

◆ Introduction

Strategies for Survival in a Self-Made World: (Re)reading Gracián

*Nicholas Spadaccini and Scott Ehrenburg
University of Minnesota – Twin Cities*

The present “Debate” comprising Justin Butler’s essay (“Gracián and the Modern Fractured Subject”), and commentaries by David Castillo, William Egginton, and Bradley Nelson can be located within recent writings on the Baroque, including substantial reflections by the three commentators in their respective engagements with the Baroque and, to some extent, the work of Baltasar Gracián.¹ It is fair to say from the outset that Butler’s essay engages not only theoretical work on modern subjectivity, but also, and most especially, Egginton’s recent book *The Theater of Truth: The Ideology of (Neo)baroque Aesthetics* (2010), which recalls the philosophical interest awakened by the Baroque among those intellectuals who seek alternatives to the philosophical discourse of the Enlightenment and the “Renaissance” thought of Descartes through a reading of Spinoza and, most especially, Leibniz. A brief review of some of the underlying concepts used by Egginton might help us contextualize the present “Debate.”

In his study Egginton reminds us that while “the Baroque stands for an alternate mode of rationality to the dominant trends of modernity, one that is centrifugal, disruptive vis à vis modern rationalism . . . the very same Baroque would seem to represent a centripetal force of power, of control over the periphery, as argued by Maravall in the Spanish, and Ángel Rama in the American Context” (70). His argument is that both kinds of rationality address common philosophical problems, as shown through some of his case studies, including analyses of texts of the Spanish seventeenth century, among them those of Cervantes, Gracián, and Calderón. Following Deleuze and Guattari’s work on Kafka (*Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, qtd. in Egginton 75) Egginton’s theoretical frame, adopted in part by Butler, is built upon a differentiation between “minor” and “major” strategies,² and the

recognition of a “tension” between the two as a way of getting at the problem of baroque aesthetics and thought (71).

Butler’s essay thus serves as centerpiece for a discussion that revisits the related issues of representation, truth, and appearances to gain insights into modern subjectivities. His conceptual frame is wide-ranging, drawing on a variety of concepts, including Maravall’s notion of “dirigismo” and on psychoanalytic concepts, especially the Freudian articulation of “ego” and subjectivity formation (*fort/da* game) and the Lacanian mirror stage, with particular attention drawn to the notion of “fictional direction,” one that posits an internal fiction that compensates for the body as it is presented to an exterior environment. For Butler the question at stake is whether or not the modern subject is capable of being unified and if not, what are the consequences for a perpetually fractured self? Can the modern subject transcend this “fictional direction?”

Butler also applies concepts of circulation, capital, and commodity as discussed by Karl Marx, Friedrich Hegel, and, in our days, John Beverley among others, in order to problematize Egginton’s affirmation (in his schema of *major* and *minor* strategies) that truth is corrupted through appearances. In his reflections on Góngora, Egginton suggests that the *major* strategy is focused on a politics grounded in a “simple, attainable, singularity” (60) and that the *minor* strategy could work to affirm the *major* one (despite highlighting an otherwise absent realm of complexity to language) by assimilating the “realities” that are present therein. Butler, on his part, argues that the *minor* strategy stands a better chance at chipping away at the “reality” question by diverging from the *major* one and directing itself toward another “reality.” This understanding comes in sharp contrast to Egginton’s *major/minor* paradigm. For in Butler’s argument there seems to be an implicit idea that, as the *minor* strategy affirms and assimilates the “realities” of the *major* one, truth is denatured by the corrupted discourses of the latter.

In his commentary Egginton points to “character fundamentalism” as an example of *major* strategy. Such a concept is based on the notion that behind everyone’s actions or presentations of self there is a core guiding character that ultimately leads to one’s success or demise. In essence, appearances “are manipulated so as to project a truth currently hidden but ultimately to be revealed” (1). For Egginton, the modern deployment of this concept has its grounding in the historical Baroque and is illustrated in Gracián’s *Oráculo* through a tension between a “major” and a “minor” strategy; in the manner in which the former is built through “the scaffolding of control,” only to be unmasked by the latter (4). Butler counters that for present-day readers of Gracián’s book of aphorisms it might well be the *minor* strategy that wins the day, as the peeling of the veil of appearances reveals an ephemera *caudal* that can barely sustain fifteen minutes of fame, as witnessed in present-day, neo-baroque reality shows (5).

In the end, these discussions might well beg the following question: how is a text written for a court elite by a Spanish Jesuit, in mid-seventeenth-century Spain, redeployed to address present-day concerns regarding questions of identity in a consumer driven society “guided” by the interests of media conglomerates and transnational corporations; how bits of wisdom dispensed in a pithy, cerebral fashion can be put to use as much by the (courtly) reader(s) of Gracián’s time as by a more fragmented readership of late capitalism.

As is the case with Butler and Egginton, Castillo and Nelson are also interested in “updating” Gracián, or making his writings meaningful for us today. Thus Castillo points to the importance of examining his philosophy in light of the deleterious consequences of modern rationalism on “nature and humanity” (30–31), following strains of thought echoed in the writings of critical theorists such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*) and, explicitly, in the more recent reflections of Carolyn Merchant and Teresa Brennan who write respectively from feminist and ecological perspectives. Castillo is concerned about the consequences of the domination of nature by man, a paradigm brought about by the scientific revolution. Seen through these lenses, Gracián’s instrumentalist view of the social sphere positions him as a rationalist “moral philosopher” for whom virtue cannot be separated from self-interest. Ultimately, for Castillo, a reexamination of this kind of thinking in light of contemporary concerns in critical thought and certain strains of cultural criticism allows us to gain insights into both what has traditionally been called baroque *desengaño* and our own reactions to the degradation of nature and humanity in our own time.

As with other collaborators in this “Debate,” Nelson also speaks to the modernity of Gracián’s philosophy, in his case engaging the topic from a reading of Neal Stephenson’s third volume of *The Baroque Cycle* (2005) to address how the value of *caudal* is in constant flux; how in modern society such capital circulates in the most complex of ways. His commentary also makes clear that for the Spanish Jesuit Gracián, this complex circulation of value and meaning even extended to “free will,” an idea formulated in the previous century by other Jesuit thinkers, among them, Luis de Molina, who posited that God’s grace could be influenced by a subject’s free will. In the end for Nelson this is what makes Gracián’s philosophy modern, “as man’s lack of access to transcendental truths forces him to develop what comes to be called a ‘middle science.’” (39)

In reading Gracián’s book of aphorisms, what seems clear is that becoming a *persona* (or subject in the public sense) hinges on the mastering of techniques fit for public representation. Thus, practical wisdom implies an understanding of the demands exerted by public opinion and an ability to manipulate appearances to meet expectations. In this sense, “Gracián equates ‘being’ with being public, what ‘is’ with what is ‘seen,’ thus closing the gap between public and inner self” (Spadaccini and Talens xxi). We would like

to end this brief introduction with aphorism 150, which could have been written by political strategists today:

Saber vender sus cosas. No basta la intrínseca bondad dellas, que no todos muerden la substancia, ni miran por dentro. Acuden los más adonde ai concurso, van porque ven ir a otros. Es gran parte del artificio saber acreditar: unas vezes celebrando, que la alabança es solicitadora del deseo; otras, dando buen nombre, que es un gran modo de sublimar, desmintiendo siempre la afectación. El destinar para solos los entendidos es picón general, porque todos se lo piensan, y cuando no, la privación espoleará el deseo. Nunca se han de acreditar de fáciles, ni de comunes, los asuntos, que más es vulgarizarlos que facilitarlos; todos pican en lo singular por más apetecible, tanto al gusto como al ingenio. (Blanco 183–184)

(Know how to sell your wares. Intrinsic quality isn't enough. Not everyone bites at substance or looks for inner value. People like to follow the crowd; they go someplace because they see other people do so. It takes much skill to explain something's value. You can use praise, for praise arouses desire. At other times you can give things a good name (but be sure to flee from affectation). Another trick is to offer something only to those in the know, for everyone believes himself an expert, and the person who isn't will want to be one. Never praise things for being easy or common: you'll make them seem vulgar and facile. Everybody goes for something unique. Uniqueness appeals both to taste and to the intellect. [Trans. Maurer 84])

Present-day political strategists know much about major strategies and fractured subjects, about the value of television sound bites, and about arousing desires through a surplus of promises for everyone and for all seasons . . . at least until the end of an election. The popularity of Gracián's *Oráculo* today might well be due to its postulation of a "modern subject, an individual with an instrumental capacity for 'self help' activity" (Romano 331). In this sense, one might say that its value as dispenser of practical bits of wisdom has remained constant, even if the message has lent itself to different types of appropriations over time. Gracián was a master of both strategies, the major and the minor. But the actualization of one and/or the other also depends upon the circumstances of reception and the degree to which one can strip away the veil of appearances.

Notes

1. See Castillo's *Baroque Horrors: Roots of the Fantastic in the Age of Curiosities* (2010); Nelson's *The Persistence of Presence: Emblem and Ritual in Baroque Spain* (2010); and, Egginton's *The Theater of Truth: The Ideology of (Neo)baroque Aesthetics* (2010). For a broader contextualization and expansion of the "Debate" readers are referred to two past *Hispanic Issues* Volumes: *Rhetoric and Politics: Baltasar Gracián and the New World Order* (1997) and *Hispanic Baroques: Reading Culture in Context* (2005). For a previous reading of "caudal" as symbolic capital, see Francisco J. Sánchez, "Symbolic Wealth and Theatricality in Gracián," in Spadaccini and Talens 209-229.
2. This construct has also been called elsewhere the "freedom" and "containment" sides of the Baroque (see *Hispanic Baroques: Reading Cultures in Context*).

Works Cited

- Castillo, David. *Baroque Horrors: Roots of the Fantastic in the Age of Curiosities*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010. Print.
- Egginton, William. *The Theater of Truth: The Ideology of (Neo)baroque Aesthetics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. Print.
- Gracián, Baltasar. *Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia*. Ed. Emilio Blanco. Madrid: Cátedra, 1997. Print.
- _____. *The Art of Worldly Wisdom: A Pocket Oracle*. Trans. Christopher Maurer. New York: Doubleday, 1992. Print.
- Nelson, Bradley J. *The Persistence of Presence: Emblem and Ritual in Baroque Spain*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010. Print.
- Romano, James Vincent. *Baltasar Gracián and the Fabrication of Subjects: The "Oráculo manual" as "Self-help" Writing*. Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1997.
- Sánchez, Francisco J. "Symbolic Wealth and Theatricality in Gracián." *Rhetoric and Politics: Baltasar Gracián and the New World Order*. Ed. Nicholas Spadaccini and Jenaro Taléns. *Hispanic Issues*, vol. 14. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Print.
- Spadaccini, Nicholas, and Luís Martín-Estudillo, eds. *Hispanic Baroques: Reading Cultures in Context*. *Hispanic Issues*, vol. 31. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005. Print.
- Spadaccini, Nicholas, and Jenaro Taléns, eds. *Rhetoric and Politics: Baltasar Gracián and the New World Order*. *Hispanic Issues*, vol. 14. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997. Print.

Spadaccini, Nicholas and Scott Ehrenburg. "Introduction: Strategies for Survival in a Self-Made World: (Re)reading Gracián." *(Re)Reading Gracián in a Self-Made World*. *Hispanic Issues On Line Debates* 4 (Fall 2012): 1–5. Web.
