

theories and
methodologies

Obscuritas and the Closet: Queer Neobaroque in Mexico

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DURING THE BAROQUE PERIOD, LUIS DE GÓNGORA Y ARGOTE (1561–1627) WROTE THE FIRST SPANISH-LANGUAGE CLOSETED LITERATURE. SOME three hundred years later, the challenging originality of his closet verse, openly studied and appreciated by a cultured, intellectual elite, played a pivotal role in the development of homosexual literature in the early-twentieth-century avant-garde movements of Spain and Latin America. This essay will briefly explore how twentieth-century Mexican avant-garde writers expressed the closet using baroque models. The thesis is that the rhetorical strategies of *obscuritas* provided Góngora an ideal instrument for representing the closet, which in literature is defined as a symbolic space that allows writers to represent and readers to recognize homosexuality in a heterosexual context. The pertinent *OED* definition of *closet* as an adjective reads, “secret, covert, used esp. with reference to homosexuality” (“Closet”). This recognized use of *obscuritas* is validated further in the observations of the Peruvian colonial writer Espinosa Medrano, one of Góngora’s seventeenth-century commentators, who epitomizes the consolidation of baroque aesthetics in Hispanic America by the criollo elite. The final chapter in this tour of the baroque closet will examine how the Mexican avant-garde became aware of *obscuritas* through Federico García Lorca’s Gongorine lectures and poetry.

Obscuritas is the term used by writers and their commentators to explain, justify, and criticize a set of rhetorical devices—the products of an elaborated intellectual process—at the service of an elitist literature that is designed to be studied by a cultured minority rather than simply read by the general public. In classical rhetoric it refers to “el uso de palabras oscuras” (“the use of dark words”), such as inexact synonyms, archaisms, regionalisms, neologisms, technical terms, and amphiboly. There is also a morphosyntactic *obscuritas* (Lausberg 383–84). Later this essay will explore in detail one instance of Góngora’s use of *obscuritas* to represent the closet and a poem by Xavier Villaurrutia, written in the 1930s, using similar devices.

Góngora’s poems circulated in literary academies formed by members of the aristocracy, clergy, university, and commercial

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world. Membership in these academies was determined by intellectual merit rather than lineage, and thus their readings and discussions were modern, individual, bourgeois, usually private though at times semipublic. This privileged intellectual elite could enjoy a literature and art that reached well beyond the moral codes of commoners. Similar associations appeared in the twentieth century, such as Alcanía, in Mexico City. In 1933 Alcanía published a special edition (limited to fifty copies) of García Lorca's "Ode to Walt Whitman" to be distributed among the city's intellectual gay elite (Walsh 258–59), which included movie directors and producers, journalists, writers, senators, art historians, literature professors, and similar professionals.

The history of *obscuritas* is well documented; the following summary serves to contextualize its development in seventeenth-century Spain and Spanish America. In his seminal study on Góngora's use and defense of *obscuritas*, Antonio Vilanova explains that the reader's role was to unveil a poem's final meaning by solving its riddle (658). Discussing Góngora's major poems, *Solitudes* and *Fable of Polyphemus and Galatea*, Vilanova astutely observes that they were meant to be pondered instead of simply read; only worthy readers could fully comprehend such complex texts and achieve the maximum pleasure and benefit. In the open letter ("Carta en respuesta") Góngora wrote to an anonymous critic to defend his poetry, he—following Augustine—quoted Matthew 7.6 to justify his use of *obscuritas*: "do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under foot and turn and maul you" ("Respuesta" 297). Góngora is one more modern writer in the chain secularizing Augustine's classical reading of the Holy Scriptures, a reading based on Augustine's view that "it is much more pleasant to learn lessons presented through imagery, and much more rewarding to discover meanings that are won only with difficulty" (33). In Spain, Ramón Llull's *Nova Logica* ("New

Logic"), Teresa of Avila's *El castillo interior* ("The Interior Castle"), and Luis Alfonso de Carvallo's *El cisne de Apolo* ("Apollo's Swan") all praise *obscuritas* (Vilanova 671). The consolidation of *obscuritas*'s value in the peninsula came with Juan de Boscán's translation of Baltasar de Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*, considered the beginning of modern prose in vernacular Spanish. In Castiglione's book, Messer Federico repeats the idea that obscurity delights the reader and that it implies a complicity between readers and texts (40–41). Subsequently, Baltasar Gracián in *Agudeza y arte de ingenio* ("The Wit and Art of Genius") theorized and analyzed Góngora's use of metaphor, and Espinosa Medrano studied Góngora's handling of hyperbaton. Both praised Góngora's creative use of *obscuritas*. Some three hundred years later, the early-twentieth-century boom of philological studies in Spain, Mexico, Colombia, and Argentina would revive interest in this baroque literature and lead to contemporary discussions about it. Many of the neobaroque poets were professors of literature who could study the texts through the "scientific" lens of philology and incorporate the resulting readings into their own poetry.

Vilanova describes Góngora's poetry as mysterious and full of dark symbolism (658). The key word in this context is *oscuro*¹ ("dark") because this word will become a code for the closet for the next three centuries. Góngora promised readers *deleite* ("bliss") if they worked hard enough to find the hidden meaning of words (Vilanova 659). More recently, Joaquín Roses Lozano has updated Vilanova's study; he bases Góngora's *obscuritas* on neologism, metaphor, and hyperbaton (6). The purpose of this poetry is to surprise the reader—the seventeenth-century term was alienation—in a way similar to that of estrangement as defined by Russian formalists (Maravall 213). In this context, it is important for our link between *obscuritas* and the closet that a commentator like Juan

de Jáuregui in 1624 complained not about the difficulty of the poetry, which he valued, but rather about the presence of *obscuritas* in stanzas of *Solitudes* that referred to unheroic, mundane occurrences of everyday life (Roses 89). Conservative critics disliked Góngora's introduction of new topics that lacked antecedents in classical literature, which already included Petrarch and Garcilaso. Góngora's intention, however, was to become a classic himself. He broke the classical balance—decorum—between the words he chose, the reality they represented, and the genre he used. As his critics noted, *Polyphemus* should follow conventions of lyric poetry and *Solitudes* should observe heroic-verse tradition, but Góngora inverted the genres.

Góngora and his followers valued *imitatio* and originality equally. This cultural eagerness to incorporate novelty offered the perfect place for the closet: a new reality made of neologisms (because a new sexuality was being written), a reality with hyperbaton (because words, like bodies, were not in their classical position), a reality that demanded new metaphors (because new parts of the body would be described, parts beyond Petrarch's or Garcilaso's metaphors of teeth as pearls, cheeks as roses, hair as golden threads, and necks as glass). As José Antonio Maravall has demonstrated, what characterizes baroque is not exuberance but extremeness and the technique of the unfinished (210–19); life at the margins and daring, obscure metaphors provided a perfect setting for the closet.

Spanish America's seventeenth-century viceroalties reproduced the cultural structure of the European metropolis with pontifical universities, Trentine seminaries, and liberal schools to educate the criollo and mestizo bureaucracy of the crown and the church. The seventeenth century is also a moment of vigorous intellectual debate among Dominicans, Franciscans, and Jesuits. In this intellectual context, baroque flourished. The overwhelming number of extraordinary baroque churches

and civil buildings in colonial Hispanic America and the presence of literary favorites like Juan Ruiz de Alarcón, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora demonstrate unequivocally that baroque aesthetics were not just an adopted artistic strategy but a true means for colonial writers and artists to express their creative desires. One measure of baroque's widespread acceptance is seen in the 1662 *Apology in Defense of Don Luis de Góngora*, by Juan de Espinosa Medrano (1629?–88), also known as “el Lunarejo,” a significant commentator on Góngora's verse. Published in colonial Peru, the text makes Lunarejo the first relevant literary critic of Spanish writing in the Americas, and his *Apology* is an extraordinary cultural document.

Renaissance and baroque aesthetics were the first European artistic movements practiced in the Americas. Baroque writers there exploited a particular form of *imitatio* that included classical writing and slang, the Spanish patois of African slaves, ballads and songs linked to dance, obscene tavern songs, nursery rhymes, and aspects of the local cultures, mainly Aztec, Maya, and Inca—the “medieval” colonial culture in the Americas. It also incorporated the “epistemology” of popular culture, like the presence of the puppeteer in the puppet show. In particular, Lunarejo studied the Gongorine use of hyperbaton, the impossibility of separating form from conceit in the poems, and the artistic position “that *all* poetic language consists of a deviation from the common linguistic norm” (González Echevarría 161; my emphasis), the sum of which constitutes the tenets of modern literary theory and the basis for avant-garde neobaroque poetry. To this theoretical corpus and literary tradition, the neobaroque added French literature and the new culture coming from the United States: jazz, vaudeville, pachuco slang, the Harlem Renaissance, the fast language of radio, the ephemeral language of publicity, gossip, the aesthetics of cinema, and sports.

The arrival of neoclassicism in colonial Spanish America represented an abandonment of baroque forms in favor of the rational literature of the Enlightenment.² It also led to a rapid decline in the quality of baroque literature, which became merely a form of entertainment—for example, sonnets written with words whose only vowel was *a* and uninteresting imitations. Romanticism, which followed neoclassicism and coincided with the independence of most Spanish-speaking countries, was interested mainly in the creation of nonmetropolitan national identities through a vocabulary of indigenous plants, animals, and regions. Baroque was perceived by liberal Romantics as too close to the culture of the metropolis. Baroque recuperated its allure when cosmopolitan Modernista poets rediscovered Góngora and Francisco de Quevedo (Góngora's nemesis and an extraordinary innovator of the language) and the American baroque models and brought baroque literature back to the center of the canon. The Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío (1867–1916) discovered that he could write about the Americas using the techniques and epistemology of baroque forebears,³ thereby returning to the roots of criollo culture and bypassing contemporary liberal crises, with their compulsory Romantic nationalism. By the end of the nineteenth century, when new national identities were well established, poets, now unfettered from Romantic prejudices, could return to a more cosmopolitan literature open to European influences like Baudelaire or Mallarmé and could likewise recuperate their colonial literature as part of their true past.

Modernismo opened the doors to the avant-garde with the use of foreign words and dark sexuality; the Parnassian taste for Greco-Roman art and “exotic” cultures like the Aztecs, Incas, and Mayans; and the symbolist obsession with the hidden meanings of words. When a generation of gay writers appeared in the context of the avant-garde, they already had at their disposition all the

cultural tools needed to elaborate a literature of the closet. Salvador Novo, Xavier Villaurrutia, and other writers of Contemporáneos, a twentieth-century Mexican group, were gay in the modern sense of the term; baroque aesthetics proved to be the perfect ideologeme to problematize their gender and their art. They realized that Góngora had already brought the beauty of the masculine body to his poetry, as seen in *canción* 388, where the poetic voice expresses a masculine desire for the groom in the wedding chamber; in the wrestling of naked peasants in *Solitudes*; and in the descriptions of Acis in *Fable of Polyphemus and Galatea*, there seen through the eyes and desire of Galatea. Quevedo, a homophobic contemporary of Góngora's who outed him several times, offered a different perspective. He despised *bujarrones* (“sodomites”), *putos* (“faggots”), and *itali-anos* (“Itali-anus”). Yet, at the same time, he dedicated a book to the anus, *Gracias y desgracias del ojo del culo* (“Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Asshole”), and seven entries to the anus and its functions in *Diccionario privado de Francisco de Quevedo* (“Private Dictionary by Francisco de Quevedo”). By bringing the butt and the anus to the center of his poetry, he challenged the phallocentrism of the dominant culture (Díaz-Ortiz). Quevedo taught the Contemporáneos to write satirical and irreverent homosexual literature. Under these conditions, the first modern Mexican closeted literature could be created.

At this point we must re-create the avant-garde reading of baroque closeted literature to understand how it influenced neobaroque. An outstanding early instance of closet writing occurs at the beginning of *Solitudes*: the pilgrim, a young, beautiful, and noble man, is thrown naked by the waves onto the beach. To underscore the adolescent's beauty, the poem employs a clear homosexual reference—Ganymede: “el que ministrar podía la copa / a Júpiter mejor que el garzón de Ida” (“a more fit cup bearer than Ganymede / for Jupiter”; *Soledades* 77; Smith 86). And the following

stanza expresses an extraordinary example of homoerotic desire in Spanish literature:

Desnudo el joven,
Océano ha bebido,
restituir le hace a las arenas;
y al Sol lo extiende luego,
que lamiéndolo apenas
su dulce lengua de templado fuego,
lento lo embiste, y con suäve estilo
la menor onda chupa al menor hilo. . . . (77)

The youth then stripped, and all that they had
quaffed
Of Neptune's humid draught
Back from his garments to the sand he wrung,
Then spread them out to meet
The sun, whose gentle tongue
Licked them with gradual and temperate heat
And mild insistence, till his kindly aid
Sucked the least moisture from the tiniest
thread. . . . (Solitudes 9)

The Sun, also called Jupiter and Taurus, does three things: first, he licks the body of the young man; then, as a bull, he charges toward him slowly; and finally he sucks the young man's clothes kindly. We can infer that the pilgrim youth, more handsome than Ganymede, is gay as well—he also is described as a “garzón” (“groom”), which carried homosexual undertones in seventeenth-century Spain, mainly suggesting a passive sodomite (De Armas 129). The erotic image of Jupiter licking and kissing the body of the young man, sodomizing him gently, as the verb *embistir* indicates, and licking the clothes in a fetishistic scenario represents a powerful image of homoerotic desire. If we separate *Océano* (“ocean”) into *oce* and *ano* (“anus”), the word indicates where our gaze is to be directed when we first see the naked young man. As indicated earlier, one of Quevedo's favorite homophobic insults was to label his enemies, like Góngora, *italiano* or *siciliano* to indicate that they were homosexuals. The diaeresis, a Derridean *différance*, is a mark of homosexuality, because it creates a hiatus, separating

the word in two and stressing the presence of the anus (Oropesa 33–34). The play of fricative and nasal sounds of the alliteration in the whole stanza illustrates the sensuality of the caress and of Ganymede (Barkan). In Andalucía the verb *chupar* (“suck”) has a sexual connotation, and in this context can only refer to fellatio.

Federico García Lorca (1898–1936) was the first to explain publicly, in closeted fashion, these lines from Góngora, in a 1927 lecture delivered in his native Granada to commemorate the tercentenary of Góngora's death:

¡Con qué juicioso tacto está armonizado el océano, ese dragón de oro del Sol embistiendo con tibia lengua y ese traje mojado del joven, donde la ciega cabeza del astro ‘la menor onda chupa al menor hilo.’ En estos ocho versos hay más matices que en cincuenta octavas de la *Gerusalemme Liberata*, del Tasso. Porque están todos los detalles estudiados y sentidos como en una joya de orfebrería. No hay nada que dé la sensación del Sol que cae, pero no pesa, como esos versos: ‘que lamiéndole apenas (...) lento lo embiste (...)’ Como lleva la imaginación atada, la detiene cuando quiere y no se deja arrastrar por las oscuras fuerzas naturales de la ley de inercia ni por los fugaces espejismos por donde mueren los poetas incautos, como mariposas en el farol. Hay momentos en las *Soledades* que resultan increíbles. (231–32)

How wise is the touch that brings into harmony the ocean, that golden dragon of the Sun that probes with his warm tongue the young man's wet clothes, where the Sun's blind head “sucked the last bit of moisture from the tiniest thread!” These eight lines hold more nuances than fifty stanzas of Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*. [This is] because all details are studied and valued like precious jewels. Nothing there can compare to the sensation of the Sun falling, weightless, as in the lines “barely licking it/him . . . probing it/him slowly. . . .” Since [Góngora] has captured the imagination, he can stop at will, and he is compelled neither by the dark, natural forces of inertia nor by fleeting mirages

where unwary poets are killed like butterflies
in a lamp. Certain moments in *Solitudes* are
simply amazing. (my trans.)

Lorca advocates the use of *matiz* (“nuance”) for writing homosexual literature. According to his reading, Jupiter licks either the young man or his clothes or both with his “ciega cabeza,” his “blind head,” or penis. The words “oscuras fuerzas” (“dark forces”) reinforce the idea of the closet and the euphemism used to express sodomy. Gay poets of the Latin American avant-garde were delighted with this reading, which opened the door for their own writing of the closet (Oropesa 34–35).

Xavier Villaurrutia’s most noted poetry volume is titled *Nostalgia de la muerte* (1938; *Nostalgia for Death*), and one of the collection’s best pieces is “Nocturno amor” (“Love Nocturne”). This strikingly original poem develops a new corpus of images in Spanish (thighs, armpit, ear, and artery as synecdoches of the body; the mouth as metonym of sex) to narrate a story of passion and absence between lovers. The text provides a notable example of new writing of the gay body in modern poetry:

Guardas el nombre de tu cómplice en los ojos
pero encuentro tus párpados más duros que el
silencio
y antes que compartirlo matarías el goce
de entregarte en el sueño con los ojos cerrados
sufro al sentir la dicha con que tu cuerpo busca
el cuerpo que te vence más que el sueño
y comparo la fiebre de tus manos
con mis manos de hielo
y el temblor de tus sienes con mi pulso perdido
y el yeso de mis muslos con la piel de los tuyos
que la sombra corroe con su lepra incurable.
Ya sé cuál es el sexo de tu boca
y lo que guarda la avaricia de tu axila
y maldigo el rumor que inunda el laberinto de
tu oreja
sobre la almohada de espuma
sobre la dura página de nieve
No la sangre que huyó de mí como del arco
huye la flecha

sino la cólera circula por mis arterias
amarilla de incendio en mitad de la noche
y todas las palabras en la prisión de la boca
y una sed que en el agua del espejo
sacia su sed con una sed idéntica
De que noche despierto a esta desnuda
noche larga y cruel noche que ya no es noche
junto a tu cuerpo más muerto que muerto
que no es tu cuerpo ya sino su hueco . . .
(49–50)

You hold your accomplice’s name in your eyes
but I find your eyelids harder than silence
and you would kill that pleasure before sharing
the dream
of giving yourself over to a dream with eyes
closed
I suffer when feeling the pleasure you seek
with your body
the body that conquers you more than sleep
and I compare the fever of your hands
with my icy ones
and the trembling of your temples lost amid
my pulse
and the plaster of my thighs against the skin of
your thighs
the shadow is rotting it with its insatiable
leprosy.
I already know the sex of your mouth
and what hides in the greed of your armpit
and I curse the murmur that inundates the
labyrinth of your ear
over the foam pillow
over the harsh page of snow
This is not the blood that left me like the arrow
flees the bow
it is rather the anger circulating in my arteries
yellow like flame in the middle of the night
and all the words in the prison of my mouth
and a thirst in the water of the mirror
quenching it with an identical thirst
During the night I wake up to this naked
long and cruel night that is not a night
anymore
beside your body more dead than dead
it is not your body but its void . . . (my trans.)

This poem belongs to Garcilaso’s animism, constructed around the function of the

eyes. One is forced to recall Garcilaso's eighth sonnet, where live, incandescent spirits leave the eyes of the beloved and pass through the lover's body, which cannot retain them, and the lover is left only to behold the absence of love. In Villaurrutia's case, the beloved still retains the lover's spirit in his eyes. Villaurrutia takes as his point of departure a break with poetic tradition because he utters a love story seldom voiced in Mexican literature, that of two men. He cannot describe the lips, the neck, or the bosom of his partner using the metaphors of the last five centuries. A new body image had to emerge: temples, lovers' thighs, mouth and sex together in the same line, and an unreachable armpit. The poetic voice curses rumors that may have separated the lovers, but he does not curse the blood that rushes into him like an arrow, the literal blood of sodomy and the metaphoric blood shed for the loss of his lover. The poetic voice describes the orgasm as well as the pain of separation. The image of two men with thighs entangled is new, like the metaphor of plaster to indicate the cooling of the relationship. The poet expresses the tension between the two men by contrasting the lover's trembling temple with the lost pulse of the poetic voice. There are also explicit parts, like the lines referring to oral sex and to the bleeding of the male lover who is penetrated by the arrow, a classic phallic metaphor. Foam becomes a metaphor for semen, or the filling of the pillow, or the semen in the bed. The ending refers to the naked bodies lying in bed and the terrible loneliness that comes when the poetic voice realizes he sleeps only with his lover's body because its soul is already somewhere else. Soullessness indicates the vacuum of the body because, as observed earlier, the poem is constructed on classical animism as seen in the use of traditional fire and ice metaphors. In classical literature, fire melts the ice of the lover to become one with it, or, alternatively, it destroys the object of desire. In this case, the poetic voice perceives that the beloved's feverish hands are

hot because the beloved is in love with someone else, while the lover's own hands are icy. At the poem's conclusion, the lover's angry yellow fire destroys the beloved following the classical pattern of the fire-and-ice metaphor.

To conclude, in this brief overview we have traversed three hundred years from the "old continent" to the new to study how homosexuality has always sought and found a way to tell its story, and we have seen how the sophistication of baroque literature allowed an elite, cultured minority to give voice to its desires in the confines of the closet. Like Góngora, Villaurrutia walks the minefield of grammatical genders and ambiguous metaphors to mask through *obscuritas* the sex of the lovers, allowing new bodies—*corpora nova*—made of new metaphors to emerge from the lines. Thus, while the Renaissance invented the model of feminine beauty that has endured over six hundred years, the baroque created an equally powerful (although invisible to most eyes) physical image for the gay male through the vocabulary of Góngora and the compelling images of the baroque painter Caravaggio. This poetry proved so powerful that it jumpstarted Hispanic American gay poetry in the twentieth century.

NOTES

1. *Sonetos del amor oscuro* (1936; "Sonnets of Dark Love"), by García Lorca, is a good example of Gongorine closeted poetry.
2. The Royal Academy of San Carlos, which introduced neoclassical education in Latin America, was established in Mexico City in 1785.
3. Forcadas and Hauser, separately, have studied the influence of Góngora on Darío, and Coke-Enguíanos has noted that of Quevedo.

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