



La musa refractada: Literatura y óptica en la España del Barroco

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BOOK REVIEW

La musa refractada: Literatura y óptica en la España del Barroco, by Enrique García Santo-Tomás, Madrid, Iberoamericana, 2014, 340pp., €25 (paperback), ISBN 9788484898283

Recently, I came across a reference to a 1605 document describing a grand “fiesta de cañas y toros” written by Pinheiro da Veiga, a Portuguese traveller staying in Valladolid. Pinheiro da Veiga writes that he saw the figure of Don Quijote in a procession wearing “a pair of spectacles for an air of greater authority”. Enrique García Santo-Tomás’s study *La musa refractada* illuminates precisely the nature of the “air of authority” that spectacles or *anteojos* conferred on the wearer.

García Santo-Tomás not only examines eyeglasses in their materiality but also the field of optics and, specifically, the presence of Galileo’s telescope in the Spanish baroque. García’s study of optics in literature is a sweeping achievement that seamlessly tackles the study of scientific history as part and parcel of the study of literature. In this sense, the book goes against debates in the humanities that separate an ostensibly stand-alone field, the “arts” (literature, in this case), from “science” (the history of optics, in this case). Moreover, the study of seventeenth-century Spain’s interest in vision (biology) and ways of seeing (epistemology) as forms of culture dispels the modern myth that it was a backward place, unaware of scientific advances in Europe. García amply adds to the bibliography on the legacy of Galileo and his telescope in literature from the period. He also contributes to scholarship on related topics, such as the scientific reception in Spain of other scientists like Copernicus; or by adding fascinating forays into how Spanish literature of the period described the earliest observations of sunspots and the moon.

From its inception, the baroque related to vision and optic distortion. Take for instance the penchant in the Spanish baroque for the topos of *engaño* and *desengaño* or the prevalence of studies that connect the baroque period to ways of seeing.¹ García is the first scholar to comprehensively and cogently examine the period through material culture related to visual perception. In other words, he is the first scholar to treat the more abstract meaning of the baroque – as an aesthetic moment of distorted vision – in a literal way.

The book explores European optical advances in the literature of the Spanish baroque with an emphasis on the transition from a Ptolemaic to a Copernican world view, as influenced by the technology of optics related to astronomy. García does not seek to establish an ordered diachronic evolution of ideas and concepts because the literary and intellectual discussions of optics oscillated continually between the old and the new, between the familiar and the unknown. He does, however, largely focus on the Spanish seventeenth century, beginning with a series

of texts from King Philip III's reign. These texts show that critics need to dismiss the idea that Spain was cut off from scientific advances in other European countries, as well as showing that baroque wit cannot be classified as wholly reactionary. The authors of plays, emblem books, sonnets, novels and most especially satirical prose, welcomed foreign scientific discoveries and recreated them from a unique angle.

The book has an introduction, four sections (with two or three chapters each), a conclusion and a bibliography. It also contains 19 figures. The introduction underlines the historical contexts and networks between cultures, borrowing heavily from English critical theory, and Bruno Latour as well. The specific social and scientific vectors that García explores were primarily determined by the tormented canonization of Galileo by his European contemporaries and the arrival of his telescope to Spain. Section 1 examines the trajectory of Galileo's famous astronomical instrument at the court in Madrid and among Spanish intellectuals. The second part of Section 1 moves to the more general but related theme of treatises on optics in Spain during the period. Section 2 examines Spanish authors that García labels as Galileo's contemporaries, including those who are part of the literary canon such as Lope de Vega, Miguel de Cervantes and Luís de Góngora. It also includes an analysis of Cristobal Suárez de Figueroa's *Plaza universal de todas ciencias y artes*, as well as of the work of the collector Juan de Espina. Section 3 examines authors such as Rodrigo Fernández de Ribera and Antonio Enríquez Gómez who wrote satires from the viewpoint of a watch tower. The section concludes with a discussion of references to Galileo in the work of Luís Velez de Guevara's *El diablo cojuelo*, and of the Ptolemy-Copernicus debate in writings by Juan Enrique de Zúñiga and Anastasio Panteleón de Ribera. Finally, Section 4 studies the tension between established ideas about optics and their entanglement with a new cosmography in works by Francisco de Quevedo and Diego de Saavedra Fajardo.

The conclusion is much more than a wrap up of the preceding arguments, continuing to explore the permutations of the optical in later Spanish authors, such as the fascinating Miguel de Barrios, a member of the Spanish-Jewish community in Amsterdam. The bibliography García provides is indispensable for scholars of the field, including works from a variety of disciplines related to the history of science as well as literature. Precisely because of its reference to a vast body of works, authors and artists, the book would have benefited from an index, which I hope will be included in the forthcoming English edition. The author cites an unknown poem by Salas Barbadillo in a quotation that takes up nearly four pages; the author could profitably have parsed the poem's significance in his analysis, printing the text in an appendix.

The book includes a rich array of illustrations, including an image of Galileo's original telescope which serves as the book's frontispiece and *hilo conductor*. Other noteworthy images are of material objects such as an original seventeenth-century robot-like automaton; the cover of *Uso de los anteojos para todo género de vistas*, a book on eyeglasses; and a series of fascinating paintings which García integrates into his argument that satire captures better than any other genre the fear of confronting scientific innovation in the field of optics.

Aside from the first appearance in painting of the telescope in Peter Paul Rubens' and Jan Brueghel's *Allegory of Sight* and in José de Ribera's chiaroscuro masterpiece *Sight*, García also includes paintings such as El Greco's *Inquisitor General Niño de Guevara* and José de Ribera's *Knight of the Order of Santiago*. Ribera's painting, in particular, supports Pinheiro da Veiga's assessment that the Quijote walking in the

parade wearing spectacles had an air of dignity and *gravitas*. However García's analysis does much more than support Pinheiro da Veiga's superficial impression that the eyeglasses granted authority to the Quijote figure, proposing that the strange effect of glasses in portraiture not only suggests an elevation of the subject but also mockery, as they imply short-sightedness.

Beyond the granting of an air of both dignity and ridicule, García examines the significance of wearing glasses within a complex baroque aesthetic, especially in satirical novels that provide an illuminating reading of the period through their reference to the materiality of glass, inasmuch as it simultaneously corrected and distorted vision. Since García's primary concern is literature, his analysis is best documented in works such as those of Quevedo, whose name would be adopted as the term for reading glasses, "quevedos". García examines glass as a material object in Quevedo's political satires *La hora de todos* and *El lince de Italia u zahori español*. He also explains how, in *El lince de Italia u zahori español*, Quevedo uses a sort of telescope (an *antejo de larga vista*) to advise Phillip IV about the imminent military threat posed by the Duke of Savoy. Quevedo uses a narrator with special ocular capacities, like a lynx who can see what the king cannot see, to alert the Crown to imminent danger. In his analysis of Quevedo's *La hora de todos*, García focuses on references to the telescope in the chapter dedicated to the Dutch in Chile, so as to explain Quevedo's fundamental ambivalence about technical innovation. The satirical object of science targeted by the narrative voice pertains to an aesthetics of radical ideological ambiguity that, nonetheless, confronts the most important debates of the period: imperial expansion with respect to Holland; the controversy over indigenous rights in America; and the advances of post-Copernican science.

The value of this work goes beyond the analysis of optics in texts, that is, beyond classical philological and literary analysis. It considers the materiality of glass and of refracted vision as pervasive elements in the visualization of urban space – treated in García's previous monograph – in which the baroque city is part of a new urban cartography that allows one to see everything simultaneously but also to see nothing at all. García's prose style is fluid, lucid and a pleasure to read. Take the lyrical cadence of the conclusion for instance, in which he describes the fascination of the texts he analyses "con la mecánica del objeto, con sus mecanismos secretos, con ese potencial que se realiza sorprendentemente en su maridaje con el ojo humano, en el maridaje, a fin de cuentas, de una lente imperfecta con otra".

Our age of Google Glass ushers us into a new philosophical cosmos in which a methodology of observation always exposes another lens through which humans are able to visualize a version of the world around them that would otherwise be invisible to the naked eye. The visual manifestation of a new version of the world invisible to the naked eye was called *desengaño* in the Spanish seventeenth century and was part of the baroque cosmos, which forced the visually perceptible into the realm of the imperceptible; that is, observable beauty in nature is revealed as an *engaño* or deceit. García's genealogy of the optics of the baroque with its emphasis on material prostheses of the human eye – the various sorts of glasses that altered vision – demonstrates how mobile was the conception of how the human subject sees and how varied were the definitions and articulations of vision. In this sense, his book is useful for understanding vision not just from the standpoint of different philosophical frameworks, but also through study of the materiality of objects. It thereby serves as an inspiration for

material studies of glass and beyond, whether viewing the stars with an astrolabe or magnifying reality through the new sorts of glasses we are developing today.

Note

1. In my *An Eye on Race*, I argue that the emphasis on seeing in the Spanish seventeenth century as related to the empirical participated in the epistemology of race that would be adopted in the eighteenth century. Other studies such as David Castillo's *(A)wry Views* argue that the aesthetics of the baroque was one of shape-shifting spectacle in which visual perception was never fixed.

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