannerism . . .). . . . To articulate itself as a difference, in relationship to this panoply of *universalia*: this is our "birth" as a literature, a sort of parthenogenesis without an ontological egg (we could say—the difference as origin or the egg as Columbus . . .). . . .
>
> Speaking the difference in the gaps of a universal code, the Latin American writers of the Baroque evolved among themselves a dialogue which has only now begun to be re-established. ("Rule" 47, 49)

These books and essays open a cycle of twentieth-century thought that ought to be the common property of not only early modernist and modernist scholars but readers who plumb such fixed and safe categories as the Renaissance and magic realism, or anyone who is interested to see the past become present in a critical, anti-antiquarian spirit. And of course, in the middle twentieth century as in the seventeenth, poetry corroborates and extends the ideas of the baroque and neobaroque perhaps better than any other kind of writing. If these two topics—at risk of becoming mere labels—often lend themselves to derivative scholarship that simply elaborates the established categories, poetry tends to oblige us to attend to the baroque and neobaroque under negotiation, in formation (Greene).

When Campos (1929–2003) began to write his *Galáxias* (*Galaxies*), in the early 1960s, he undertook one of the seminal postmodern experiments in neobaroque composition. The long lines and recursive syntax of these poems were signs of Campos's emerging design of replacing the hygienic minimalism of his early concrete poems written under the standard of the school called Noigandres, a program adapted from European and American modernisms of the early twentieth century, with a more expansive agenda derived from the baroque as it was then being reexamined across Latin America. As much as the Noigandres program entailed the making of a genealogy of precursors both real and desired, Campos's turn toward what would come to be called the neobaroque represented a more complex act of self-location. While the baroque reacted to humanism, the neobaroque always involves a context of order—often a neohumanist ideology of progress or the residual effects of early modern humanism in its colonial dimension—against which to project itself. The neobaroque is never merely a style but is always a complex reaction to such a context, and to write within the neobaroque is necessarily to expose the workings of a social and political order imposed from afar. Of course, the baroque adapts and distorts what it questions, and its exertions sometimes render its works into parodies that resemble their objects—the very ideas they put under scrutiny. The neobaroque faces this risk less readily because of its stark, unmistakable distance from its context; it is nearly always a comment on an ideology rather than a specimen of that ideology. Still, it is not often noticed that every instance of the neobaroque involves a present work and an absent context and that the relation between the two brings the mode to life.

Campos's *Galáxias* is a set of fifty poems of about six hundred words each. In style the collection is a foundational instance of the neobaroque, with a self-revising semantics, a repertory of rhythms from the staccato to the hypnotic, and a slowgoing syntax. But the achievement of *Galáxias* is not its style, however much that dimension tends to be pushed to the foreground of criticism. *Galáxias* is a handbook of cultural commonplaces under distortion and distraction. All of them are inseparable from the fabric of modernity: the disposition of time, the relation of language to the natural world, the ocean as fact and

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.1.150 Published online by Cambridge University Press

metaphor, the role of the poet in society. In each poem, Campos borrows a point of entry from language at large—a stock phrase, a literary allusion—and then warps it relentlessly until the poem yields a string of perspectives, sometimes confluent and sometimes discordant. One critic has assimilated this process to a scheme modeled on the system that Stuart Gilbert described for James Joyce's *Ulysses*, but this observation conflates the outer garment of *Galáxias* with its inner engine, as well as commits the usual act of critical homage to the Noigandres poets—namely, accepting their own account of purposes and influences (Jackson). Such a scheme is undoubtedly in operation, but it is a threshold into Campos's distinctive neobaroque worldview, not its terminus. Here is the beginning of a poem that meditates on the telling of stories:

passtimes and killtimes i wendaway darkling
for mindamends through
this minimeandering instant of minutes
instancing somebody and
instanced beyond to telltale a scheherazade
thistory my fairy how many
fates are there in each nullitywee thread
discard nines leaving nought
scheherazade scheherazade a nightstory a
thousandtimes overtold then
the sonnyboy soulumbering into this
nightdark florest came and a drago
sevensnouted dragoned his swellhand into a
fernavid and cavernish
grottohollow my boy wants knowhow to
unpick this threadform how
to sideslip this cavern only the dragon all
dragoning knows the key to
this festival and now the dragon at his siesta
is asnoozing then when
myboy began his ringawinnow round a
rosaromanorum gesta in the
bosk he stumbled on the sleepy beauty
bellabella tell me a life thistory
("From *Galáxias*" 126)

passatempos e matatempos eu mentoscuro
pervago por este minuscoleante
instante de minutos instando alguém e
instado além para contecontear uma
estória scherezada minha fada quantos fados
há em cada nada nuga meada
noves fora fada scherezada scherezada uma
estória milnoitescontada
então o miniminino adentrou turlumbando a
noitrévia forresta e um drago
dragoneou-lhe a turgimano com setifauces
furnávidas e grotantro cavurnoso
meuminino quer-saber o desfio da formesta o
desvio da furnesta só dragão
dragoneante sabe a chave da festa e o dragão
dorme a sesta entãoquão
meuminino começou sua gesta cirandejo no
bosque deu com a bela endormida
belabela me diga uma estória de vida
(*Galáxias*)

The poem announces itself as an oblique comment on the conventions of Western narrative, its speaker as a Scheherazade who will bend time and plot into a "thistory" ("estória"): "my boy wants knowhow to unpick this threadform how / to sideslip this cavern." And what is a thistory? The neobaroque dimension of the poem is manifest in such neologisms and the distinctive "overtold" discourse that embeds them in a sense of Campos's own making. The effect is to make perceptible the distances between the loci classici of medieval and early modern narrative (such as the *Thousand and One Nights* and the *Gesta Romanorum*) and our postmedieval expectations of how stories are told and to interpose between these the voice's determination to construct a narrative in its own medieval-turned-postmodern fashion. With an eye to Gertrude Stein and Joyce, Campos proposes "thistory" as a lyrical alternative to the fictions of modernity: a prose poem that turns the languages of past and present into a new fusion, with a received beginning but a new idiolect for the here and now—and perhaps with no ending, since the poem loops from its last line back to its first. Other installments of *Galáxias* start from commonplaces, such as Shakespeare's "multitudinous seas incarnadine" and "a

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.1.150 Published online by Cambridge University Press

dream that hath no bottom," or from shards of under- or overheard language, such as the conversational "that what was his name crazy american" ("aquele como se chamava americano louco"; my trans.) or the self-implicating "poet without a lyre o unlyred one" ("poeta sem lira ó deslirado"; my trans.). With their fluid but identifiable contexts in European and trans-American cultures, the poems in *Galáxias* belong to the high neobaroque, a label that would seem ironic if it were not warranted by Campos's predilection for making it signify something definite: both the evocation of contexts from line to line and the constant pressure on them, a making of new standpoints out of old language.

For a strikingly different conception of the neobaroque, we might look to the volume *Caja de herramientas* (*Toolbox* [1989]), by the Mexican poet Fabio Morábito (b. 1955). If presence (of contexts) and pressure (on contexts) are central to what brings the neobaroque out of the baroque, then we should find the distinctiveness of each specimen of the former in how it adjusts these factors: how present are the contexts, how much pressure is exerted against them, how do presence and pressure yield a particular language and worldview, and so on. Morábito's "La esponja" ("Sponge") shows his calibration of these elements:

> If we place across a level surface a certain number of passageways and galleries which crisscross and communicate, we end up with a labyrinth. If we then connect up to this labyrinth, from all directions—upward, downward, sideways—still more labyrinths, that's to say, other levels of passageways and galleries, we end up with a sponge. A sponge is the apotheosis of the labyrinth, but what is linear and stylized in a labyrinth becomes, in a sponge, uncontrolled and chaotic. The material in a sponge gallops outward, rejecting any notion of a center. It is pure dispersion. (*Toolbox* 8)
>
> Si en un plano colocamos un cierto número de pasillos y galerías que se cruza y se comunican, obtenemos un laberinto. Si a este laberinto le conectamos por todas partes, arriba, abajo, y a los lados, otros laberintos, es decir otros planos de pasillos y galerías, obtenemos una esponja. La esponja es la apoteosis del laberinto; lo que en el laberinto es todavía lineal y estilizado en la esponja se ha vuelto irrefrenable y caótico. En la esponja la materia *galopa hacia afuera*, repelente a cualquier centro. Es dispersión pura.

Instead of Campos's thickly layered discourse, where history is pressed into "thistory" at the level of the sentence, Morábito's poems adopt the neutral stance of the handbook or instruction manual and then adjust it by the torque of accumulated observation: "To be present on the inside of a pipe is an honor. It's like travelling on a public mission. Everything about a pipe is well-appointed and well-mannered. Hence where the soil is not sufficiently obliging, one lays a pipe. A pipe means pressure" ("Estar dentro de un tubo, pues, es un honor, es como viajar en misión pública. Todo en él es próvido y galante. Por eso, donde la tierra no es lo bastante solícita con uno, se coloca un tubo; un tubo es premura"; *Toolbox* 20; *Caja de herramientas* 23). Each of the "tools" in the *Caja de herramientas* is a quotidian object of the modern world that is revealed, under close attention, as not only a thing but the product of perspectives: a sponge that revises the labyrinth, a knife that "settles accounts" ("pone en blanco") and "sends into exile" ("envía a destierro"; 26; 27), a rag that, loving "fixity of being, pure essentialness" ("el ser fijo, el ser esencial"), "belongs to the school of Parmenides" ("es parmenidiano"; 62; 53). Here Morábito exchanges Campos's "thistory" for a poetic idiom at a further remove from the context to which it refers: something like a thatstory, where the context at issue is often a baroque construction such as the labyrinth, the vantage, or the passage that can be assimilated to the everyday sponges, oils, and strings that furnish the contemporary world. The presence of such baroque touchstones hardly initiates the semantic process culti-

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.1.150 Published online by Cambridge University Press

vated by Campos, for whom the deformation of verbal antecedents word by word, sentence by sentence is the substance of his neobaroque program. Rather, Morábito's version involves a regard for the dynamism of the static object—a property of the baroque in literature, art, and architecture—applied to the mundane things of this world; approaching these objects, we discover that their materiality conducts us into an unexpected world of ideals on the far side of the physical. Looking at things in their granularity, the poems reenact the baroque program of finding the metaphysical in the physical, but Morábito's sponges and rags show us dimensions of labyrinths and towers that those baroque constructions could not disclose about themselves. If a baroque passageway or gallery was once a means of gaining perspective on early modern reality—lifting the viewer out of the quotidian, distorting scale and pace to show the seams in a world constructed by science and exploration—a neobaroque sponge reflects parodically on what was provisional and radical about the baroque project. As in Campos's poems, what appears to be a feat of style might be better understood as a play of contexts, where baroque commonplaces are absent but insistently evoked and the baroque itself is both obsolete and impossible to ignore or forget. The superficial effects of style—whether Campos's deformations of received language or Morábito's idealized observations about stubbornly everyday objects—are only the result of turning a baroque view on the baroque itself.

The open valve that connects the baroque and the neobaroque allows us—encourages us—to enter a poem of the seventeenth or the twentieth century and step through into the other era. Not only responses to their moments, the two poetics are counterparts at the two ends of modernity: one speaking a creative dissent from the gathering organization of knowledge, the other sifting through what remains of that system from a postmodern vantage. We ought to understand them together.

Notes

1. See Maravall; Sarduy; Deleuze; and Buci-Glucksmann.

2. While the three authors discuss the baroque in many settings, one might start from Sarduy's *Barroco*, Lezama Lima's *La expresión americana*, and Campos's "The Rule of Anthropophagy." Among a great deal of fine scholarship, see especially González Echevarría; Chiampi.

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.1.150 Published online by Cambridge University Press