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**The Reality of Caudal
(A Brief and Admiring Response to Justin Butler)**

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In a radio interview with Dan Rodricks I used the term “character fundamentalism” to indicate a kind of thinking that, while not explicitly religious, was nevertheless fundamentalist and iniquitous to a functioning democracy. The idea behind character fundamentalism is that behind the everyday appearances of wealth, poverty, education or lack thereof, each individual expresses a core character that defines him or her and ultimately determines success or failure in life.

My point in bringing this up was to argue that whether or not the republicans currently dominating US politics are religious is far less of a concern than the extent to which they are guided by this ideology. It is this ideology, for instance, that underlies the refusal to compromise one iota over increasing government revenue in the face of massive unemployment and record deficits. While they attempt to package that resistance in economic theory, there are no economists of worth who give any credence to that theory. The true reason is much more evident in the refreshing honesty of Herman Cain, who argues simply, and to thunderous applause at the Republican debates, that the unemployed are responsible for their own lot.

Character fundamentalism is a manifestation of what I have called the major strategy of the Baroque, according to which appearances are manipulated so as to project a truth currently hidden but ultimately to be revealed. I locate its deployment primarily in the Baroque because that period represents a turning point in European history in which state bureaucracies began to deploy cultural mechanisms to exert control over the newly agglomerated urban masses. Obviously the use of the major strategy is not limited to the historical baroque, but its modern deployment finds its origin there.

Baltasar Gracián can in some ways be considered the first theorist of the baroque major strategy. This claim goes to the heart of Justin Butler’s

stimulating essay, “Baroque Subjectivity and the Modern Fractured Self.” Butler correctly points out that, by traditional standards, Gracián’s *Oráculo* would seem to be an “anti-baroque” text, inveighing, as it does so eloquently, against excess, hyperbole, and so many prototypical baroque tropes. Butler goes on to argue, again correctly, in my view, that the power of Gracián’s subject accrues through its circulation, in a way similar to how commodity fetishism in Marx’s later analysis accrues with an object’s circulation in a market environment. Is Gracián aware of how that value or power is itself deployed in the service of control, of directedness? For Butler, that is not clear. “He seems mostly to think that what he is doing is teaching other upwardly mobile members of the court how to create the illusion of this power” (17).

But if I can claim that Gracián is a theorist of the major strategy, then I suppose I am positing some significant awareness on his part. Perhaps it is enough, however, that he think he is tutoring yuppies, or the social climbers of the court; the point is, he has analyzed the reigning social psychology as a way to do it. Indeed, Gracián is not baroque in the tropological sense mentioned above; he is baroque in that no one knows better than he how to navigate the world of appearances.

Butler mentions, among many brilliant examples, this nugget of wisdom: “Siempre ha de aver novedad con que luzir, que quien cada día descubre más, mantiene siempre la expectación y nunca llegan a descubrirle los términos de su gran caudal” (There must always be some novelty left over. The person who displays a little more of it each day keeps up expectations, and no one ever discovers the limits of his talent [Maurer 32–33]). *Caudal*, as I have pointed out before, seems to be coterminous with its inexhaustibility. Another way to put that is that it follows the logic of the supplement in a very rigorous sense: found all your *caudal*? Bingo, it’s gone. It’s only there insofar as it’s not all there. In this respect Butler is exactly right in marshalling both Freudian and Lacanian thought as well as Marxist theory to grasp its libidinal and economic dimensions.

Yes, Gracián may use such wisdom for the benefit of his yuppie readers, but his analysis is befitting of a highly paid political consultant. To be generous, it is not clear if Herman Cain is himself a character fundamentalist or simply a savvy operator (ok, well maybe it is); but it is very clear that the top political operatives know how to coach their prospects in cultivating character fundamentalism. If Gracián were alive today . . . well, Karl Rove, I’m afraid. But only if Karl Rove then wrote books revealing his tricks and hence providing the tools for analyzing how subjects can be so effectively guided. A political operative with an exquisite eye to social psychology, who then opens his playbook for all to see. This is why Gracián’s writing seems to play both sides: to both build the scaffolding of control and undermine it with his awareness. By doing the former he instructs leaders in using the

major strategy; by doing the latter he helps unmask that strategy, which is what the minor strategy is all about.

Butler seems concerned that my valoration of the minor strategy cedes too much on the question of reality. His pointed listing of the venal displays of our contemporary media culture presents an image of society not as prostrate before the *deus absconditus* of a longed-for truth, but the detached opportunism of ever-renewable avatars of celebrity. Are not these and all denizens of a hypermediatized world in some sense the practitioners of a neobaroque minor strategy, profiting not from the deferral of reality but from its denial, and from the boundless affirmation of the collapse of reality into a world of appearances?

“It must also be the case that there are different kinds of appearances,” Butler writes, and I think he hits the nail right on the head. Far be it for me to reduce Cervantine irony to reality TV. But Cervantes and Colbert, as I recently argued . . . now there’s a match made in heaven. Politicians, reality TV stars, the flavors of the hour, while their behaviors show how they manipulate a culture of appearances, the ideology that fuels their short-lived fame is still that of *caudal*: when it’s exhausted, they fade away, because the dream of their deferred reality vanished into hot air. Why do we watch them? We’re still clamoring for something real: humiliation, redemption, something human, after all. The minor strategy never says we’re not human . . . it just shows over and over again how part of being human is to hunger for the real, and never stop.

Works Cited

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