

My baroque life and literature as a U.S. hispanic

Rolando HINOJOSA-SMITH

As many of us know, the Baroque and the term, as well as its derivation and etymology, have long been in question and contention.

The Italians claim the term as theirs and so do the Portuguese, off and on; too, plausible explanations have been proposed and promoted for centuries by one camp or another. For two brief examples, German scholars came into the field of study when the Baroque was still thought of belonging solely to the realm of architecture, and they continued their study when the Baroque also became a literary movement and thus arose a new field of study. The French and the English entered into this study and movement as well, as one can suppose.

Needless to say, the Baroque was attacked when it first appeared on the scene. It was considered a danger—if not to public morals, although this too was advanced as an argument—to an established movement that (to the proponents of the Baroque) had stopped moving: the Classics. But what Classics? Well, there was Classic architecture, art, music, and, of course, classic literature.

Some of us who know something of the history of Romanticism, remember reading that this movement was also considered a danger to public morals when it appeared.

What is Romanticism, anyway? It was the question. What good does it do? Why do these people take this extreme view of life? Why do they behave the way they do? What, after all, does it mean; what does it purport to do other than to revolutionize the existing order? The Baroque had faced similar questions earlier, of course.

The term, *existing order*, gave the attackers away. Without saying it, they meant their existing order, that is, the Classic way.

Never mind, of course, that nature, a favorite element of the Classics, had been shown to be revolutionary and evolutionary, ever moving and in constant motion away from what it had been, what it was, and continually pressing toward

something new. Nature had and has a way of renovating itself, but the Classicists took the view that nature was constant and unchanging.

It was the Romantics pulling away from the so-called Classic mode that caused the consternation in much the same way that the Baroque had earlier upset the Classic artists and architects. To put it another way, the workers in the Baroque shook the Classic form and attempted to improve on it. This was quite a claim, for if some-thing is classic, that is, perfect, then why gild the lily? Simply put, it had to do with change, and not merely for change's sake, but for the necessity of changing something to keep it alive. This sounds a paradox, but let me explain:

The Baroque, in architecture, did not seek to destroy the foundation, that is, that which props up the structure; it merely sought to change that part of the work which we could see; and, by doing so, it strived to show (us) the additions placed on the original works to make us see something new; the way Baroque music allows us to hear something new; the emperor was still there, but he wore new clothing which one could see rather than imagine. Heightened imagination and daring along with a rigorous philosophy played salient roles in the appreciation of the Baroque.

The reaction to change is one all of us know, and the traditionalists reacted accordingly. The traditionalists, the standard of all that was good and proper, that stood in the name of the natural order of things, saw the Baroque as a danger to their philosophy; their way of life. These new people were considered usurpers, barbarians; they wanted to change a straight line —where there had been one since the beginning of time. Walls, pilasters, nooks, crannies, apses, naves, why, nothing was safe from these usurpers of the established order. And, as always, the term order appeared as the rallying cry. Without order, they seemed to say, there is nothing.

But the so-called usurpers said, well, there is too much order, and too much of a good thing can't be that good for anyone. Let, then, the old order remain, but let's add something to it, let's bring some imagination, some daring, something, finally, that would be pleasing to both the eye and the mind. The eye could still see the orderly wall, but it could also see something else that could, in some ways, bring to it the pleasure that a straight, solid, classic wall could not.

There would be another change; the mind, too, could roam around aided by the eye which allowed it to imagine things that were not there, things that could be imagined to be there.

In brief the Baroque promised something new, but it wasn't for the timid, for those who wanted something safe. Nor, did it promise reassurances of a return to or to the maintenance of the past. It must have been somewhat frightening since the Baroque also did not promise continuity.

I think you can see how this movement, for that's what it was, would prove unsettling for many people. A view of the original wall would change if one took, say, five steps to the left or five to the right. What the viewer saw was the same thing, but it wasn't the same thing; another paradox. Another breaking away from the familiar, a step toward the unknown, toward that which was exciting.

The same exciting changes took place in music and the other arts, as we know. No need to go into that here, but suffice it to say that we have all lived with the changes and thus profited from them. These were changes made not for novelty's sake; that role would be played by the rococo. One of the main differences between the two is well-known: whereas the Baroque reacted against the Classic form and realized a life for itself; the rococo, which is still with us, is more of a survivor rather than a leader of a movement.

As regards coming head to head with an established order, I, as a U.S. Hispanic, and as an academic, see a marked congruence between the original established order of the literature programs in our universities and the once-startling introduction of Mexican American literature into the curriculum. The congruence lies, chiefly, in the opposition the literature faced in the late sixties.

Some academicians with short memories forget that nineteenth and twentieth century American literature also faced opposition when it attempted to become part of our university curriculum. The opposition came from those who taught British literature. The same can be said of the opposition faced by Latin Americanists when the language departments were dominated by Peninsularists. It took the infusion of Federal money for the National Language Defense Act in the late 1950s to bring Latin American literature to a respectable representation in those departments.

Water under the bridge? Perhaps.

It happens that this writer is a native son reared in a region once inhabited by indigenous people along the lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas where the Rio Grande empties into the Gulf of Mexico. That piece of land later became part of the Spanish Empire and still later, a state of Mexico. In time it became part of the Republic of Texas followed in short order by being annexed into the Union, followed by the secession to the Confederacy, and finally, reforming itself as a member state of the Union once again.

These formal changes of governments took place within the lifetime of my paternal great, great 'grandmother, doña Mauricia Cano who was born in 1814 and who died in 1904.

These changes had less to them than met the eye, for while there were for-

mal governmental changes, the people maintained a social democracy common to rural communities. Too, the classic social rural forms were kept, and this helped to stabilize the place. However, as in any borderland, there were constant shifts and changes, new additions, and these helped to bring vitality to the place. These changes, these leavenings, could be looked upon as the Baroque adding its spirit to the classic, rural, communal way of life.

By the time doña Mauricia died in 1904, Texas had undergone Reconstruction and had been restored to the Union for thirty years. That bit of Texas facing the Gulf of Mexico was American soil, and it too presented well-known American institutions to the rest of the union: counties, public schools, regular elections, and so on. But there was something else going on at the same time.

The early English speakers who lived and died there did so as bicultural American citizens. Many of them married and settled there; oftentimes they engaged in commerce on both sides of the river, and while remaining red-blooded Texans and American citizens, the Spanish language was not unknown to them. Spanish became not their second language but merely another means of expression among themselves and with the original settlers.

The racial lines would blur at times and last names such as Heath, Howell, Atkinson, Weaver, Kingsbury, and Hull, would be merely that, last names and identifiers as to families but not as to racial stock necessarily. Thus the classic English and Continental European names remained, but with Hispanic additions to them.

One could look at a plaque commemorating the dead of World Wars I and II, Korea, and so on, read the names listed there, and see something different from what an outsider would see. The outsider would see names of French, English, German, and Spanish derivation as casualties. The outsider's eyes would also see a flat surface with names, while we would see differing configurations with extending and extensive bloodlines despite the varied European surnames. We would see lines crossing and crisscrossing across the years and across the wars that would cause the flat surfaces to show us another reality which I learned later on was refraction, one of the chief attributes of the Baroque.

I, of course, at a young age was innocent of such concepts. But it was the incessant phenomenon of refraction, of looking, say, at the same object in media of different densities, that caused one to see the illusion but to recognize its reality. This did not come all at once as in a blinding epiphany but rather in more gradual ways which, because of a great number of examples, seeped into the mind and were retained there much like a reservoir stores water; at this point, I should like to remind us all that water is a well-known and recurring symbol of the Baroque; in my case, it comes in double doses since being born in a farming community, water was not only important, it was essential. Too, one was always watchful either

because of a drought or a flood. And then, there was the ever present Rio Grande River, a jurisdictional barrier but not necessarily a cultural one.

Added to this, it was the examples through actions and reactions, that what one was taught, shown, and told in school, was in refraction to what also one saw, learned, and heard there. To counter this, we the Texas Mexicans, also had our own schools aside from the public ones. These schools were taught by Mexican exiles, men and women, who had crossed to the northern bank during one phase or another of the seemingly unending Mexican Revolution. And our teachers were actors, that is, participants in a conflict to which our parents, American citizens and border people, felt themselves to be obligated to take sides or to participate in.

This was pretty heady stuff for youngsters to take in, and yet this too became part of our lives, of this disparate, often discrete, manner of looking at life.

And since our special summer school was taught in Spanish, we would close the day by singing the Mexican national anthem. In September, when the regular school started, it was morning prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance. I very much doubt if either the prayer or the Pledge affected me emotionally either way. Both, however, impressed upon me a sense of a dual belonging, a duality which, years later, I also learned was an important element of the Baroque. When the duality was fused, it became one more example proper to the Baroque.

But I think it was World War II which first established for me, and once and for all, that most Baroque of all elements, the brevity of life. If Harry Rouse, Hal Hoover, and Gene Atteberry, in life, never spoke to Arnolando Díaz or to Francisco and José González, it was death, that constant companion, that made these six Mercedes, Texas natives, share identical U.S. Government headstones.

The brevity of life, the skull behind the facial skin, that great Baroque symbol, awaited them all; and if it were true for them, why not for me, for everybody else, I asked myself.

And meanwhile? Well, as Virgil reminds us, meanwhile time is flying, flying never to return. In short, a one-way trip where we all share the same destination if not the same estimated time of departure.

And so, the first piece I ever published for money dealt, among other things, with the brevity of life. And, at age fifteen, much earlier, in the summer of 43, in a house surrounded by hills and mountains overlooking the city of Saltillo, Coahuila, I also wrote about the brevity of life, and I included water, an irrigation stream, that carried and spread the blood of two campesinos who attempted to escape a pursuing horseman intent on impressing them into military' service.

In this last instance, I had a vague idea of what I was doing, but as vague as it was, it was an idea which I meant to pursue.

When the first published piece came out, some well-intentioned soul told me it revealed, and I quote, "the fatalism of the Mexican race".

To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, "One needs a heart of stone not to laugh at such people".

Here's a small digression. Writing and publishing usually carry with them a certain amount of luck. My good luck came because the fatalism banner was neither hoisted nor waved. This is not to mean that students will not come up and ask me (invariably and almost uniformly) why it is that I mention death so often. I imagine they've counted the instances in the book they've read, and I can only imagine that their instructor pointed this aspect to them. Worse, perhaps made them count the number of direct and indirect mentions in their notebooks.

My defense? None. The published books, as we all know, belong to the buyer, not to the writer.

End of digression.

Now, the Baroque also concerns itself with beauty, as do I. But unlike the Classics, the Baroque realized that beauty' is impermanent, a part of human life and thus transitory. What finally did it for me in this regard was the poem by a Spanish nobleman said to be in love with the wife of the Emperor Charles V; it's a moving piece of writing, and the disenchantment he writes of could only come from one who loved someone so much that to see the loved object ravaged by time and by death could produce the powerful lines that remind the reader of the inescapable fate that awaits us all. Death, after all, is the supreme expression of the ephemeral. It is there, hidden, but present in everything that is fresh and beautiful... there's anxiety there, as we say in Spanish, *un amargo deleite*, a sweet sor-row; not unlike Juliet's parting words to Romeo, and the end that waited patiently for both of them.

And so, armed with some healthy skepticism, another Baroque element for it recognizes that riches and ostentation are also transitory, I decided to write the novel I've been working on for over twenty-five years.

I would construct an imaginary world where appearances would affirm themselves as reality. Where masks, a favorite usage of the Baroque, and cynicism, tempered by satire, would foster the illusion of permanence held by the inhabitants of this imagined world despite the fact that their acquisition of power, wealth, and control would prove illusory and thus temporary.

The same characters would then appear, disappear, and reappear; they would occupy different bodies and genders, different faces and ages, but would always remaining in character. Thus, to define these characters would be difficult because of the eternal conflict familiar to us all: to be or to seem to be. And it would be a complicated game these characters would play and thus full of surprises.

Who, then, would be wearing the mask?

Writing in this manner, I thought, would not be a flat picture with a disappearing point of perception. It was and is more like a stage, as in the novel *Rites and Witnesses*, which is clearly labelled *A Comedy*. The first part consists of ritualized ceremonies and the second is populated by witnesses who either affect or are affected by the rites and then, in the middle of the two parts, from beginning to end, a series of conversations that are the consequences of those rites related to some of the witnesses. Intercalated conversations that disrupt and are meant to disrupt, by their private reality, both the rites and the witnesses.

So, instead of a flat picture, or a horizontal one, *Rites and Witnesses* attempts to recover a vertical plane because several games are at play here aside from the pleasure of reading a challenging work. Its verticality, then, shows heaven and hell, but hell intermittently intercalated with earth and hence a conquest, of sorts, of space.

Writing in Spanish, at other times in English, at other times giving different versions of the same novel in one language or in the other, and always trying to produce a linguistic tension, the different values attained point toward some significance that I myself seek to explain.

The structures in this long novel are complex; the familiar classic linearity substituted and invaded by complicated forms. Not as superfluous ornaments, but rather as part of the novelistic art itself— fundamental to artistic beauty, as I see it — And there must be artistic enhancement to all of this if it is to succeed, and in this regard I am quoting one of the great theorists of the Baroque, Baltazar Gracián.

There is also the tendency to unify a thousand-and-one strings, and trifles, too, but by this heaping of things, the constant reader-participant associates events and characters into some organic whole —and the events, and such is life, are often contradictory—.

Additionally, I don't often go or try for an expression of direct significance but usually settle for different meanings which once again produce contradictions.

The readers of the work, and some have seen this already, gather that this vision of fusion is a reality, or, they may see this vision as a duality. In short, anot-

her paradox. That is, looking at that which is real is looking at something which is in conflict, arid conflict lies at the heart of the Baroque; that is, the discovery of the interior conflict of mankind.

And so, the characters, the objects, the background, and the actions are suggested and seldom described; thus, they blend and are confused at times, and it's through the use of certain allusions which allow the characters and their actions not to be described but to be reflected through the eyes of other characters as if one looked at a mirror—but not the mirror of the 19th Century Realists, but the mirror where reality is both refracted and reflected: imagine a still pool of water reflecting the blue sky, suddenly birds fly over the water, and you see the pool and you see the birds reflected in it; and, at the same time, you see the birds and interspersed, as they fly, you see the blue pond, but this time it's the sky, not the pond. Multiple sensations, or, simply, the Baroque.

Exaggerations, hyperbole, the occasional use of mixed syntax, antithesis, anaphoras, zeugmas for whatever effect, a surprise here and there, conciseness of presentation, and degrees of difficulty to challenge the reader, all of these elements, if not unique to the Baroque, appear over and over as part of the writing of the novel which, incidentally, is called the *Klail City Death Trip Series*.

So, contradictions; two dualities which are then unified to present a vision of fusion, of vertical space, that have found a repository in a person who has been a son and a father; a brother; a soldier; a civil servant; a high school teacher; an office manager; a sales manager; a laborer in a chemical plant with degree in hand; and, finally, a writer.

Not, then, a straightforward classic life but rather one full of curves, of vistas not always clarified nor clearly seen, and as always, an ongoing student and teacher who tries not to be taken in by the apparent—but only apparent—permanence of things.

And, finally, a piece of advice: when it comes to U.S. Hispanics we're not all what we seem to be.