

Periodization and the notion of the baroque and (neo)baroque in British literature and culture

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Abstract

The paper is devoted to the category of the Baroque as a historical period of literature and culture, and the category of (neo)baroque, which has recently become relevant in the description of modern/contemporary literary and cultural phenomena that exhibit the “crisis of representation” and the experience of dramatic movement and change of the world (this pertains to a large part of the so-called post-modernist literature). The article examines the relevance of these categories for the canon of English literature. The traditional periodization of English literature does not usually reveal the historical period of seventeenth-century Baroque and uses other categories instead, which are either Anglocentric/ethnocentric or refer to the style of the Italian Renaissance. The term “baroque” has become indispensable in literary-historical studies due to the necessity to create a transnational/simultaneous and more “spatial” history of literature(s) and culture(s) and because of the need for more universal tools of description.

Key words

Baroque, British literature, history of culture, history of literature, (neo)baroque, periodization of literature

Périodisation littéraire et culturelle britannique et les notions du baroque et du (néo)baroque

Résumé

L'article présente la catégorie du baroque, comme une époque historique dans la littérature et la culture, et celle du (néo)baroque, comme une notion devenue importante pour la description des phénomènes littéraires et culturels contemporains révélant « la crise de la représentation » et l'expérience du mouvement dramatique et du changement dans le monde (cela concerne une bonne partie de la littérature que l'on appelle « postmoderne »). L'objectif de cet article est de présenter la pertinence de ces catégories pour le canon de la littérature anglaise. En général, la périodisation traditionnelle de la littérature britannique ne se réfère pas à l'époque historique du baroque au XVII^e siècle. Aux fins de la périodisation, on emploie d'autres catégories, anglo- et ethnocentriques ou relevant de l'esthétique de la renaissance italienne. Le terme « baroque » est devenu actuellement indispensable pour les études historiques et littéraires dû à la nécessité de créer une image de l'histoire de la littérature / des littératures et de la culture / des cultures qui soit plus transnationale / simultanée et plus « spatiale ». Il répond aussi au besoin d'un outil de description plus universel.

Mots-clés

baroque, histoire de la culture, histoire de la littérature, littérature britannique, (néo)baroque, périodisation littéraire

Zagadnienie periodyzacji literatury i kultury brytyjskiej a pojęcie baroku i (neo)baroku

Abstrakt

Artykuł omawia kategorię baroku jako historycznej epoki literatury i kultury oraz (neo)baroku jako pojęcia, które stało się ważne dla opisu nowoczesnych/współczesnych zjawisk literackich i kulturowych ujawniających „kryzys reprezentacji” i doświadczenie dramatycznego ruchu i zmiany w świecie (dotyczy to sporej części tzw. literatury

postmodernistycznej). Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie relewantności tych kategorii dla kanonu literatury angielskiej. Tradycyjna periodyzacja literatury brytyjskiej zwykle nie uwzględnia historycznego okresu siedemnastowiecznego baroku. Dla celów periodyzacji stosuje się inne kategorie, które są anglocentryczne/etnocentryczne, bądź odnoszą się do stylistyki włoskiego renesansu. Termin "barok" stał się obecnie niezbędny dla studiów historyczno-literackich z powodu konieczności tworzenia transnarodowego/symultanicznego i bardziej „przestrzennego” obrazu historii literatury/literatur i kultury/ kultur, a także w odpowiedzi na zapotrzebowanie na bardziej uniwersalne narzędzia opisu.

Słowa kluczowe

barok, historia kultury, historia literatury, literatura brytyjska, (neo)barok, periodyzacja literatury

The categories of the Baroque, as a historical period of literature and culture, and (neo)baroque as a transhistorical paradigm of discourse recurring in the history of literature and culture,¹ also relevant in post-modern art, have not been universally accepted as models of thinking about British literary history. In colloquial English the "baroque" connotes the meanings of excess, redundant ornamentation, whimsicality, grotesqueness, and even ugliness. The "baroque" as understood colloquially has never had any associations with modernity in the English language and, as a cultural category, has been mainly associated with the art of Catholicism. In this context the style of the Baroque is also associated with utilitarian art used for the expression of authoritarian power and control, which, in the historical memory of the British nation, is frequently associated with Spanish absolutism. In academic

¹ There is a variety of ways in which relevant authors use and define the term „baroque”. For the purposes of this paper I shall use the capital letter for the meaning of the “Baroque” indicating a historical period of literature and culture, and the “baroque” or (neo)baroque, written with a small letter, as a transhistorical paradigm of discourse recurring in the history of literature and culture.

practice these connotations very often mean a negative qualification of the term as a neutral descriptive category.

Peter Davison in his book *The Universal Baroque* (2007) describes the phenomenon of the English resistance to this category of style and shows that, paradoxically, a large spectrum of British cultural activity actually complies with the most rigorous definitions of “international baroque”. Davison explains:

British English and the academy in Britain are uneasy about *Baroque* as a neutral descriptor. Almost all definitions of *Baroque* offered by *OED* are negative or disparaging, and there is a tradition both of thinking of the Baroque as Catholic and of perceiving the Catholic arts as the arts of the enemy, of that group of peoples against which Englishness defines itself by negation. This disjunction is maintained despite the fact that a vast sweep of British cultural activity falls squarely within even the most stringent definition of “international Baroque”.

(Davison 2007: 26)

Like other authors dealing with the stylistic and historical notions of the baroque, Davison understands the term as signifying a historical period in European art and culture without a clear centre or “metropolis” (Davison 2007: 13), but also a “recurring mode” of culture which “keeps coming round in alternation with the austerities of what are called Classicism or Enlightenment” (Davison 2007: 20). The baroque understood as a recurring set of features then means the preference for the eclectic and pragmatic use of any representation, with the characteristic consciousness of epistemological distance typical of the theatre situation, in which elements of communication are of dual nature (text within text, space within space, actor as character, character as “embodied perception”, etc.) and the process of communication is based on the recognition of the fact of performance and re-enactment of the known, the “classical”, or emblematic motifs.

These days the importance of the term seems to be strengthened by the literary phenomenon of (neo)baroque in

modern literature. The phenomenon of (neo)baroque in contemporary culture is well described by Omar Calabrese in his book *Neo-Baroque: A Sign of the Times* (1992). Calabrese presents a study of contemporary media culture as referring to the poetics of repetition, variation and citation. The author deals with the problems of taste, repetitive rhythm, excess, detail and fragment, metamorphosis, chaos and labyrinth, complexity and dissipation, distortion and perversion, as well as the relationship between the terms “neo-classical” and the “baroque” (1992: 15-16). An important part of these considerations is the analysis of “anamorphosis and foreshortening” as a problem of “destroyed perspective”.

Calabrese particularly focuses on the neo-baroque excess of contemporary culture. He explains that

[...] the knocking down of boundaries does not lead to destruction or exclusion, but to a shifting of the limit. When confronted by an “acceptable” excess, the limit is simply moved (perhaps to a considerable distance) in order to absorb it, in an accommodation that might involve a conflict. There are also intermediate cases, in which excess of content are absorbed into the system. This occurs for a number of reasons. First, because the system becomes more elastic (as principles such as “tolerance,” “permissiveness,” “libertarianism,” and so on arise). Third, because the system is able to integrate the excess by distorting its objective, thus rendering what appears to be excessive substantially normal. This final principle is, in effect, a regulating constant in all social systems (whether political, religious, or of taste). It consists in the creation of antidotes or antibodies to the excess, even in those cases where excess functioned at the outset.

(Calabrese 1992: 65-66)

These principles express themselves in the “aesthetics of Nothingness”, which is a version of *vanitas vanitatum*, one of the basic topoi of seventeenth century literature, also expressed in the motifs of “annihilation”, “disfiguration of figures”, and the “madness of seeing” (Calabrese 1992: 169-170). These motifs, typical of early seventeenth century European

literature, may also be observed in the so called postmodernist fiction, only the term postmodernist, which negatively refers to the preceding epoch of Modernist literature and culture, is less flexible and historically restrictive in comparison with the term (neo)baroque, which usefully describes a wider variety of cultural phenomena, also referring to the formal stylistic solutions observed in seventeenth-century art and literature. Calabrese, like other authors, uses the category of the baroque as a category applicable not only to the specific historical period but also as a transhistorical notion more flexible than postmodernism. The (neo)baroque as a term serves for the description of a wide variety of cultural phenomena exhibiting similar formal stylistic solutions observed in seventeenth-century art and literature.

But the notions of the historical Baroque or transhistorical (neo)baroque also need to be seen with reference to what seems to be a convention of depicting literary and cultural history in terms of “aesthetic modernity”,² which, unlike the universalist notion of (neo)baroque, indicates a break with tradition and implied opposition to the past (Habermas 1981: 4). However relative and recurrent in history the notion of “modernity” may appear, it seems to be a central idea accompanying the aesthetic and cultural movement of the historical Baroque.

Gregg Lambert, in his book *The Return of the Baroque in Modern Culture* (2004), relates this anti-traditionalist and anti-normative intellectual trend of early seventeenth century literature and culture to modern theories of language and rhetoric by Paul de Man or Walter Benjamin, as well as to Foucault’s concept of *episteme*, epistemic forgetting and “rupture of the tables of representation” (Lambert 2004: 81), which is perceived as a caesura between epochs. Foucault’s concept of

² Cf. Scott-Warren’s notion of “modernity” in his *Early Modern English Literature*. The author considers it a more “ethnocentric” term than the traditional “English Renaissance” that conventionally connotes Italian Renaissance and imitation of the Antiquity (Scott-Warren 2005: 14-16).

“epochal rupture” that marks the origin of modernity (Lambert 2004: 83) is also analysed by Omar Calabrese in connection with the Baroque obsession with the crisis of individual consciousness and the break with the traditional worldview:

There are epochs in which change in mentality is so radical (as in the seventeenth century) that one can justifiably speak of a rupture with the past. This is a strikingly important idea that undermines one of the principles of traditional historiography, that of causality understood as a necessary relationship between “before” and “after”.

(Lambert 81, qtd. after Calabrese 1992: 7)

However, although thinking about English literary and cultural history in terms of novelty and “modernity” is quite well established, the Baroque does not exist in the British tradition as a term defining the period of art and literature between Early Modern Literature (1500-1700) and the Age of Enlightenment. In a more detailed depiction of British literary epochs, literary and cultural periods still tend to be distinguished with relation to historic events or reigns of kings. Important publications offer a periodization of British literature which dissolves the Baroque into several chapters/periods of Renaissance, Reformation, Revolution and Restoration (Sanders 2004), whereas international authors define relevant periods of cultural history as Early Baroque (c.1590–c.1625), High Baroque (c.1625–c.1660), or Late Baroque (c.1660–c.1725) sometimes identified as Rococo. Various phases and episodes of English Baroque are still recognized as Jacobean (1603-1625), Caroline (1625- 1649), or Commonwealth (1649-1658).

For the non-British student of European literary and cultural history, the picture is further blurred by the fact that the English notion of “neo-classicism” used in the British tradition of literary studies does not completely correspond to the art of the eighteenth century and for some British authors it may cover nearly three centuries from the beginnings of the Renaissance till the beginning of the nineteenth century (Jones

1976: 55). In this tradition, “neo-classicism” is associated with imitation of the balance and proportion (not distortion!) of the classics, as in the case of the Baroque and (neo)baroque.

It seems to be a fact also that it is the eighteenth century, and especially the Augustan Era (1700-1745), which is the epoch considered paradigmatic for modern British cultural conventions. And the high axiological status of the Augustan Era in the culture of Britain according to some authors (Davison 2007: 33) makes it impossible for the British people to see the features of the baroque in their own culture. This tendency results in the general obscurity of the picture of relations between British writers of the Baroque epoch and writers on the Continent of Europe:

Another thing that obscures the picture of English relations with the Continent is English critics’ traditional desire to see a direct line of literary influence on vernacular English writing from renaissance Italy, particularly from the admired tradition of vernacular poetry stemming from Petrarch, while simultaneously denying any influence from later Italian letters. At its simplest, this is a desire to demonstrate a cultural *translation imperii* which vindicates the status of imperial England. The problem recurs, in the discussion of the later period, with the use of such terms as “Augustan”, in itself an arrogantly explicit claim for such a cultural *translatio*. “Augustan” is, of course, yet another way of not saying “baroque”, while claiming neo-classical status for a cultural phenomenon only neo-classical in the same relative sense that much baroque literary and architectural activity is referential to the achievements of Roman antiquity.

(Davison 2007: 33)

Davison explains this partly by the “immense posthumous prestige” of William Shakespeare which “distorted the whole picture of the literary arts in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As has frequently been pointed out, he is the sole non-university graduate among the English playwrights; the only one who, as far as we know, preserved nothing composed in Latin” (Davison 2007: 26). This makes him

peculiarly English and native and strengthens the insularity of English literary historical perspective.

Davison claims that early modern English culture developed in two antithetical trends in Elizabethan culture: one tended to present English culture as autochthonous and independent “while a contrary cultural impulse was eager to look civilised in continental terms” (Davison 2007: 28). The differences were religious, political, emotive, but also traditionally “anti-speculative”. Warnke wrote about this earlier in *Versions of Baroque* (1972) in the following way:

The relative indifference toward theory displayed by English men of letters of that period combined with the general antiquarianism and nationalism noted above to blur the recognition of significant stylistic innovation, and the late occurrence of the English Renaissance has since blinded many literary historians to the autonomy of the English Baroque: they have assimilated the earlier stages of that age to the Renaissance and the latter stages to the Neoclassical period, acknowledging the facts of development and change only through the application of artistic labels derived from the reigning monarchs (i.e. the various episodes of the English Baroque have been traditionally identified as “Jacobean,” “Caroline,” and “Commonwealth”).

(Warnke 1972: 16-17)

Despite the obvious English participation in the cultural trends of Latin European countries, severe falsifications took place in terms of language, history of ideas, and terminology. “The chief culprit”, says Davison, “is ‘metaphysical’, a term adopted in the eighteenth century, but revived in an atmosphere of nationalist anxiety as a deliberate attempt to suppress the degree of connection between the poetry of early modern England and that of the contemporary Continent” (Davison 2007: 28).

It is important to note that most authors who use the category of the Baroque/(neo)baroque as an internationally applicable category realise the vernacular differences and varieties, including, for example, Scottish Calvinist baroque art or Irish

baroque aesthetics, but vernacular writing was inspired by a corpus of Latin sources which has become less and less known, and this fact may be one of the reasons for the fact that the term Baroque is not used in British periodization of literature and culture. One author of texts in Latin who is considered paradigmatic for the Baroque and who published his works in London was Mathias Casimir Sarbievius (Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski), a Polish Jesuit widely read and imitated in Europe (Davison 2007: 31-32). There are studies which show the immense popularity of Latin works by Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski in seventeenth century England, the popularity of Spanish Jesuit writers, such as Calderon, Lope de Vega or Tirso de Molina, and the reception of the French writer Madeleine de Scudéry. There are also studies which show the quality of the Baroque in the writings of particular authors of English literature of the end of the sixteenth century and the seventeenth century, such as William Shakespeare, the so-called metaphysical poets, John Milton, John Dryden, Thomas Otway, and others (Warnke 1972: 11-12).

What is at stake in the way we divide literary history is in fact the interpretative context. If we abandon categorization based on national history, that is “Anglocentric” in the case of British literature, we may paradoxically discover that there are national versions of the Baroque, regardless of religious provenance, based on the works of major European theoreticians such as Baltasar Gracian with his *Agudeza y Arte de Ingenio* (1642). Interpretative awareness of such contexts may turn out to be very helpful in understanding certain aspects of English Romantic literature, which goes back for inspiration to old Scottish literature. A good example here might be George Buchannan (1506-1582), a Scottish author of Latin texts who reappears in Romantic historicism not only as a tutor to Mary Queen of Scots (Davison 2007: 74). Other great names of the Scottish Baroque are Robert Montgomery, famous for his theatrical funeral in 1636, John Barclay (1582-1621), Alexander Montgomery, and also George Strachan (1592-1634). It seems

that Scottish artists created much of the Baroque culture of the time, the proof of which is, for example, the iconographic art of the emblematic room of Chancellor Seaton in Pinkie House of the East Lothian district (Davidson 2007: 78).

Taking into account Scottish Baroque literature also helps us to understand the literary historical links between, for example, Robert Burns and George Gordon Byron. The literary output of both poets is traditionally derived from the canon of English Augustan poetry, and in particular the poetry of Alexander Pope. But many of the features of Byron's poetry, found also in Burns, cannot be explained by eighteenth century neoclassicism solely. These include the conceptual polarization of values characteristic of metaphysical poets; *coincidentia oppositorum* as a method of fictional world construction; carnivalism of language, compositional fragmentariness and the "poetics of nothingness"; humour based on the grotesque, the burlesque and the deformed, and the motif of madness; theatricality of utterance with the typical dissociation of the lyrical persona into self-reflective masks, and others.

Such literary motifs and literary techniques have their source in European Baroque and they reappear in the later phase of Romanticism, in which poetic individualism is inspired by the sensuousness of metaphysical poetry. The historical concept of the Baroque hardly appears in the official language of modern literary studies. In spite of this, many texts of British Romanticism do refer to the seventeenth century paradigm of the world full of crisis, revolt and conflict, which emerges from the romance plots of Shakespeare, Calderon and Cervantes, in which vagabonds, pilgrims and beggars mix with aristocracy, and eroticism is always close to death. We may find similar motifs in many texts by Walter Scott or Byron.

The category of the Baroque as based on the poetics of "nothingness" provides an explanation for all sorts of Romantic practices of image and icon production (Mole 2007), for which the term "modernity" is usually preferred. Interestingly, alt-

though used without conscious reference to seventeenth-century poetics, the neo-baroque language of “nothingness” turns out to be useful for the description of Romanticism and Neo-Romanticism in the volume edited by James Chandler, *English Romantic Literature* (2009). In the last chapter of the volume, “Is Romanticism Finished?”, Jerome McGann proposes going back to the language of paradox. Byron called this poetic method “mobility” and “spoiler’s art”, while Keats perceived it as “negative capability” and starting “with nothing” (Chandler 2009: 664). Keats’ “nothing” reappears in poetry, for example in the “epistemological” piece of post-Romantic poetry by Wallace Stevens, “The Snow Man” (1921):

One must have a mind of winter
 To regard the frost and the boughs
 Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
 To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
 The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
 Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
 In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
 Full of the same wind
 That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
 And, nothing himself, beholds
 Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

The poem exhibits a typically neo-baroque epistemological shift from description of facts to discussion of optics, which has its roots in the philosophy of the Baroque as it re-appears in modern culture.

In conclusion, we may say that the use of the terms “Renaissance” and “Augustan Age”, instead of Baroque and neo-baroque, and the application of the category of “neo-classicism” in an ahistorical manner, not related to the periodization of British literature, causes distortions in the understanding of English literature as part of European culture, that is also as part of seventeenth century Baroque culture, which may be seen, for example, in the mutual influence of Catholic writers and Protestant intellectuals.

British periodization of literature may seem problematic when compared with other European methods of dividing literature and culture into periods, because it reveals semantic differences in the usage of the terms “renaissance”, “classicism” and “neo-classicism”. It seems that they need to be reinterpreted with reference to European Baroque literature and culture, but also with reference to English antiquarianism and cultural nationalism. The relatively late chronological appearance of the so-called “English Renaissance” may then become noticeable. The stylistic innovations of the time might then be seen as a version of English Baroque in its autonomy. There is a need for re-thinking these notions, as the descriptive category of the Baroque and (neo)baroque becomes relevant again. This has been illustrated in a series of publications (Davison 2007, Lambert 2008, or Zamora and Kaupt 2010, and others) which describe modern literary and cultural phenomena that exhibit the crisis of representation and the experience of dramatic movement and change typical of the Baroque epoch.

The traditional periodization of English literature is partly of a political nature, as the insularity of the native English canon of literature as the evolution of culture is perceived in the historical context of the monarchy. Resignation from such a perspective might reveal the omnipresence of the baroque style, despite its religious provenance. A better understanding of the seventeenth-century Baroque might be very helpful in uncovering certain aspects of English Romantic literature, which, as suggested earlier, goes back to Old Scottish literature and its

neo-Latin inspirations. Such a broadening of perspective might reshape the canon and the memory of English literature in terms of cultural geography.³

In other words, cultural and literary studies of the historical period of seventeenth-century Baroque as well as of the stylistic quality of the baroque have become indispensable because of the necessity to create a transnational history of literature and culture and because of the globalization processes in contemporary culture. The pragmatic nature of the baroque style, based on theatricality, assuming a variety of roles, points of view, and perspectives, is pervaded by a sense of the duality of the world (personal/social, national/universal, and communicative), in which sign and meaning are not given once and for ever and may change with relation to culture and the geography of the communicative process. The idea of “international baroque” may help to overcome the *translatio imperii* of British periodization of literature, with its preference of the Renaissance or the Augustan Age as a justification of the cultural domination of English art and literature (Davison 2007: 33) and may make it possible to refocus the temporal depiction of literary and cultural change into a more geographical image of the simultaneous coexistence of English literature with other world literatures.

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³ Compare Alina Clej’s theoretical reflections on François Hartog’s idea of “presentist perspective” (allowing for a variety of simultaneous or even alternative “histories of the past”) in the study of cultural history and the need for “spatial rather than temporal” reorientation of historical studies in a globalized reality (*Literary into Cultural History*, Irimia and Ivana 2007: 182-183).

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