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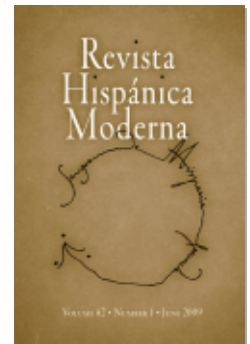
Góngora's Soledades and the Problem of Modernity (review)

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(Review)

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trucción a la que se resiste el texto de Marías, y “a sort of ludic counterbalance to his [el autor-narrador de *Quién*] crippling, nihilistic narcissism” (187)—narcisismo estéril que según Amago sufría el narrador de *Negra espalda*—.

Contra la crítica que estigmatiza la narrativa posmoderna auto-consciente como indulgente y vacua, Amago, alineándose con críticos como Linda Hutcheon o Patricia Waugh, propone en su libro una lectura según la cual “narrative self-consciousness is not irreconcilable with the human search for meaning, but rather can be used as an important tool in that search” (17). Lo que a mi juicio se echa en falta en este punto de partida es una cierta reflexión o problematización sobre nociones como “experiencia humana” o “significado”. La repetición constante de la tesis, que en sí es un tanto elemental (la narrativa—incluso la posmoderna—nos reconforta, nos hace sentir seguros, nos ayuda a dar sentido al mundo), a lo largo de la introducción, cada capítulo y la conclusión, en lugar de darle cohesión al libro conduce a cierto cansancio ante el encuentro constante con conclusiones similares. Como se ha podido desprender de la descripción de los capítulos, el autor cae en juicios de valor (la narrativa de Marías sería más “débil” que la de Cercas porque renuncia a encontrar un sentido o darle un valor “humano” a su texto) cuando las novelas estudiadas no se ajustan a su interpretación personal de la auto-referencialidad en la narrativa posmoderna como algo redimiblemente humano. Desde el punto de vista de la argumentación y estilo la repetición es uno de los aspectos más problemáticos en este libro; no sólo las conclusiones son repetidas con múltiples variantes, sino que las citas de los textos originales, primero en español y luego traducidas al inglés, son parafraseadas por el autor, en la mayoría de los casos innecesariamente, contribuyendo a la falta de fluidez del texto. Del mismo modo la lectura se hace un tanto farragosa por la presencia constante de referencias críticas, si bien la investigación realizada demuestra ser exhaustiva y es en este sentido admirable.

True Lies es sin duda un estudio valioso y una importante contribución a un campo en proceso de formación como es la narrativa española más reciente. Su intento de darle una coherencia, un sentido de conjunto a esta narrativa, resulta curiosamente similar a la misma intencionalidad que el autor detecta en estos textos posmodernos. Creo que la interpretación crítica en este estudio se hubiese beneficiado también de cierta dosis de auto-consciencia y problematización de la realidad (¿en qué consiste, a fin de cuentas, la experiencia humana?) como la que existe en los textos estudiados.

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CRYSTAL ANNE CHEMRIS. *Góngora's Soledades and the Problem of Modernity*. Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2008. 174 + xx pages.

This monograph focuses concisely and with exceptional clarity on Luis de Góngora's most complex and enigmatic work, arguing that the *Soledades* consciously breaks with existing literary models to articulate a baroque expression of modernity. Throughout her study, Chemris builds on the foundational contributions of John Beverley, Mary Gaylord, Paul Julian Smith, and other scholars

who have revisited the *Soledades*, in order to conceptualize the work as “an aesthetic response to the crisis of early modernity” (xv) rather than as a historicist or materialist artifact. Localizing the text in a period of epistemological crisis, Chemris carefully analyzes the literary tropes and poetic structures of the work to demonstrate how they reflect artistically the issues of fragmentation, subjectivity, and ontological insecurity that characterized the loss of the medieval worldview and the advent of the modern (1).

The book’s introduction deftly sets the parameters of the study and localizes the *Soledades* in the context of the Renaissance aesthetic of individualism and the “solitude of individual consciousness” (19) expressed in literary works at the beginning of the Spanish Golden Age. Chemris reads *La Celestina* as a prototype that offers a critical breakdown of the courtly love tradition and evokes self-destruction, meaninglessness, and an absence of moral order reflecting a historical moment of change and uncertainty. She then continues to trace similar motifs and meanings in the poetry of Boscán and Garcilaso de la Vega, demonstrating in the eclogues and sonnets an increased interiority and emotional estrangement of the subject, the fragmentation of the body, and an escapist impulse that moves these Renaissance poets away from conventional modes of lyric emotional expression. Taken as a whole, the innovations of *La Celestina*, Boscán, and Garcilaso create a foundation upon which Góngora would build in order to express poetically a consciousness of “the Baroque crisis of self” (19).

Chapter 1 elaborates on this concept of crisis with a discussion of the emergent rationalist and empiricist worldviews and the declining Scholastic-Aristotelian mode of knowledge. Utilizing an especially pithy phrase from Paulo Rossi, Chemris characterizes the failing, outdated episteme as a “sacerdotal conception of knowledge” (21) which gives way to more subjective approaches in understanding reality at the dawn of the Cartesian era. The literature of this period, Chemris argues, is fraught with textual contradictions that echo the crisis of the times. In the *Soledades*, she identifies ambivalences of genre, tone, syntax, and semantics as examples of this consciousness of crisis. This interpretation views the Gongorine *silva* as a mixed generic form, caught between epic and lyric conventions, and representing a modernization of Petrarchan lyricism. This juxtaposition of high/serious and low/burlesque enables a self-reflexivity and self-critical tonality that approaches what Smith has termed the “axiological nihilism” of *La Celestina* (42). A syntactical ambivalence is likewise visible in Góngora’s manipulation of word order conventions to parallel the difficult process of human perception. A semantic ambiguity, with its rhetoric of absence and defense of obscurity, establishes the *Soledades* as a work of crisis at all levels of organization (49–50).

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are short studies that focus on imagery of violence, human perception, and ruptured boundaries of time and space, respectively, as examples of the characteristic disorder of Góngora’s work. An intensive scrutiny of the poem’s mythological rape imagery and its relationship to wounds, the hunt, and the “cruel decorativeness” evoked by such images as bleeding jewels (61) reveals “the real horrors of equating violent conquest with love” (60), bridging literary aesthetics and the historical context of Spanish imperialism. Góngora’s critique of sexual violence leads Chemris to read a broader commentary on the

“process of epistemological and aesthetic mediation” in the *Soledades* (72). Chemris writes, “The *Soledades* thus portrays human thought, our capacity to perceive and to represent, as inherently solipsistic, revealing more about the nature of the self than about the reality it attempts to apprehend” (76). She interprets the text’s reflexivity, cultivated style, images of subjectivity, telescopic and microscopic viewpoints, and the breakdown of boundaries of perception as a Gongorine celebration of the power of the human mind “in an imaginary transcendence of the restrictions of the human condition upon knowledge” (81). The prevalent images of epistemological instability, particularly those related to time and space, further question the established limits of knowledge and perception by playing on apocalyptic traditions, messianic beliefs, and Spanish baroque culture’s obsession with *mudanza* and the passage of time.

The longest of the book’s five chapters is also the last, which proposes that Góngora’s poetics be considered a “New Poetry” that anticipates many of the structures, themes, and aesthetic concerns arising later in the modern age. As the introduction previously identified antecedents to *Gongorismo* in the literature of early Renaissance Spain, this final chapter provides a sort of structural symmetry to the study by analyzing twentieth-century Latin American poets whose works show marked indebtedness to Gongora’s baroque representation of crisis. Chemris contends that it is no accident that writers of the last century rediscovered the baroque aesthetic; the ontological crisis articulated by Góngora finds its natural affinity in the subjective vision of twentieth-century poetry. This chapter offers some of the closest readings in the book, both of Góngora (the chapter no longer rests its analysis on the *Soledades*, but includes the *Polifemo* and other works as well) and those of Octavio Paz and César Vallejo, most often by way of comparison to Mallarmé and Symbolist poetry. The analysis here, as elsewhere in the book, is persuasive and concise, but this longer chapter curiously seems somewhat removed from the central focus of the first 100 pages. As elsewhere, Chemris is subtle and sophisticated in her expansion of Góngora’s poetics of modernity, and her skillful analysis makes the comparison between Góngora’s fragmented lyric subject and later poetic movements seem self-evident, but the chapter perhaps says more about those other poets, relegating Góngora to a subordinate position in the service of a more recent episteme. Her final point, however, joins the two periods (and their critics and writers) in an optimistic search for “a future beyond the terrible contradictions of the legacy of modernity” (142) that effectively emphasizes commonalities in modern thought as expressed in the age’s earliest poetic works as well as its most recent.

Overall, this monographic study of Góngora’s *Soledades* succeeds and makes a substantial, original contribution to the field with its well-conceived analysis of an early modern poetics of crisis. The study is a model of concise writing and clear exposition of complex literary and epistemological issues. Chemris does forego a substantive consideration of the historical and social contexts she describes, relying summarily on Maravall for her conception of the baroque, on John Elliott (whose name, incidentally, is misspelled in footnotes and in the bibliography) for history, and on what other literary critics have said about the early modern crisis instead of citing additional sources or examples from Góngora’s time. This is a minor complaint, however, and it is beyond the scope of

the present monograph, which is focused on the aesthetic manifestation of the early modern episteme rather than the events in the realms of technology, science, religion, and philosophy that ushered in this remarkable era of change.

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DANIEL MUÑOZ SEMPERE. *La Inquisición española como tema literario. Política, historia y ficción en la crisis del Antiguo Régimen*. Londres: Támesis, 2008. 243 páginas.

Los últimos suspiros de la moribunda Inquisición no llegan hasta 1834, a pesar de varios intentos de ahogarla o descuartizarla durante los primeros años de la Guerra de la Independencia y los momentos más ilustrados de las Cortes de Cádiz o el Trienio Liberal. Como Rasputin años más tarde en el Palacio Yusupov en San Petersburgo, se negó a morir. Esta institución dejó profundas huellas en la historia política y conciencia literaria de un país en lucha continua contra la heterodoxia, tanto de dentro como de fuera de sus fronteras. Un análisis del Santo Oficio como tema literario es lo que ofrece Daniel Muñoz Sempere en este excelente estudio de una materia que abarca los años 1789–1848, es decir, un periodo que experimentó dos grandes revoluciones europeas.

Hoguera, proceso, víctima, auto de fe, tortura, miseria, denuncia, procesión, terror, calabozo: pensar en la Inquisición suscita una amplia gama de imágenes terroríficas y vivas que dan escalofríos. ¿Quién pudo defender una institución tan cruel y tan despiadada? Muchos. Existe toda una literatura apologética del Santo Oficio, como sabemos, compuesta de obras escritas por los que creían defender la pureza del cristianismo contra el declive moral dieciochesco y decimonónico (me resisto a trazar analogías contemporáneas con la América de nuestro siglo). La defensa fue fácil en su día (o por lo menos, mucho menos arriesgada); el ataque era lo que podía resultar en destierro, desaparición, tortura o muerte. A pesar de ello, se sucedían continuos ataques: el Siglo Ilustrado abrió grietas en la muralla de defensa religiosa-dogmática del Santo Oficio; si en época anterior, habían sido los extranjeros—como parte de la campaña protestante y anti-español—quienes habían cuestionado la justicia y la necesidad del Santo Oficio, en este momento fueron los ilustrados quienes pusieron en circulación obras críticas para apoyar su campaña anti-clerical y anti-superstición.

La Inquisición fue no sólo un instrumento de control religioso sino también de control social. La tortura existía, pero también existía una “sutil difusión de miedo” (11) para dejar constancia del poder que ejercía y que ejercería contra los que no se conformaban con sus normas. Muñoz ve el siglo XVIII como un periodo de desacralización, en que los monarcas pierden progresivamente la conexión entre Religión y Estado, herencia divina y realidad diaria. Esta “decrisitianización, desmitificación y desenmascaramiento” (17) lleva inevitablemente al fin de la Inquisición porque las dos grandes instituciones sobre las que se fundamentaba el Antiguo Régimen perdieron su razón de ser. Muñoz analiza un número de obras que se atrevieron a enfrentarse con la Inquisición. No es este libro una historia de la Inquisición ni una antología de obras relacionadas, ni una lista de menciones y referencias, sino un nutrido estudio de la institución

Correction:

On page 112 of Volume 62.1, near the end of the third paragraph, the phrase “what Smith has termed the ‘axiological nihilism’ of *La Celestina*” should read: “what Stephen Gilman has termed the ‘axiological nihilism’ of *La Celestina*.” We regret the error.