

# *Introduction*

## INTRODUCTION

It is indeed difficult to fully explain any cultural movement. My aim in this particular thesis is to try to define and clarify the movement which has been termed as the Baroque in Western Europe from the latter half of the sixteenth century to the 1750s. The Baroque mode manifested itself at many stages and influenced literature and the arts in various ways.

There are varied and overlapping definitions of the term 'Baroque'. To some it is a mode of European painting; to some others a particular style of architecture; and others view it as a distinct cultural phenomenon which is most remarkably seen in the fine and applied arts. Some go even further to suggest that the Baroque means an attitude to life which flourished after the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, and found expression in the literature, music and painting of this period. However, in countries like Italy and Spain, Austria and Germany where the influence was very strong, the Baroque is rated highly and some of the finest and most representative works of the seventeenth century are termed as Baroque. This is not so in England and in France where there was an ingrained and understandable reluctance to accept the term. Here the term has a pejorative meaning. It was felt in these countries that this term is more suitable to describe foreign achievement than their own. Protestant countries, too, share this reluctance, and consider the Baroque as purely Roman Catholic.

The rise of two significant factors in Christian Europe was chiefly responsible for the Baroque's emergence. These were the concept of absolute monarchy and the idea of the theatrical stage. When absolutism and the theatre came together in the royal command performance in the seventeenth century palaces, the Baroque was much in evidence. This was, however, not so in the Roman Catholic Church. I have, therefore, concentrated on the importance of drama, royal prestige and the spiritual values in this thesis on Europe's Baroque culture.

The decade on either side of 1660 saw the climax of the Baroque in Europe. It was a cultural movement which formed a cultural pattern extending from the 1620s to the early eighteenth century. My main focus is on literature because it articulates the notions embodied in the music, art, architecture and painting of the times. The chapters are arranged in order to concentrate on the various interdependent facets of baroque culture in relation to literature. Literature is written to be read by those who actively or passively create the tastes and fashions of a period, particularly the playwrights and theatre-goers of the Baroque period. Success, applause, and an appreciative public: stage plays need these far more than painting and poetry. The drama therefore can help us to recreate and somewhat recapture the atmosphere and spirit of Baroque Europe.

The chapters in this thesis focus on six areas where the Baroque mode expressed itself most successfully. Each chapter depicts a separate exploration and elaboration of different interdependent facets of a vast and complicated subject - the Baroque.

I would like to mention that I have attempted to trace movements in drama and poetry, and have tried to connect them with parallel movements in the fine arts, more specifically with the music, painting and architecture of the period. I have also tried to demonstrate how in the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries, the Baroque mode is manifested a) similarly; and b) differently in the poetry, drama, music and the fine arts. Consequently, this has led to a discussion on how two generations of writers and artists handle the Baroque mode. Finally, since the dramatic element is the chief characteristic of the period, I have tried to find a relation between the Opera, Oratorio and Cantata and the formal structures of English poetry (for example, the epic and the ode) and English drama and other dramatic productions (for example, the masque) of the Baroque period.

During the seventeenth century, elite and popular culture benefited from enough cross fertilization to make rigid classification between the two difficult. In an age where more than half the population of Europe was still illiterate,

visual and musical imagery were of enormous significance in many contexts and at different levels of society. A perfect vehicle for such cross-cultural communication was the new artistic trend of the seventeenth century, described by the term "Baroque" - involving as it does, according to commonly accepted definitions, a considerable element of the theatrical, of subjective emotional expression, and of deliberate antithesis; between marble and the human body, between architecture and the freedom of fluid space, between sexual and divine ecstasy, or between harmony and the dramatic musical expression of a single voice. In all these forms, the aim of the Baroque writer and artist was to involve the observer or audience directly in what was being represented. Artistic patronage had perhaps always to some extent been a vehicle for status - and value-oriented publicity amongst the well-off not least in late medieval times and the sixteenth century. Because of its inherent qualities the Baroque lent itself particularly well to the role of active and dramatic transmitter of new values - values which, it seems were on the whole those both of patron and artist. This thesis will therefore attempt to highlight the spirit and the consciousness of the age, and will at the same time try to analyse the period in terms of the literature and the arts. Some areas of Europe that might reasonably have deserved more prominent treatment are only covered in passing. However, the point of the thesis is not to attempt total coverage, but instead to spell out some of the main concepts and facets of the Baroque mode. Analyses with regard to literature, music and the arts, concentrate on areas where more reliable results can be attained. Whether one examines the changes in literary taste, away from the grandeur and passion of Milton and Racine towards the lighter entertainment of the Restoration theatre, or whether one turns from the dramatic masterpieces to the conventionality of court music during the last years of Lully and after his death, or whether one looks at the relative decline of Italian artistic innovation after the age of Bernini - the conclusion must be that a natural point of summation comes in the last quarter of the seventeenth and the early part of the eighteenth century.