

Chapter II

CHAPTER-II

THE BAROQUE STYLE AND THE LANGUAGE OF BAROQUE

To come to a definite conclusion about the Baroque style is difficult indeed. It has been interpreted in diverse ways. The insistence for nationalist predilections has been added by those who have claimed it as distinctly and peculiarly Italian or Spanish or German, again as un-English or as un-French. What can be said confidently, however, is, that the Baroque style clearly emerged as an European form of art, of letters and of life in the decades after 1600. The extraordinary achievements of the Renaissance were followed by a period of uncertainty and experimentation and there are those who have identified a distinct style separating Renaissance from Baroque.

It has been questioned as to where this style came from. Many factors combined to mould it. It permeated all spheres of life and art. A profound revolution of spirit is clearly manifested through it. One of these factors is the Counter - Reformation. The Catholic Reformation brought a revival of medieval devotion, banning nudity and establishing rules for the use of secular melodies in composition. Baroque art, on the other hand, was worldly or at least deeply influenced by naturalism, and excessively sensuous as is evident in the canvases of Rubens. It often encouraged the heroic ideal of antiquity. Baroque style is, however, partially animated by the ideas and feelings which the Reformation and the Counter - Reformation introduced. The Baroque age was torn between the extremes brought about by the violent clash between religion and politics, between the church and the state. The Baroque age was tormented by doubts, conflicts and tension. Pangs of conscience alternating with extreme sensuality became a characteristic feature of Baroque. The worldliness of the Renaissance gave way to coarse materialism and carnal debauchery, while the philosophical and academic inquiries of humanism led to scepticism and scientific discovery. On the other hand, the religious protest against the Renaissance and humanism strengthened other worldly beliefs. This brought about a fierce moral fanaticism often resulting in empty dogmatism and intolerant persecution, superstitions and violence. As the Counter - Reformation constituted an essential element in these conflicting attitudes, it influenced the Baroque artist in ideas and feelings.

Some critics have maintained that the dominant impulse in the Baroque style originated in the life of the monarchical courts under absolute rule. This view is based upon the well-known patronage which the princes of seventeenth century Europe bestowed upon the arts of the time. Many of these princes took a personal interest in these matters. The result is that most of the characteristic creations of the Baroque style were courtly : the splendid castle within vast artificially fashioned parks and gardens. Similarly, the opera was performed as part of the magnificent court festivals, such as the marriage of Henry IV of France and Marie de Medici in 1604. Yet it may be an exaggeration to maintain that Baroque art was the art of monarchical absolutism. As mentioned in the earlier chapter, the beginnings of the Baroque style in architecture are to be found in ecclesiastical Rome and especially in certain Jesuit churches. That the Jesuit architecture is identical with Baroque architecture throughout this period has been disproved effectively by Joseph. Braun S.J., in a number of works. Apart from court and church there was the rich bourgeoisie not only in these absolute monarchies, but also in England, Holland and Venice. They built the beautiful town houses, bought the canvases of painters, and strongly supported the new musical forms of the opera, oratorios and symphony. In Holland, even the artisans and the common people shared in the general enthusiasm. Great painters like Nicolaus Poussin, Rembrandt and Claude Lorrain were indifferent, if not actually hostile to court life. The extremes of mysticism and rationalism which divided religious feeling in this period, were reflected in the Baroque style. Sometimes these contrasts occurred in the work of the same artist.¹ However, the stage and the church, with their plays and oratorios, while encouraged by the princes, were the common possession of all, and not the exclusive privilege of the few; they perhaps most clearly expressed the spirit of the age.

As has also been mentioned in the introduction, there are 'regional' variations of the Baroque. While some regional characteristics were national, as in England, France and Spain, others like Roman as contrasted with Venetian, Hapsburg as contrasted with Saxon or Rhineland Baroque, were not fully integrated into a national style. Baroque in the Austrian lands of the Hapsburgs bore a greater kinship to Spanish Baroque than North German forms. Moreover,

the migrating of Italians, Flemish and other artists and musicians all over Europe further complicated the attempt to characterize the several national and regional variations of the Baroque Style. Subsequently, there was a great deal of literary and artistic cross-fertilization. Poussin spent most of his life in Rome, the German poet Opitz went to Poland, Descartes to the Netherlands, Grotius to France. Baroque was therefore, a European way of thinking and feeling, of experiencing the world and man, and creating works of art and letters. The regional variations of the Baroque were the strongest where the national life was most fully integrated. Thus, the most characteristic Baroque came from Spain. In France, greater restraint and an emphasis on classical themes obscured for some time, the essentially Baroque quality of Corneille, Pascal and Descartes, as also of Poussin and Claude Lorrain. In the England of the Stuarts and their court, the revolutionary implications of Protestantism, so long held in check by the skill and power of the Tudors, hid from many the sway of Baroque feeling in art and letters. In Germany too, the tendency to fight Baroque in letters, art and life was present.

Regional and national styles, on closer inspection, often seem to contain mutually exclusive aspects and traits. Of no style is this more true than of the Baroque. It is a very polarized style, and startling combinations have produced this multicoloured, multifarious and glittering quality. Baroque sought to give literary and artistic expression to an age which was obsessed with the power of man. It was an age which was fascinated with the impossible and improbable. Hausenstein has aptly said : "Baroque means the unthinkable : the river with two mouths"²

At the height of the Baroque period, the architects, sculptors, painters, poets and musicians struggled to accomplish the impossible in all directions. Hence materialism competed with spirituality, radical naturalism with extreme formalism, the most terrifying realism with delicate illusionism. Metaphysical poetry sought to probe into ultimate mysteries, while erotic poetry violated all the rules of good taste. Some typical subjects of artistic endeavour are : monarchs, cardinals and princesses, devout nuns and praying saints. These vied with beggars, vagrants and cripples in the canvases of Rubens, Rembrandt,

Velásquez, and other Dutch painters ; highly ornamented altars decorated in gold with severe church exteriors, colourful and dramatic murals with symmetrically arranged gardens. Such an age stimulated beyond measure by the potentialities of man, might through some of its representatives establish the foundations of modern science, while through others it might damn some old women as witches; for both presume an exaggerated belief in the power of man. God by his infinite power orders the Universe: Satan seeks to disturb this order. The fascination that Satan held for many writers, including Milton, has often been remarked upon. This admiration for the kind of strength that will challenge rather than be subordinated, is a common feature in the history of literature. The statesmen of the Baroque Age made a cult of power and of its adornments: the great spectacle, the complex intrigue, the gruesome murder. All these indicated an intoxication with power.

The same sense of power inspired Milton as he faced the cosmic struggle of good and evil, of God and Satan. "In confronting the Son of Man with Satan the Tempter, Milton created a scene which is one of the high moments of Milton's art, and the English masterpiece of the Baroque, analogous to great Italian painting.³ It has been said that Milton more than any other poet of his time, had a deep sense of the dynamic, spiritual potential of language; he "did not merely use language; he carved it, shaped it with the vigour of a Baroque architect, and built it up until it became a monument of words in marble". The artist who has the capacity to portray, to dramatize tension, from this sense of power, is truly a Baroque poet.

The language of the works of all Baroque writers is highly ornate. Rigorous forms are maintained with an artificiality which is highly irritating to modern ears. The great emotions which throb beneath this formal and artificial language seem strange. Milton's description of the evil spirits abounds in Baroque word - painting. Involved similes were popular with all writers as were classical allusions. But their chief function was the depiction of human passions, which were seen to be proliferations of supernatural powers rather than human.

The greatest portrayal of the Baroque man that the age created in letters is Milton's Satan :

“.....aspiring
 To set himself in glory above his peers,
 He trusted to have equalled the Most High,
 If he opposed, and, with ambitious aim
 Against the throne and monarchy of God,
 Raised impious wars in Heaven, and battle proud,
 With vain attempt.”⁴ (Paradise Lost BK I - 38-44).

In all his works ranging from Comus to Paradise Lost the Baroque is manifested in some one aspect. In Comus and Lycidas Milton gives us the characteristic Baroque pastoral landscape.

In illustration of a lofty and universal theme in Paradise Lost, he paints a sequence of momentous actions. Book II of Paradise Lost opens with a magnificent vision which in a few lines portrays much of what the Baroque Age in Europe most admired and valued :

“High on a throne of royal state, which far
 Outshone the wealth of Ormus and of Ind,
 Or where the Gorgeous East with richest hand,
 Showers on her kings barbaric pearl and gold,
 Satan exalted sat ...

insatiate to pursue
 Vain war with Heaven.”⁵ (Paradise Lost BK II) 1-5,8).

When one compares Milton with Racine and Corneille and Calderon (1601-87), Joost van Vondel (1587-1679); Martin Opitz (1597-1639), and Andreas Gryphius (1616-64), one appreciates the fulness of his Baroque stature.

As has already been mentioned, it was Spain which experienced the Baroque most intensely. This was true also of its literary endeavours. The Spanish creativity in this period remains one of the marvels of the age. The writers who constitute the flourishing of Spanish genius in literature are, Góngora (1561-

1627) who was a brilliant lyricist, Lope de Vega (1562-1635), the writer of numerous dramas epics, sacred plays and lyrics, Molina (1571-1648), a priest, who wrote sacred plays of deep devotion and wisdom and some saucy comedies, and the great Calderon, the greatest dramatist of them all. The contrast between idealistic, impassioned spirituality and worldly passionate sensuality - which represent the dynamic tensions of the Baroque, are quite suited to the Spanish temperament. The exaggerated formalism and the desire for complicated ornamentation run parallel to naturalism and passionate intensity that borders on the erotic. Gongora, who is considered to be the founder of the "cultivated style"⁶ carried the classicist passion of humanism to Baroque lengths.

It was Luis de Góngora y Argote who gave perhaps the most extreme expression to the formal and artificial in Baroque literature. Being a man of a grave, haunted disposition, his favourite themes were death, pain and the inconstancy of fortune and human attachment.

"The lass most beautiful in the entire land
Left who only yesterday him had on her hand
Who today is gone to the wars with a band
To her mother she laments how he's inconstant :
"Oh, let me weep on the wide ocean strand."⁷

Although these lines are straightforward and clear, in the best works of Góngora, the allusions, metaphors and other literary devices are ingenious. "Here, we find the most extreme form of poetical convention concerning a language of metaphorical allusion which put an unreal wall between the meaning and the object it refers to."⁸

There is a great contrast between Lope de Vega and Góngora. The latter wanted to withdraw from the common people into an elite circle of cultivated spirits, while the former was the poet of the multitudes or the common folk.

Pedro Calderón de la Barca, is "superior to any dramatic poet of his age in grandeur of theological conception and mystical subtlety. He is the poet of

Catholicism 'par excellence'."9 His ardent devotion and his deep understanding of theological issues combined with his brilliant lyrical language to produce works of unmatched and unique beauty. The strain of mysticism in Baroque language has nowhere found such artistic expression as in the works of Calderón.

In France the cue was taken from Spain as regards the Baroque style. Pierre Corneille was truly Baroque in the abstract and typical characters of his figures, the elaborate quality of his language and in his passion for formalized conflict situations.

Corneille was considered to be deeply Baroque. He modelled his French tragedy upon a Spanish base, but significantly altered it and developed it to the extreme. He found himself at the centre of a great literary controversy when he wrote his first play Le Cid. But Corneille stood his ground and defended himself against his critics. He took for his theme the "Universal Baroque honour". On the whole, it was a magnificent play. In contrast to this play, Cinna and Horace represented a complete revolution. Cinna which was very popular with all the elite Baroque audiences, is a political drama. It became the embodiment of French culture. It focused on the Roman emperor Augustus. The play was very appropriate for the age. It was an age unsure of its values, and prone to disillusionment, and ready to question the plausibility of its leading public figures. Hence, they responded readily to a Baroque Cinna. In the play public and private motives are inextricably bound together and the difficulties implied in the end, of reconciliation do no obscure the rich Baroque allusiveness with which Augustus opens Act III. Elevated and majestic in style and delivery, yet deeply infused with a sense of fawning flattery and hollow praise, their somber, stoical resignation interrupted by moments of short-lived brightness, these are the words of a true Baroque ruler about to experience the severe trial of discovering that his most trusted friend has betrayed him. They are confirmation that his world is indeed an unstable, miserable place ; yet the insight acts as a spur to greater nobility of action and to an almost superhuman display of heroic self-assertion. The play depicts the recognition of the vanity of worldly vainglory and rejection of worldly power and splendour in a grand gesture of profound disdain. Yet at the same time it expresses a proud reassertion of

absolute authority in a magnificent display of the royal privilege of clemency. Corneille's next tragedy Polyeucte was first performed in 1643 (the year of Louis XIV's succession to the throne). It was one of the greatest dramatic variations of the glorious theme of martyrdom. The qualities found in the above mentioned plays are present again in subsequent tragedies like Pompee (1642), Rodogune, Princess de Parthis (1646), Heraclius (1646), Nicomede (1650), Oedipe (1659), Sertotius (1662) and Sophonisbe (1663).

Jean Racine succeeded Corneille to the popularity of the French stage. Although Corneille was the chief of his predecessors, there were other writers who had travelled the tragic path, and even while he was engaged in producing his series of classical plays, many of his contemporaries competed with him for supremacy on the French stage. Thomas Corneille, younger brother of Pierre, contributed a steady series of tragedies to the stage. In 1657 he produced his Timocrate which was a great success, and though it does not figure among the great literature of the period it was a play that almost everybody at the time had seen. It represents one of the climaxes of the Baroque stage entertainments in Europe. As a purely aesthetic experience Timocrate impresses us with its verve and versatility. Although it is pleasing to the eye and ear, it remains a difficult play to read, mainly because it is such a "tour de force" of high-flown obscurity and dramatic suspense. However, even this failed to be recorded in the annals of literary history as it lacked brilliance. Phillipe Quinault also pursued the Corneille way, but soon, in collaboration with Lully was drawn into the arena of opera. Among other works he produced his famous Armide (1686) one of the tragedies most instrumental in establishing "grand opera" in France. None of the tragic plays produced during the years immediately before Racine's appearance had given any indication to true greatness.

Jean Racine's first play Andromaque (1667) was in the classical style, strictly observing the unities and confining the movements of the actors on the stage. In Britannicus (1669) he attempted, with brilliant success, a drama more in the manner of Corneille, but modified it to his own peculiar pattern. Unlike Corneille, he did not believe in the all-embracing theme of love. Similar Corneillian influence is traceable in Bajazet (1672), which has often been referred

to as Racine's "harem" tragedy. This was followed by Mithridate" (1673). In Bajazet he tried to achieve a tragic "distance" by depicting life in a far-off Oriental world, painting excellent portraits of the politician Acomat and of the impassioned Roxanne. His next three tragedies announce in their titles the predominantly feminine interests - Berenice (1670), Iphigenia (1674) and Phedre (1677). In these dramas he sheds the mantle that he inherited from Corneille and moves firmly on his own chosen ground. By now Racine is in full control of his peculiar tragic style. Berenice may be regarded as a transitional play. Its theme is love and its central character is a woman, but the conflict between love and duty demanded by Corneille is clearly present. Like Andromaque, Berenice is a drama of conflicting love; it is different from the former in that it introduces the clash between love and honour, and honour wins.

Racine conveys the action of the play through logical and musical verse, and the use of the Alexandrine. Although the Alexandrine verse form of Corneille and Racine was peculiarly adapted to the metric rhythm of French, poets of other European countries, especially German, imitated the dramas of the two great French dramatists. They also derived inspiration from the greatest Dutch dramatist Joost van den Vondel (1587-1679). J. Huizinga has written that "Vondel in the clumsy, but always aspiring majesty of his elevated, solemn language is the perfect Baroque poet." He was born in Cologne of refugee Anabaptist parents who were forced to flee from Antwerp, in the Spanish Netherlands. He established himself in Amsterdam, and for the remainder of his life was called the greatest exponent of the Dutch language. He was also called the voice of his country's conscience. His first poem centres around Constantine the Great and the triumph of Christianity in Imperial Rome. It is constructed on the model of Tasso's Jerusalem Delivered. After his wife's death, he turned to tragedy. He had found his perfect medium. He produced tragedy such as the Baroque age dreamt of but seldom achieved, with imaginative power, and force of language. Vondel, like the Dutch painters, is a great painter too : a Baroque painter in words. Unlike the other Dutch artists and writers he turned away from domestic subjects to loftier visions of heroic warriors, prophets and angels borne on clouds.

His Maeghden (1639) ("The maidens"), is an eloquent tragic portrayal of the legendary martyrdom of St. Ursula and her 11,000 virgin companions. Although the subject seems impossible, at least for a tragedy, yet Vondel achieves the impossible. This is the characteristic of a truly Baroque achievement. The Sophoclean, classical devices of narration and dialogue are combined in such a way so as to produce an effect that is at once visual and intellectual : the dramatist shows in words what cannot be told in action or understood in images alone ; the martyrdom of 11,000 virgins and, in doing so depicts the fundamental clash between Christian conviction and heathen savagery. The play opens with Attila's trusted commander describing Ursula's amazing approach to her future killer, who will soon become infatuated by his captive's unattainable and enigmatic charms. Artfully the description at once attracts and warns ; it is an image of purity moving into the centre of attention, and pictorially evoked in bold yet delicate whites and reds, the colouring dominant throughout the entire painting in words :

She stood - and what a proud, defiant stance !
 On the first ship, her banner in her hand,
 A crown of diamonds and rubied roses on her :
 But, lovelier still, still those blooming on her face,
 Most beautiful when glowing with the flush
 Which noblest blood brought welling to each cheek.
 Upon her bosom glowed and played the arms
 Of a gold cross, all set with choice blue sapphires :
 Luxuriant breezes too played now and then,
 Filling the sail or rippling the flag
 Tied to her standard cross, in which she trusted.
 These were her armoury, and all her spears;
 Her eye, a sharper spear, transfixed my heart.
 Her Purple garment with its sleeves of white.
 Was now and then raised by the tender winds.
 The lily and the rose in golden threads
 Were kindled into the brightness by the Sun
 Which set envy ... (Maeghdan Act I).

The posture, the Baroque imagery of rose and lily, spear and sun, the wind and the water and the palpable sign of faith, all bear upon an undercurrent of erotic admiration ; the visual force and symbolic effect, the colour, and the movement all convey the essence of the dramatic elevation of spiritual values expressed in sensual terms.

Vondel's brilliance and power is best represented in his next work Lucifer. Political events of the day played an important part in inspiring him to write this drama. Vondel had been roused to indignation by the events in England. His indignation inflamed emotions that triggered off that creative passion which then welled up and soared to extraordinary Baroque heights in a formal drama on the rebellion and the Fall of Satan and his angels. Vondel's Satan is the personification of Pride and cannot bear defeat. He thirsts for pride of place. When one of his followers give him an eyewitness account of the newly created paradise and the unbounded bliss of Adam and Eve, whom he considers to be mere mortals, he is filled with anger and envy. The news that God has decided to become incarnate in human form is even more unbearable:

Mankind has won God's heart and is now Heaven's friend !

For angels, night has fallen : our servitude begins.

(Lucifer Act I).

Satan is transformed into the hideous form of a monstrous serpent to be thrown down from the heavens in a last encounter with the archangel Michael. No other poet of the Baroque period, apart from Milton, could achieve the daring feat of paraphrasing the dynamic sweep of colour, light and movement with which Rubens had depicted the cosmic battle of good and evil in his Last Judgement and the Fall of the Damned, painted between 1617 and 1620. Milton and Vondel are firm in both structure and diction, and are restrained and calculated despite the colour and the violence of the action depicted. Their enormous dramatic epics, like Rubens' paintings, convey a passionate desire to view infinity in relation to their time.

Vondel exerted an enormous influence on the leading German Baroque

poets of the stage, especially upon Andreas Gryphius (1616-64). Martin Opitz set the tone by his Book of German Poetry which was published in 1624. He emphasized purity of language, style and verse like the French. In spite of this his poetry lacked depth of feeling.¹⁰ However, he was a skilful and truly Baroque poet. More genuine in this respect was the German poet Gryphius who is considered to be the "founder of German Bombast."¹¹ Some of the lines from his sonnet on the Thirty-first Psalm are deeply touching:

With weeping and with groans, with labour, woe and fear
 I'm wasting hour and day, and February's grimness
 Ruins me, like the flight of the swift time, the year,
 Let's hardly me lament my bitter woe, my mis'ry !

(Psalm Thirty-One)

Gryphius carried the Baroque violence of expression to greater lengths than any other poet of the period. One wonders whether his poems can be considered to be poetry at all when one encounters such lines as :

Ah! and Woe!
 Murder! Clamour! Terror! Cross! Torture! Worms! Plague!
 Pitch! Torment! Hangman! Flame! Stench! Cold! Fears!
 Ah Perish!

High and Low !

Sea! Hills! Mountains! Rocks! Who can bear the pain?
 Swallow, abyss, Oh swallow them! who forev'r shall clamour.

(from the Sonnet on Hell)

It is as Gundolf has suggested, straight virtuosity.

In England, the Platonic mode which was so deliberately cultivated by Henrietta Marie and by the courtiers of Charles I continued in altered terms, into the world of the courtiers of Charles II. The latter may have looked back

with a certain contempt upon their immediate ancestors, yet they felt a kinship with them in temper. They enjoyed what their forefathers enjoyed; the romance that they sought was only a development of the romance that had already been staged on the stages of the earlier theatres. "The basis of Restoration Tragedy", it has been said, "is the Romantic idea". The artificial Platonic love, the conflict between passion and honour, the exotic distant scenes of the unknown lands that were idealized, all these were inherited from the dramas produced at the court of Charles I.

If the foundation of Restoration tragedy is the Romantic idea, it is equally true that this romanticism was accompanied by classical concepts. It was not the severer type of classicism, but the classicism of Seneca that influenced Dryden and Nathaniel Lee. The atmosphere of ghosts, blood and horror, and the supernatural happenings was in keeping with the native strains. Italian "melodrama" which is classical in inspiration but Baroque in execution, contributed to the artificiality of the themes and to the development of operatic features. The influence of Italian music and the Italian operatic art was experienced in England during the latter half of the Restoration period, both in dramatic opera and in spoken tragedies.

What the English dramatists knew when they started to write tragedy during this period, was not the tragedy of Racine, but the experimental drama of Corneille. The development and popularisation of this serious French drama was achieved in two ways - by direct translation and free adaptation to suit the English drama.

The French tragedy of the reign of Louis XIV, the "melodrama" of Italy, the heroic play of the English, and the French Romance were but so many aspects of a general European movement - the Baroque.

Carl Friedrich has rightly observed, "These many different writers had one thing in common - the Baroque language. The Baroque language was rich in simile and metaphor, in ornamental adjectives and stately formalities. Nouns were piled up and ejaculation occupied a central place. Indeed, with the more

radical Baroque writers, literary language became an end in itself; thought was sacrificed to expression, meaning to sound. And yet, with all the brocade and declamation, there occurred the occasional luminous vista of utter simplicity :

freely we serve

Because we freely love, as in our will

To love or not ; in this we stand or fall.”

The sense of power in all its forms, spiritual and secular, scientific and political, psychological and technical, is the common denominator which helps us to conceive of them as varied expressions of a common view of man and the world. The startling achievements of man led to a sense of potential might which alternated with a crushing realisation of human limitations in the face of an infinite world created by a remote and all powerful being transcending all human comprehension. The inherent drama of such a view provided a magnificent setting for poets of true grandeur. It is the glory of the Baroque age that everywhere men rose to this unique challenge. Milton, Vondel, Corneille and Calderón, Lope de Vega and Gryphius - they all spoke the language of an age when man's dignity was his most prized possession in the face of the powers on this earth and those of the beyond.”¹²

CHAPTER-II : NOTES

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