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Fábula de polifonía: Harmony and Discord in Góngora's *Polifemo*

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Perhaps the first aspect of Góngora's *Fábula de Polifemo y Galatea* that strikes the reader, once the initial syntactical difficulties of the verses have been overcome, is the poet's tremendous visual virtuosity. One has only to consider the vivid description of Polifemo's appearance in strophes 7 and 8, and the striking evocation of Galatea's face and body in strophes 13 and 14 to understand why Dámaso Alonso stressed the opposing themes of "oscuridad-monstruosidad" (Polifemo) and "luz-belleza" (Galatea) as essential elements of the "claroscuro barroco" with which the work is imbued (73). Given the phantasmagorical abundance of the imagery in this and Góngora's other works, it is not surprising that Octavio Paz should characterize the author of *Polifemo* as a "visual poet" (75).

Yet the dazzling contrasts of images in the poem can easily obscure another pervasive element, perhaps less obvious, but certainly no less crucial: the presence of *sound* and *silence*, not as mere descriptive devices, but as thematic emblems which combine with their visual counterparts to form complex nodes of sensorial impressions laden with meaning. Góngora's imagery has with reason been amply commented upon, but the fact that he employs the aural and visual fields in conjunction has received less attention. It is no doubt significant that seventeenth-century *conceptismo* is often regarded as a "quality of vision" (Mazzeo 54), because metaphors and conceits are frequently based on correspondences between appearance and essence. To ignore the sonorities expressed in Góngora's work, however, would result in a partial and impoverished apprehension of the poet's achievement. Alonso refers to the musical distribution of themes in the work (58), and speaks of the *Polifemo* as "poesía que va hacia música sinfónica" (67); and C. C. Smith calls Góngora's verse "la poesía más musical que se produjo en el Siglo de Oro" (139), pointing out in his admirable study the poet's subtle and elaborate patterns of alliteration and assonance, which confer upon the poem an

exquisite musical unity. These are important observations, but I believe it is essential to go beyond the *formal* musicality of the poem and explore the mythical, *metaphysical* implications of Góngora's evocations of sound and silence, thereby enhancing our appreciation of the dynamic of ideas operating within the world that the poet's words conjure forth.

Just as images of gloom and dark telluric associations serve to evoke Polifemo's abode (strophe 5) and his appearance (strophes 7-8), so likewise are lugubrious and discordant sounds employed. The famous verse "infame turbe de nocturnas aves" (v. 39) is immediately followed by a description of the birds' voices, "gimiendo tristes" (v. 40): Góngora employs the image of a turbulent swarm, repeating the sound *tur- /-tur-*, then describes the sounds issuing from the birds themselves. Thus an image which contains a suggestive aural *form* (v. 39) directly precedes a pair of words pertaining to aural *significance*: image, sound and meaning are thereby bound up in a single metaphorical knot. The evocation of sound at once completes and is inseparable from the image.

This pattern, wherein sound serves to deepen or consummate the effect of the image, can be observed most forcefully in the description of Polifemo's music, in strophe 12. Again Góngora's conjuring of sounds follows a description cast in images: Polifemo's barbaric, even chthonic appearance, which bespeaks disproportion (v. 49), enormity (vv. 53-5), disorder (vv. 59-60), and darkness (vv.57-8). In strophe 12 we have an ironic presentation of Polifemo's *zampoña*, the instrument traditionally associated with the sensitive, enamoured shepherd. But in Polifemo's case this normally simple instrument is enormous, consisting of a hundred pipes, their disproportionate number subtly emphasized:

Cera y cáñamo unió (que no debiera)
cien cañas (vv. 89-90)

With the parenthesis "que no debiera," we are reminded of the unseemly nature of a shepherd's pipe whose reeds so far outnumber the norm: thus Góngora signals, even before describing the "bárbaro ruido" that issues from the pipes (v. 90), that disproportion will prove to be as much a part of the Cyclops' music as it was of his appearance. The effects of his music upon the world, then, come as no surprise: at

the sound of his pipe the forest is thrown into confusion and the sea is disturbed (v. 93); Triton smashes his conch (v. 94); and a ship's crew is deafened, fleeing under sail and with oars manned (v. 95).

The effects of Polifemo's music are to provoke repulsion, tumult, violence: the sounds of his pipe produce a music of discord completely incongruous with the harmony of the spheres that, according to Renaissance cosmology, frame the universe (Tillyard 101). Music is traditionally held to express the inner being: thus Góngora's enumeration of the disturbances resulting from Polifemo's music achieves much more than a mere accretion of detail—it reveals that the Cyclops' outer, physical monstrosity mirrors the disorder and discord within him, offering us an acute contrast with the beneficent, even sacred properties associated with music, especially within the Orphic-Pythagorean tradition.

In fact, if we survey this tradition, it appears quite likely that Góngora intended to present Polifemo as a kind of "anti-Orpheus." Certainly he knew from Books X and XI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that Orpheus was able not only to enchant wild beasts and charm all the denizens of the Underworld with his music, but also that his song induced the trees and rocks to follow him, making the creatures draw near so as to hear the tones of his lyre (Ovid 246). However, one can only speculate as to whether he knew that Orpheus was held to have preached against sacrificial murder at Thebes (Graves I:112), and that Polyphemus, like Baal and Moloch, was the object of a cult that demanded human sacrifice (Graves II:366). In any case, the presentation of Polifemo as manifesting and emanating discord and violence must be viewed against the background of Orpheus as the epitome of harmony, with whom, in contrast to Polifemo, all of nature is in accord because Orpheus himself reflects the harmony of the universe.

In addition to the Orphic tradition, we must consider also that Góngora must have been aware of Pythagoreanism, which was deeply "influenced by the tenets and ritual of the cult of Orpheus" (Nahm 47). I do not mean to imply that Góngora constructed the poem according to rigid Pythagorean doctrines, but rather that the complex of Pythagorean ideas was so pervasive throughout the Renaissance, especially within the poetic tradition, that no intellectual could have gone untouched by their presence. Indeed, their impact on Copernicus' thought, especially through his teacher Domenico de Novara, was

profound (Boorstin 298-9), and in turn Kepler regarded the movements of the heavens as “unceasing polyphony” (Berendt 93).

The fundamental Pythagorean assumption is that the multiplicity of the world is ordered by *harmonia*—proportion between the parts and the whole; the ultimate goal in life is to achieve salvation by understanding and reproducing in oneself the order of the cosmos (Allen 6). This purification of the soul can be attained through music which reflects the cosmic harmony, bringing about the “restoration of the complex harmony of the body” (Nahm 48).

From the foregoing we can see quite clearly that Góngora’s description of Polifemo’s physical monstrosity and his cacophonous music relate to the Pythagorean association between macrocosmic and microcosmic harmony, the Cyclops’ hideousness arising from the fact that his microcosm is in discordant opposition to the macrocosm. In addition to the examples we have observed, Góngora speaks of Polifemo’s “zampoña ruda” (V. 358), and when he is about to begin his song we are told, “el trueno de la voz fulminó” (v. 359). This voice is called “horrenda” as his song is interrupted (v. 465), and just before crushing the fleeing Acis, Polifemo is likened to a storm: “celoso trueno” (v. 486) and “fulminante trompa” (v. 488), giving us a kind of musical variation of the verse that preceded his song (v. 359). Here Góngora masterfully unites form and content, evoking the violent trumpets of a storm while simultaneously employing the musical device of recapitulation.

Perhaps the most fruitful aspect of Pythagoreanism with regard to the *Polifemo* will be disclosed when we pause to distinguish the discordant clusters of sounds associated with the Cyclops from the sounds mentioned or suggested in connection with Galatea and Acis. For the Pythagoreans, “the cosmos is constructed of conflicting elements” (Nahm 51). These contraries are expressed in the Table of Opposites, probably attributable to Pythagoras himself, in which Limit is opposed to the Unlimited, the One to the Many, Right to Left, Male to Female, Rest to Motion, Light to Dark (Allen 9). Now in contrast to Polifemo’s black hair, which is likened to the dark waters of Lethe (vv. 57-8), Galatea is frequently associated with the luminosity of stars (v. 101) and the transparency of crystal (v. 103), and Acis sweats damp sparks and burning pearls (vv. 187-8), his body becoming the “cristal puro” of a river upon his death (v. 496). In parallel fashion, the welter of dissonance arising from Polifemo’s *zampoña* is opposed to the

sonorous crystal of the stream which reflects Galatea (v. 192), and the water lapped by Acis' hands is perceived as "sonorosa plata" (v. 267). Later, when Galatea spies Acis sleeping, the nearby brook produces a "dulce estruendo," its loudness tempered by its sweet tone (v. 267). Their eventual coupling is presided over by doves—birds sacred to Venus—whose "gemidos" contrast with the sad cries of the nocturnal birds that haunt Polifemo's cave (v. 40); the doves assail the lovers' ears not with dolorous sounds but with loud exaltations, their beaks being "trompas de amor" (v. 320). Although loud, the birds' cries are nevertheless harmonious, a *concentus* that symbolizes the lovers' commingling (v. 324). The sonorities of birds are again suggested in Polifemo's song when he likens Galatea to a swan by merely alluding to the bird as "aquel ave que dulce muere y en las aguas mora" (vv. 363-4).

The harmonies of water and birdsong are complemented by another aural element: silence. Beside the "sonoro cristal" of the stream, Galatea is "cristal mudo" (v. 192). When she observes Acis feigning sleep she desires to silence the brook ("el lento arroyo enmudecer querría" [v. 268]); Góngora has also referred to Acis' "retórico silencio"—rhetorical because, although speechless, it is a silence fabricated to persuade, to seduce Galatea (v. 260). In all these instances of silence we must be careful to eschew the temptation to interpret the attribute in modern terms: silence as the opposite of sound, muteness implying mere passivity and powerlessness. In traditional metaphysical terms, the opposite of sound is not silence but noise—chaotic sound such as the "bárbaro ruido" of Polifemo's pipes—whereas silence suggests sacramental receptivity, worship, communion (Van der Leeuw 237-8). "Nothing in the universe is so like God as silence," declared Meister Eckhart (Berendt 72). Harmony arises out of silence and returns to silence: it is therefore not an absence or void but a plenum of potentiality. Thus the silence and muteness of Galatea and Acis are linked to the sonorities of water and birds that accompany them: here, silence is to sound as the translucency of *cristal* is to light. The sounds and silences usually connected with Galatea and Acis are emblems of serenity and concord, and it is out of the lovers' poise and stillness that their communion springs, amidst their silence that the *concentus* of doves is heard. This lies in direct opposition to the modes of darkness, dissonance and violence that attend Polifemo.

These oppositions, between Polifemo on the one hand and Galatea and Acis on the other, are not static, however. Polifemo's discord is to some degree tempered by his love for Galatea, so that in his song his voice becomes "dulce" (v. 384)—a word he has applied just before to the swan (v. 364)—and his instrument becomes capable of calming the fierce sea and the wind (vv. 437-40). Moreover, he is civilized to the point that he offers hospitality to a shipwrecked Genovese (vv. 449-51), instead of hanging the unfortunate wayfarer's skull in his cave, as he was formerly wont to do (vv. 425-32).

If love for Galatea imparts some measure of harmony to Polifemo, it nevertheless has the opposite effect on those who were previously in balance with their world, making the youths of the island abandon their fields and flocks (strophe 21). The disorderly power that Galatea's charms exert over them results in a desertion of civilized practices, which Góngora subtly evokes through sound: instead of the shepherd's whistling and the creaking of his slingshot, the animals hear only the whistling of the wind and the creaking of oak trees (vv. 165-8). This reversion to wildness causes a discordant inversion: the watchdog remains ineffectually mute (v. 169), while the flocks produce a "mísero balido" (v. 171), and are subject to the feral depredations of the wolf (vv. 172-4).

Góngora, then, does not merely establish Polifemo and Galatea as static opposites, but also reveals the dynamic play of opposites within each of them as well as within the spheres they inhabit. Like the Pythagorean Table of Opposites, which indicates "the union of disparate or contrary elements" (Nahm 48), Góngora portrays a world in which light and dark, serenity and violence, beauty and ugliness, euphony and discord coexist, ultimately resolved by *harmonia* into a cosmic cycle of unity and form. In the poem this *harmonia* is achieved by means of a meticulous dynamic counterpoise of dialectical forces which, as we have seen, manifest in a complex of images and sounds that reinforce and intensify one another. We could very well conceive the dynamics operating in the visual and aural spheres, as well as the depictions of Polifemo and Galatea, in terms of Venus and Mars: the union of the goddess of love and the god of war produces the child Harmony which, like the *Tao* of Lao-tzu, serves as an emblem for the unity of opposing fields of force.

It is significant for our understanding of Góngora as a Baroque artist, however, that the resolution of opposing forces does not take

place within the domain of the poem's content, but only at the level of form: only through aesthetic or contemplative distance—not in the vital course of action—can harmony be attained.

Góngora's Baroque, "chiaroscuro" use of dissonances and darkness profoundly alters the sweet harmonies and sunny aspects of preceding Renaissance pastoral forms. Whether or not he had direct knowledge of the Pythagorean Table of Opposites, as a cultured poet, his knowledge of Pythagorean ideas would certainly have extended beyond the exposition contained in Book XV of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It is very unlikely that he could be unaware of the revival all across Europe of Pythagorean Platonism, which was exerting through Copernicus a profound influence on cosmology (French 102). Moreover, he undoubtedly realized that the universal metaphysical principle of the *coincidentia oppositorum* as formulated by Nicolaus of Cusa could, when embodied in verse, produce a richer kind of poetry, one which encompasses violent passion and disharmony while still maintaining, even perfecting, unity of form: a poetry whose complex harmony derives not from an Aristotelian unison of tone but from a Pythagorean synthesis of contraries.

This shift from a Renaissance to a Baroque conception of harmony can also be observed in musical theory, the consequences of which Góngora no doubt could hear, whether he was aware of the debate or not. Gioseffo Zarlino (1517-1590), organist of San Marco and author of *Le istitutione harmoniche* (Venice, 1558), defended the use of dissonances in music by declaring that harmony can only arise from that which is "diverse, discordant and contrary," rather than elements that are "in complete agreement": music which employs discord within an ultimate frame of harmony can thus attain to greater beauty and elegance (Koenigsberger 193). These developments are perhaps most perfectly demonstrated in Claudio Monteverdi's *agitato* style, which is capable of a much greater range of expression than was previously possible.

We have seen how a similar aesthetic is operating in Góngora's work, and it is precisely this torsion of forces, this paradoxical and profound dynamism with respect to life and art, that confers upon Baroque art—of which Góngora was without doubt one of the most superb practitioners—its enduring fascination and difficult delights.

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