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Perverse Currency

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‘Sometimes I think I am the sum of my losses,’ Caroline finally said. ‘And if so, then every loss I suffer enlarges me.’

—Neal Stephenson, *The System of the World* (369)

The climax of Neal Stephenson’s final volume of *The Baroque Cycle* juxtaposes two quite different *exempla* of “currency.” On one fold, we encounter the ritualistic half-hanging, drawing, and quartering of Half-Cocked Jack Shaftoe, The King of the Vagabonds, a picaroon whose attempts to corrupt the value of the British guinea result in his trial and execution. On the other, is a “Trial of the Pyx”; more on Pyx in a moment. As Jack’s procession makes its way to the gallows, through a massive and festive “Mobb,” he systematically gives away all of his expensive clothing and rich accoutrements, donated to him by an anonymous “friend.” This calculated placing of the symbols of his public persona into circulation culminates with his taking communion, for the first time in his eventful life. Although he was not planning to be moved by the ceremony, he finds that “there is a powerful point to that rite, and he reckons it has something to do with a joining together, a sharing with everyone else who’s ever accepted payment in that coinage, God’s Legal Tender” (Stephenson 852). The end product of the conversion of his persona into currency is the Mobb’s consumption and appropriation of it, to the extent where the anonymous *vulgo* overpowers Jack Ketch and his retinue of royal guards, takes Shaftoe down from the gallows, as he apparently expires, and places his body into recirculation beyond the reach of the authorities, until he disappears into the

horizon. The messianic and carnivalesque tones of this scene are hard to miss (Bakhtin).

Meanwhile, in the Star Chamber at Westminster Palace, a very different trial is set to determine the fate of none other than Isaac Newton, the Master of the Mint and responsible party for maintaining the purity of English coinage and, therefore, the integrity of British commerce. The Pyx is a strongbox into which the Master places sealed and dated samples of English coins, which can be assayed during a Trial of the Pyx in order to provide both a history of the metallic composition of the coinage and a guarantee of the purity of the same. In an age in which currencies are constantly changing and subjected to repeated false reproductions, the Trial of the Pyx aspires to set English currency apart from its European competitors and attract all the world's gold to London, where its value can be empirically, i.e., scientifically, determined and safeguarded. What is curious about Stephenson's dramatization of the Trial of the Pyx is that its ritualistic, highly public, and thus spectacle nature is exploited to the extreme by Newton's partisans. What should be a straightforward demonstration of the objective metallic content of the coins is converted into a sleight-of-hand spectacle that produces an impossible yet plausible result: coins that are 100 percent gold. Shaftoe's counterfeit coins, which he had surreptitiously placed in the Pyx, are chopped up and "confused" with Newton's fakes, producing a pure, but false, result. In the process, the social alchemy of ritual practices is masterfully depicted (see Bell).

The manipulation of currency and its value, monetary or political, is a modern commonplace, but Stephenson's placement of this particular element of modernity at the climactic moment of his tour-de-force narration of the emergence of modern science, commerce, geopolitics, and identity underlines the complexity and contradictions of modern paradigms of scientific thought, especially as they pertain to questions of identity and self-determination, two of the central concerns of Justin Butler's provocative essay. For although Butler's point of departure concerns the way in which Gracián's writings describe "a process of a subject in circulation within the halls of power [through which] power is accrued" (6), subsequent arguments seek to circumscribe points at which this circulation might become anchored, thus creating links between appearances and experience, objects and their linguistic signs, subjects and their identities. More specifically, Butler takes issue with William Egginton's notion of a *minor* aesthetic strategy, one capable of destabilizing the relationship posited between appearances and a *real* meaning or reality ostensibly referred to by what Egginton calls the *major strategy*. As I observe, "For Egginton, Góngora's *minor strategy* of poetic expression captures the 'essentially metaphorical nature of the real itself,' thus turning the *major strategy*'s insistence on the existence of a more substantial reality behind the appearances back towards the reality of the appearances themselves" (297). Butler exemplifies this

movement in economic terms by underlining how Marx arrives at a similar observation concerning the circulation of capital. Even though capital is a social process in its entirety, Marx astutely observes that “the totality of the process appears as an objective interrelation, which arises spontaneously from nature” (qtd. in Butler, 16). Thus, even though the value of the commodity is ever in flux, the distinction between this value and the materiality of the commodity creates the (false) impression that there is something objectively real about the process that determines said value.

Notwithstanding Marx’s critique, the arbitrary nature of the relationship between the commodity and its value, or signs and meaning, is taken by Butler to be a weakness in Egginton’s notion of a minor aesthetic strategy: “If we can show that indeed the word *partakes* of its object, of the thing it is said to represent, rather than merely representing it, can we not then begin to construe a poetic language in which the difficulties of reality are highlighted not for the emptiness that undergirds them, but precisely for their fullness?” (21). If I read this correctly, what Butler seems to call for here is a repositioning of the pull that the *major strategy* seeks to exert on the subject through the appearances/real distinction, an attraction that Baroque writers like Gracián, Góngora, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz resist by calling all discourses “ficciones” (fictions). In Stephenson’s opus, this is the same flow that the Trial of the Pyx attempts to anchor through the refiner’s purifying fire. What actually happens during the Trial, however, is that the exaggerated impurities in the coins in the violated Pyx are counteracted through a bit of prestidigitation by the addition of so-called “heavy” or “Solomonic” gold.

According to Stephenson’s complex weave of scientific, economic, and political intrigues, the entry of this heavy gold into the coinage alters the essential being of the mundane mix of pure gold and base metals, according to three possible scenarios, or Natural Philosophies. According to Newton, an alchemist, Solomonic gold is heavier because it contains minute quantities of “philosophic mercury,” or the philosopher’s stone, a sign of God’s creative force in the world. For Wilhelm Gottfried Leibniz, Newton’s philosophical adversary, the quantum-sized “monads” that make up the heavy gold perceive and interact with the quantum-sized monads in the regular gold and base metals, creating a new set of relationships: all as a result of God’s infinite plan. Finally, according to the pitilessly mechanical dynamics of Daniel Waterhouse, proto-atheist and fictional founder of the Massachusetts Bay Colony Institute of Tecknological [sic] Arts, “it is all pistons and cylinders, weights and springs, to the very top” (Stephenson 682). The question left unresolved by all three philosophers concerns whether the “pattern of relationships that coheres in space and time,” i.e., identity, “is added or inherent” (Stephenson 84), which bears directly on Butler’s question as well as on the problem of free will. In the cases of Newton and Leibniz, the overwhelming presence of God’s will, either in the

philosophic mercury (added) or quantum monadic structures (inherent), would seem to overwhelm any human aspirations to self-determination. In the case of Waterhouse's mechanical philosophy, the necessity of obeying mechanical laws arrives at a similar predicament. Nevertheless, if we take a closer look at Shaftoe's and Newton's seemingly miraculous transformations of currency, it appears that the way out of the conundrum is located in the ways in which circulations are ingeniously altered, or channeled, rather than anchored.

Both Stephenson and Gracián locate the "divine spark," or internal "organizing mechanism," in a place that seems hard to pin down. In the case of Shaftoe, his self-diagnosed "Imp of the Perverse" is made responsible for Jack's dizzying reversals of fortune, both triumphant and humiliating. Unpredictable, uncontrollable, and seemingly foreign yet necessary to Jack's identity, the Imp of the Perverse is both a symptom of self-alienation and an inalienable character trait-flaw of the infamous picaroon. The Imp shows up in (un)timely constellations of players and events and forces Jack's hand one way, or the other. What José Antonio Maravall might call a "dynamic guidance through activity" both escapes Jack's control and, paradoxically, lends his identity a precarious unity. Maravall, of course, is referring to the conscious and unconscious ways in which guided culture acts on the Baroque subject (*The Culture of the Baroque*), while Stephenson's Imp is a more personal mechanism; nevertheless, the implications for the question of free will are not dissimilar. In like manner, the most precise definition of the *ingenio* that Gracián formulates hinges on the demented nature of the greatest thinkers. For example, Seneca appears in *El Criticón*, declaring that "no hay entendimiento grande sin vena" (II, 13.526) (there is no understanding without inspiration). Santos Alonso clarifies Gracián's meaning by noting, "Vena de loco, se entiende" (526n39) (A mad fancy, it is understood). In *Agudeza y arte de ingenio*, Gracián's mapping of ingenious madness emphasizes that the *ingenio* never coincides with itself; it is always other to its affect, its will, and its passions; in the end, "it misrecognizes itself." Even its greatest powers are on loan from another faculty: judgment. In other words, Gracián's thought concerning identity and free will would seem to leave both Newton and Leibniz far behind, but not by theorizing a fullness of being, or by anchoring linguistic or courtly currency in any substantive attachment between words and things, or representations and experience.

According to the Counter Reformation ideology of *desengaño*, "the human condition is . . . constitutively finite, condemned by and limited to its temporal-corporeal nothingness: in essence, its fallen condition is translated into insuperable ontological and epistemological limitations" (Nelson, *Persistence* 169). In Augustinian fashion, there is no way to access "true" knowledge through the imperfect and moribund channels of the five senses. Nevertheless, in *The Persistence of Presence*, I argue that Gracián augments

the power and efficaciousness of his apparatus of self-actualization by seeing man's temporal limitations as a source of immanent validity and power. For Gracián, currency (and *caudal*) becomes a derivative of temporally conditioned, carefully calculated vectors of apparent meanings and fleeting truths. And this is what makes his philosophy modern, as man's lack of access to transcendental truths forces him to develop what comes to be called a "middle science."

This notion of a *middle science* is engineered by Jesuit theologians as a means for navigating the impasse erected by neo-Scholastic notions of grace and free will. Working at the University of Salamanca in the 1580s, Luis de Molina offers the notion of God's *scientia media* as a way to allow for the possibility of God's grace being influenced by the actions, i.e., free will, of human subjects. Rivka Feldhay writes that, "according to Molina, God, before every act of grace, can discern by means of his 'middle science,' those individuals who are able to cooperate with him, through the exercise of their free will. It is this divine 'science' of man's future actions which finally guides the choice of grace imparted to the elect" (174). Working at approximately the same time, at the Jesuit Collegio Romano in Rome, the mathematician Christopher Clavius introduces this term into debates concerning the status of mathematical astronomy in explanations of physical causality. Traditionally, mathematical signs and equations were understood to provide "hypothetical" descriptions rather than substantive explanations of the real causes of astronomical phenomena. Aquinas classified them as *scientia media*, since they are applied to phenomena after the fact (*ex suppositione*) and thus open to infinite re-articulation and manipulation. By uprooting the Thomist concept of "middle science," Molina suggests that God's foreknowledge of man's future actions is likewise hypothetical, which sparks a half-century-long theological dispute between Jesuits and Dominicans (see Feldhay). This institutional conflict eventually culminates in the trial of Galileo. For my part, I want to emphasize the way in which the hypothetical nature of "middle science" is eventually understood to be a strength, rather than a weakness, of scientific thought. Since astronomical phenomena cannot be understood, or predicted, without mathematical formulas, this new language becomes charged with a reality that is both alien and necessary to the quickly evolving relationship between knowledge and experience. As Stephenson makes clear in *The Baroque Cycle*, alterations in mathematical formulas change our relationship with experience and its meaning. What Góngora, Gracián, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz make apparent is that the reality of poetic, aphoristic, or scientific discourses makes our relationship to the world, our experiences in it, and their meaning a function of aesthetic control (see Cascardi). Free will is not located in the existence of some sort of "heavy gold" in our coinage; rather, the lack of anything substantive in our currency is what allows us to multiply and alter

our circulation through diverse and simultaneous flows of value and meaning and, thereby, multiply and alter the flows themselves.

Butler does well to renew Gracián's currency in our contemporary, media-saturated moment. After all, when scientific "givens" such as the evolution of species and climate change become political choices or beliefs, rather than dependable tenets of scientific knowledge, it is clear that Gracián's models are more relevant than ever. But rather than look beyond the appearances or signs, I believe we need to embrace the radical nature of Gracián's lessons. To wit, it would behoove liberal thinkers and politicians alike to consider more seriously the importance of aesthetic representations and their attendant rituals of social control. I am not advocating for the imitation of ritualistic fabrications of "news," as practiced by Fox News and its retinue of commentators; nor the indiscriminate use of dehumanizing fear tactics. But I do believe that we need to take heed of the effectiveness with which conservative forces have appropriated the aesthetic mechanisms and rituals at the heart of the spectator's relationship with reality and experience. If McLuhan is correct, then the objective cannot be stronger links between media and reality, since media is reality. As Egginton points out, the positing of a distinction between appearances and some reality beyond is itself the main tool of the major strategy. Thus, in addition to using the minor strategy to attack the illusions of the major strategy, we might use the media to alter the flows of information in such a way that political tides are influenced, and the value of political currency affected. Indeed, we are already seeing how a politically engaged use of so-called social media can mobilize heretofore repressed political forces. And if this sounds like science fiction, then I am moving in the right direction.

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