interview/Severo Sarduy

Severo Sarduy is a young Cuban writer (b. 1936) established in Paris, where he is director of the Latin American collection of Editions du Seuil. He began his literary career as a poet in pre–revolutionary Cuba. After the Revolution, in 1959–60, he was part of the team of writers who published *Lunes de Revolución,* an active literary weekly directed by the novelist Guillermo Cabrera Infante. At the end of 1960, a grant from the government sent Sarduy to Paris to study art history at the Ecole du Louvre. He has been in Paris since, where, after completing his studies, he joined two influential literary groups: the one formed around *Mundo Nuevo,* a monthly literary journal directed by Emir Rodríguez Monegal and the *Tel Quel* group. He had published two novels, *Gestos* (1963) and *De donde son los cantantes* (1967), and one book of critical essays, *Escrito sobre un cuerpo* (1969). These last two books, as well as his third novel *Cobra* (to appear this spring in Spanish; fragments have already appeared in *Tel Quel* translated by Philippe Sollers), show the influence of the structuralist *Tel Quel* group, which will be evident also in his answers in the following interview. Aside from his work as a novelist and playwright, Sarduy has served as intellectual bridge between the French literary theoreticians and the Latin American intellectual community.

Roberto González Echevarría: Severo, I know that you're preparing a lengthy essay on the Spanish–American baroque for a UNESCO book edited by the Peruvian critic, Julio Ortega. In addition, your interest in the works of Góngora and Lezama Lima

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qualify you as an expert in the baroque of the seventeenth century as well as in that of the contemporary period. I'd like you to speak first of Góngora, and then proceed to the baroque of Lezama Lima and of course, that of your own works.

Severo Sarduy: Góngora was born in 1561 and died in 1627. If I remember correctly, he wrote the first *Soledad* in 1612, the year in which he also wrote *Polifemo*. I am not the least bit interested in making a kind of literary and historical parallel with what happened in that period. I mean, as an example, all the biographers of Góngora point out that in 1604 peace was made in London, and the second part of the *Guzmán de Alfarache* was published. Or they can say that in 1609 the *moriscos* were expelled and there appeared, as well, Quevedo's translation of Anacreon, and Quevedo's polemic with Góngora was begun. What the biographers point out is a visible parallel, a visible synchrony with what happened in that moment. I am more interested in establishing a kind of table—and I would give the word "table" the meaning which it has in French when one speaks of a *table de correspondances;* that is, an interplay of different signs that correspond among themselves—establishing a table of the underlying elements that reverberate in the wording of the *Soledades,* and which are not marked by visible historical events. For example, we can keep in mind the following: What is the *episteme* which the baroque makes explicit and puts into practice? There is a factor which seems to me to be essential, which undoubtedly Eugenio d'Ors, the precursor of all that we can mention in this sense, foresaw: in this age which we have just situated, Kepler discovered that the rotation of the planets around the sun is not circular, as was believed and as Galileo continued to affirm for primarily esthetic reasons, but *elliptical*—I underline, obviously, the word "elliptical." At the same time, if I remember correctly, it was Harvey who discovered that the circulation of the blood traces a kind of ellipse around the heart. I should also add another thing to this *dossier:* the canonical structure of the Church was decentralized; in place of a central aisle leading the worshiper from the entrance to the high altar, it took the form of a building without specific entrances and exits, and whose plan was opened, just as the urbanism of the baroque city was opened. In other words, the baroque city was no longer a center around the cathedral, around the dome, but rather a decentralized organization—"polysemous" shall we say—with various comings and goings, with various interior sections. Thus we see here that there exists a kind of underlying battle—which interests me much more than those battles and those treaties that the biographers point out—between two forms characteristic of our western civilization: the circle and the ellipse. This struggle of circle and ellipse has various manifestations; it is fought in several fields. In painting, it is apparent for example, how in the works of Raphael, a circular structure continued to prevail. However, already in Pierre de Cortona, the central circle breaks apart and everything is organized into a kind of ellipse that defines the baroque, of which Cortona is perhaps the most characteristic Italian painter. Thus we see how in painting the circle and the ellipse confront each other. I believe that, forcing things a little, we could say that the figures in Guadalupe which carry on a dialogue in the paintings of Zurbarán can also be inscribed within a circle, while those of El Greco can not.

RGE: And how do you extend these ideas to literature?

SS: The area to which I am most interested in extending these ideas is, obviously, literature. In Góngora, as in all of the baroque, the ellipse is the essential support, and the rhetorical ellipse here corresponds, metaphorically I think, to the geometric ellipse. This is not by chance. In the Gongorine ellipse, in the baroque ellipse, there are two centers: the suppressed term and the "suppressing" term. In an ellipse, there is always a term which is hidden, censured; and one which blossoms from the textural surface to serve as a *cachette* or a mask for the other. Instead of saying "Strait of Magellan," we would say, "the hinge, the narrow embracer of one ocean and another, etc." We know perfectly well that certain animal names are censured in Gongorine rhetoric, that one can not speak of hens, and so forth. We know that there is a series of pre-established *topoi,* so that one term may be censured and the other apparent one may cover it. In a Lacanian sense we can say that what Góngora shows is precisely what he hides from us. In other words, that which he shows, as in the metaphor that supports all of the Lacanian psychoanalysis, is that which never ceases to hide something. The Gongorine ellipse, in short then, functions as a table of events which are never historical, which can never be dated, but which constitute the epistemology underlying all the mechanisms of the baroque; which is to say, the struggle between Galileo and Kepler, between Raphael and Cortona, between Zurbarán and El Greco, between the "divine" Herrera and Góngora.

RGE: Let's move on to contemporary literature, or rather to the present baroque of Lezama Lima and Severo Sarduy.

SS: We're going to begin exactly as we did with regard to the Spanish baroque of the seventeenth century—with cosmology. Which is to say, what does contemporary cosmology teach us? The latest theories are supported by data obtained not through instruments of observation but through radio, using high frequency waves. These waves have allowed us to construct a cosmological theory which is almost sure, to the extent that one can speak of cosmology beyond hypotheses. The universe is presently in expansion—this theory is called, precisely, the theory of the expanding universe. This expansion, which has verified that celestial bodies constantly distance themselves from each other, proves that at a certain moment—and to which undoubtedly corresponds the notice which heads the second part of *Enana Blanca* in *Cobra*—there was an explosion of a quasar, and this explosion gave origin to the universe such as we know it, which brings us to the following: the center of the universe is empty; it is a polyvalent and movable center. This theory of the empty center, this topology of the empty center, is going to reverberate in literature exactly as the theory of the ellipse resounded at a certain moment in the structure of the Gongorine metaphor. To wit: I believe

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that the textuality consistent with this theory is precisely one which stipulates an empty center. In other words, the censured word is going to form here that empty center; it will not exist any more, but its pulverizations at various levels will be legible in the textual surface, in that which Julia Kristeva calls the "phenotext," as opposed to the "genotext." The genotext is movable, plural, empty; the phenotext—that is, the visible, legible surface of the text—will, by means of a radial reading, make room for this word, this paragram which has been censured, eliminated. Here I will allow myself to give an example of radial reading found in *Cobra,* by means of the censured or suppressed paragram "morphine" at which one arrives through a series of signs that participate on different levels; on a phonetic level, when instead of "morphine" allusion is made to "Morpheus," to "morphologically," to "white morpheus" which is a cattle disease, etc. On the level of meaning, reference is made to a series of images of whiteness such as "snow," and an another level, to "horse," which, in slang, is another way of saying "morphine," etc. Thus one can read on various levels these signs which lead to a center which is no longer there, which is already missing.

RGE: I would like you to clarify a little more the difference between paragram and radial reading.

SS: Radial reading is the process which can lead us, in this case, to a negative and absent paragram. In other words, the basic model, that which generates the visible text, the phenotext, is no longer there; it is missing. We could say, in a very Heideggerian sense certainly, that it shines by its absence.

RGE: But then, should the reader of that paragraph in *Cobra* to which you were alluding—should he be able to recover the genotext?

SS: No, no, his reading would be innocent.

RGE: Then if the reading of such text were not innocent, it would not be considered a "good reading"?

SS: I think it would be as if the seventeenth century reader had to recognize the zodiacal allusions Góngora makes in the first *Soledad* in order to know that he was speaking about the month of April. I think that the reader of the age generally read very naïvely. *Cobra* is full of such traps, some of which are for my friends, some for you as you know, some for Roland [Barthes], some for François [Wahl], and others strictly for me which no one knows. In other words, there is a series of formal secret mechanisms. Let me use a canonical example of this devotion: the sculptures of the Parthenon, situated at a great height on the metope of the pediment, and not visible except frontally or from below, are also minutely sculptured from behind. The craftsman who created them dedicated this work to the gods. That work, although not to be contemplated by men, had to be perfect. These "secrets of construction" were dedicated to God. In this sense, in the humble as well as minute composition of *Cobra,* there are many "secrets of construction"; the manuscript which in Benares I offered to the Ganges for example, was the object of great care.

RGE: Then an innocent, naïve reading is for those who have said that you alone understand *De donde son los cantantes.*

SS: In other words, the reading, with all of the mechanics to which we refer, is not accessible to everyone. I think it's evident that there are degrees of perception in all readings. That which interests me is to see how the whole *episteme* of his age is reflected in the practice of writing of each author. I repeat that I am not the least bit interested in lists of contemporary occurrences which point out to the author, for example, that there was a reform of customs and a high sense of authority in the year 1623, when Góngora received a pension of 400 *ducados*!

RGE: This brings us to a theme to which you have alluded in several of your works: the expulsion of the author, or the negation of a unique, individual emissive center.

SS: Well, perhaps this stems in part from an observation by Philippe Sollers with regard to the absence of the author. Through a series of motives of an ideological nature, in Sollers the interesting thing is precisely the censure of that type of emissive center of the text which is the author, and which is, specifically, the Romantic author. Romanticism supposes—and this conception has been handed down to our age through a series of persistent prejudices—that there is a single, omnipotent emitter of the text, and that the text is an expressive entity which stems from a center and which is decoded by another center: the reader. Even in Sartre, the idea of language as practical–inert stems from this conception, since the author would be someone who uses that practical–inert entity to express something that is his own psychology, etc.

RGE: This is what you parody in *De donde son los cantantes,* when you appear in the novel . . .

SS: As author . . .

RGE: Yes, and later in *Cobra,* when you appear and threaten a character with exclusion from the chapter which you are writing.

SS: In other words, that which is being formulated there exactly is that there is no author. And why is there no author? Because if we carry our ideology to its ultimate consequences, we will know that there are no proprietors of language . . . Plagiarism, as Lautréamont proposed, is not only admissible, but advisable besides. One must totally suppress the idea of a central emitter of the voice.

RGE: But getting back to the expulsion of the author, how is it effected, how can we nullify him?

SS: This idea of eliminating the author, of expelling him, can be realized by means of two practices. One of these practices is very obvious: the ultra–baroque. In other words, when we arrive, for example, at the temple of Kajuraho, that enormous Indian pyramid of copulating figures; or when we arrive at the temple of Konarak or Mahabzli–Puram or to Kanchi Puram, or to any of the great places of Indian architecture (also in this context: the window of Tomar, of Alcobaça, and of Batalha; as well as certain South American colonial architecture—the works of the Indian Condori, or the works of the authors of the Sacrarium of Mexico, the works of the Aleijandihno in Minas Gerais . . .) All of these works have no author . . . the baroque proliferation is so extreme that this type of bubbling up of the signifiers expels all personal ideology, all psychology. There is no author because the *horror*

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vacui eliminates any central emitter. In this sense I believe that all the works which I have just mentioned have no author. I believe that here that which is manifest is a grammar in proliferation; an exacerbated code which devours everything. The chapels "by" Churriguera in the cathedral at Burgos have no author. Gongorine literature, the literature of the extreme baroque, expels this omnipotent entity of which we were speaking.

The second possibility is that which has already been practiced in the United States by the sculptors of the school of "minimal art." For example, Bob Morris, Donald Judd, John McCracken, Larry Bell, Sol Lewitt, etc. And perhaps preceding these sculptors, the painter Barnett Newman. What do these sculptures of minimal art—or, as has been said, of primary structures—teach us? In the case of Barnett Newman, monochrome panels. In the case of the others, simple cubes, cylinders—in other words, pure geometric forms. These painters and sculptors, by reducing themselves to primary structures, that is, to the structures which engender all other possible forms in space, and by radically eliminating all expression, eliminate the author as well.

RGE: Thus it is the opposite of what you mentioned before about the ultra–baroque.

SS: Yes, the opposite of what I had said. In this sense, I think that a painting of Barnett Newman also has no author. Showing a blue monochrome panel is precisely bringing us to that point of non–reducibility of expression.

RGE: Is this what you have tried to do in *La playa?*

SS: La playa, my dramatic piece whose subtitle is precisely *Primary Structures,* claims to do nothing other than show primary grammatical structures. There is practically no plot, and no development, since it is a fixed theater, and as it was represented in Kassel, there are no entrances or exits of characters, nor any movement. It is like a staged photograph. The sentences—*et pour cause*—are extremely simple, and they do not allow one to "see" or rather to hear more than the essential articulations of the composition of the sentence. The mechanics of this play consist of showing the support which from a subject leads to a predicate and to a direct object. As in the cube of Larry Bell, that which one sees is the essential support of all possible bodies in space. That is the second practice of the expulsion of the author; the first by hypergraphy, the second by the reduction of the support to the primary structure.

RGE: You say that there is no plot in *La playa;* however, you told me that . . .

SS: Of course, there is a kind of plot, shall we say, *grosso modo,* which can explain to a certain extent the acceptance of the play in Germany. It deals, putting between quotation marks the work "deals," with the story of a German gigolo in Cannes. The gigolo, as hero of the play, has business in the south of France with whatever people he meets, which gives rise to a whole series of possibilities of combination, and of sexual combination [. . .] but anyway, this is relatively marginal.

RGE: Why also the subtitle *Sequences?*

SS: It is called *Sequences* simply because it stems in a sense from a play by Luciano Berio called *Sequences.*

RGE: But "sequence" indicates "progression," doesn't it?

SS: It really refers to the strongest etymological meaning of the word "sequence," as the *Littré* defines it, and as was subject of an essay by François Wahl which you will probably read when the play comes out in print. Sequence is precisely the combining of various cards of the same suit in the deck.

RGE: Getting back to the baroque, I know you have on other occasions expressed some ideas about the morality of the baroque, especially in relation to eroticism, which is one of the preferred themes of your work—of creative work as well as of your critical work. What is the morality of the baroque, and to what extent is it manifested in the proliferation of signifiers of which you spoke earlier?

SS: A morality of squandering, of waste. We should start off with the idea of baroque as waste and over–abundance of signifiers, as totally saturated information. The baroque is precisely the squandering of signifiers, or "media," and from there, I believe arises the censure of a moral order of which the baroque has been victim in civilizations as puritanical as the French. In France there has never been a perfect expression of the baroque. Remember the censure, and carrying things to their extreme, the expulsion in France of Bernini, whose project for the façade of the Louvre was rejected. I would say—exaggerating a bit—that neither in French architecture nor in painting is there a perfect baroque as there is in Italy or in Spain or in Germany.

RGE: And with regard to eroticism?

SS: Eroticism, like the baroque, is a squandering, because eroticism is a game which carries with it no "information." Eroticism is not in function with reproduction, but with excess, with play. The erotic man is the *homo ludens,* not the man who reproduces. Eroticism then responds to a baroque phenomenon of waste, of loss.

RGE: Then Don Juan would be the typical case, wouldn't he?

SS: Of course, Don Juan is the typical case, although Ives Bonnefoy, in his recent book *Roma 1630,* which won this year's prize for criticism and which is precisely about the baroque, says that Don Juan is not a baroque character since he doesn't fulfill to satiety a total adherence to the object, that he assumes the category of absolute in the baroque expenditure; a *hic et nunc* which for him is the condition of the baroque and which—and I continue to paraphrase Bonnefoy—Bernini exemplifies in the dais of San Marcos.

RGE: I haven't read Bonnefoy's book, but from what you tell me, I doubt that I could agree with him about Don Juan.

SS: Anyway, that which I find interesting to note is that eroticism has been censored for the same reason that the baroque was censored. In other words because they are not functional, because they do not carry with them a mass of information, of utility. Genetic information is the penetration of the spermatazoid into the egg. Eroticism opposes this carrying of information. The baroque sentence does not lead us to a pure and simple meaning, but rather, through a series of ellipses, of zig–zags, of *détours,*

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carries with it only a floating signifier—empty and polyvalent.

RGE: And how can we apply these observations to the case of present–day Cuba?

SS: That which is happening in Cuba could be called a type of psychoanalysis of the Hispanic. The catharsis which is there being effected is that of all the repressed censures during the centuries beginning with the Inquisition.

RGE: But then, how can the work of Lezama Lima be explained within that context?

SS: Lezama is precisely the reverse of the Torquemadesque coin, since he attacks the censure on two of its levels, on two levels of waste: on the level of the erotic—and I cite obviously the Farraluque episode in *Paradiso*—and on that of the baroque. In this sense, he has dealt a blow to the censure on an exterior level—thematic—but also on a profound level—structural, syntactic, in the immense metaphorical squandering of *Paradiso*.

RGE: Yes, and in the case of Carpentier?

SS: It would be very difficult to speak of Carpentier. I wish to revise to a certain extent my thesis on Carpentier. I don't believe Carpentier is baroque in the sense which I have just given to this word.

RGE: I don't agree with you on that.

SS: I believe that he deals with a type of very learned and proliferous organization, but one which doesn't imply semantic waste. I don't think there is this squandering of information in Carpentier. But, I have to work much more with this author. It certainly interests me to contradict his ideology of the baroque. For Carpentier—and he mentions it explicitly in the interview we read today at home—the baroque is a kind of metaphor of nature. He considers, as did d'Ors in *Lo barroco,* that the baroque mechanism is a natural metaphor. D'Ors says that there is nothing more baroque than a Portuguese park at noon; he speaks of the natural, Adamic state of the baroque; he formulates a paradisiacal state of genesis, a natural primogenial state. And Carpentier says that the Amazon River, the uncontrollable vegetal proliferation of America inevitably had to lead us to the baroque. I don't think that the thesis of the justification of the baroque by natural analogy is as convincing as that of its justification by textual metaphor.

RGE: I agree, but, as Emir Rodríguez Monegal has pointed out, there is a great difference between Carpentier as theorist and Carpenter as novelist.

SS: Of course, of course [. . .]

RGE: I would say that in his novels, Carpentier is baroque almost in spite of—or perhaps in opposition to—that which he himself has stated in his book of essays, *Tientos y diferencias.*

SS: Well, in that case, yes, but I am using as a point of departure his explicit ideology, that which he has stated: his conception of the baroque is totally "d'Orsian." In this case I am putting into practice the basic structuralist opposition between *nature* and *culture*. I believe that the baroque is nothing other than a metonymy of cultural order, not a metaphor of natural disorder. It interests me more that the base be intertextual. Why? Because the intertextual base permits the conveying of an idea which seems to me essential in the baroque: the idea of "grafting."

RGE: Yes, but you know that in *Los pasos perdidos,* Carpentier grafts from colonial texts and at times, as I told you this morning, from little–known ethnographic texts as well.

SS: Yes, I know. I believe that precisely in this case I agree to the extent that the baroque can be interpreted as a cultural metaphor. I cite the façades of colonial architecture to which I alluded, where we see that the elements of the Icaic art, pre–Cortés in general, have been grafted onto an architectural structure of Hispanic origin. In literature, of course, the quotation, plagiarism, reference, and reminiscence would correspond to this type of grafting. But I am still of the idea that the baroque is a phenomenon of intertextuality precisely because the intertextuality allows me to bring into function another element—to my judgment an essential one: the element of parody, very visible in Lezama and scarcely visible at all, excuse me, in Carpentier.

RGE: I agree.

SS: I believe there can be no baroque without parody.

RGE: Without doubt, parody is the missing element in Carpentier.

SS: There is no baroque without parody; parody is a distancing, grafting, and as we have already seen—and you alluded today to Calderón's *Life is a Dream* —the baroque stems from an image which contradicts itself, which hollows itself out. The baroque is the blind spot of the king.

(Translated by Jane E. French)

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