UNDER THE SIGN OF DUALITY: CONTRADICTION AND CONFLICTION ON A SPIRITUAL LEVEL DURING THE 17TH CENTURY

Lavinia BĂNICĂ
University of Piteşti

Abstract: *The 16th century detaches itself among other periods through conflict and contradiction. Most historians and literary critics agree that this century stands out as a period of crisis (political, religious and moral) and as an era of duality: the tragic face of the 17th century reminds of the dark aspects of the Middle Ages (wars, epidemics, pauperism, desperation, mysticism, disillusion about the earthly existence); the brighter face is pictured by men's efforts to surpass helplessness by broadening the knowledge horizon.*

Key words: *duality, conflict, Baroque.*

During the second half of the 16th century and , in some cases, the first decades of the following one, the European cultural area is characterized by a period of great effervescence of the artistic movement (which generated an endless series of arguments), called Mannerism. The concept of Mannerism separates itself from any model, either Classical or Renaissance, and looks for different ways of configuring an own expression style, revealing a profoundly innovative character. The moment Mannerism touched the territory of literary creation, it became object to long disputes. Theorized by Goethe, Hegel, J.Bousquet, M.Raymond, denied as generator of culture or era, which can be defined in time, underestimated when compared to Baroque, Mannerism tends to be considered an archetype that comes to life between artistic movements (one which is at its dusk, on its way to extinction, the other at its dawn, barely crystallizing its features). Conflict, internal tension, contradiction: these all make up the Mannerist universe, characterized by a perpetual unstable balance. In respect of this meaning, Hocke resorts to a formula used by the Mannerist treatise authors of the 16th century: *discordia concors* (the Mannerist poetry abounds in rhetorical figures of speech such as the oxymoron, which signify the union of opposites). Mannerism, as Hocke describes it, makes use of the same range of symbols and rhetorical figures, which the Baroque movement claims; (seen from this point of view, the dispute between the Baroque and the Mannerism supporters covers more that the mere affiliation of the two styles to a certain historical period!). The differences, as well as the similarities, of the three movements – Classicism, Mannerism, and Baroque – are nothing but loci communes frequently occurring in the evolution of culture and artistic trends. This way one can delimitate, historically and stylistically speaking, a period between the twilight of the Renaissance spirit and the ascend of Baroque, during which there was expressed a sensitivity which has access to the individual, to an intimate state, a sensitivity stimulated by a ludic act or by the oscillation between real and imaginary. Really novel in the European cultural landscape, the Mannerist literature (mainly the poetry, since the post Renaissance Mannerism is almost missing in prose), becomes the fertile soil in which the Baroque garden could flourish.

BDD-A5814 © 2010 Universitatea din Piteşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:08:28 UTC)

Human sensitivity will soon be shattered by a profound transformation of the perception of the idea of destiny, in general, and that of human individual life, in particular. The Renaissance enthusiasm is to turn, over the following century and a half, into a deep pessimism. Many of the milestones of the Humanist thinking modify their functions, and they become – as Al. Ciorănescu claims – sources of the Baroque anxiety.

The 17th centuries brought about for the Europeans – one should notice that this trait applies to all inhabitants, regardless their social and economical background – an awfully troubled life, as they had never before experienced. On one hand, the great geographical discoveries caused a harsh fight over the ownership of the riches of the new territories; on the other hand, the economical crisis, the unjustifiably high taxes, the confessional fights and diseases decimated a large percent of the population, most victims being peasants. The increased prices, epidemics, poverty turned the common people's lives into an ordeal. It was only natural that they would soon feel distrust and suspicion regarding their destiny as mortals. Shocked by his existence, the 17th century man lacks serenity and optimism. In a very interesting presentation of the Baroque man, in his various appearances (political leader, soldier, preacher, missionary, sorcerer, scientist or artist), Rosario Villari (2000) describes an era characterized by eeriness and novelty, rebellion, bewilderment, greatness; an epoch of great tensions, oppressions and plots, disorder and an overturn of values hierarchy. The Baroque period is here considered a historical stage in which the human problems, situations, even the human types change. The chapter dedicated to the Sorceress reveals an acute need of order (this actually being an obsessive state of mind of the 17th century), due to the acknowledgement of the fact that the old order was in collapse. The Sorceress becomes a symbol of chaos and disorder, a victim of the religious battles and of the reinforcement of the Church's authority. Since towards the end of the previous century, the Church had been trying to impose a type of dictatorship, which resembled the one of the Middle Ages. The 'instrument' the clergy used was the Counter-Reform, movement which attempted to purify the information that the Renaissance philosophy and science had assimilated from the Pre-Christian system of thinking. Thus, free will, concept valued by the Renaissance is abolished by the Counter-Reform (the process is also known as the Counter-Renaissance).

The beginning of the 17th century finds Europe facing an even deeper gap between the physical universe and the intangible one. In 1609, Galileo Galilei invented the astronomical telescope and thus, he pioneered the way of scientific research of the outer space. This moment represents the point in which the system of referring to a divine power alters significantly. The results the Italian scientist was going to have, completed with the theory of the infinite space, developed by Giordano Bruno, constitutes the beginning of universe's desacralization, process, which causes the Baroque era a profound epistemological shock. The effect of this fundamental rupture is considered the disaggregating of the Baroque spirit, which ultimately led to an acute feeling of world's perishableness, (the motif of *fortuna labilis* is to know a glorious career in the Baroque literature), insecurity and instability. To be or not to be becomes the double truth that characterizes the Baroque spirit.

As far as art and literature are concerned, the spiritual scission of the epoch is translated into an augmented view over death and illusion, into a subtle aesthetic game of *engano* and *desengano* (illusion and disillusion). The Baroque art thus becomes the art of images, which try to prevent the anxiety caused by time elapsing in visual forms (masks, allegories, ornaments, emblems, theatrical performances). The metaphor of

BDD-A5814 © 2010 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:08:28 UTC)

world as a theatre (*theatrum mundi*) dominates the Baroque era, even though man's representation as actor on the stage of life is not a Baroque invention. Gryphius, Shakespeare, Calderon, Cervantes, Gracián will turn this metaphor into a principle of social existence. Grandiose fiestas, luxuriant backgrounds and ornaments, the superfluousness of masks, metaphors and costumes are elements of a diversion meant to balance life boredom and disappointment. Since each individual had to play a part in this comedy (or rather tragedy!), the human type characteristic to this period is *el discreto* (as the Hispanics called it). For Baltasar Gracián (the theoretician of the new behaviour), caution and prudence constitute the defining features of a discreto. A discreto is a man who knows how to choose the suitable conduct under certain circumstances, who knows how to adapt to given situations and who masters the art of dissimulation. To become a Protean is one of his qualities. The Baroque role model has *ingenio* and erudition, knows how avoid traps, but also how to take advantage of them, to benefit from them.

The Baroque art and literature began to shape themselves at the beginning of the 17th century and they gradually spread to different cultural areas, up to the middle of the following century; (in the countries where the Baroque flourished later, echoes of the movement are to be found even around the year 1800). The evolution and the behaviour of the Baroque movement gained the most various and contradictory significations. For example, R. Munteanu characterizes the history of the term Baroque as complex and shocking.

Source of endless controversy, the movement cannot be defined in only one way; the various labels attached to the Baroque trend raised the legitimate question whether it can be considered an independent movement and artistic style, comprised within well-known time limits, or a mere recurrent appearance, stylistically identifiable. The partisans of the former opinion limit the Baroque manifestation to the period between the end of the 16th century and the first half of the 18th one. Thus, the Baroque becomes a historical concept, forced in between more or less precise boundaries, a phenomenon taken out of the whole of the development of the human thinking and feeling. Furthermore, to consider the 17th century a Baroque century, by excellence, is an incorrect approach, which cannot pass an objective examination. The presence of Baroque notes in all arts, genres and cultural products of the respective epoch cannot be supported with unquestionable arguments, because this historical period is characterized by the coexistence of several styles, aspirations and tendencies.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ciorănescu, Alexandra, *Barocul sau descoperirea dramei*, Ed. Dacia, Cluj, 1980
Curtius, Ernst Robert, *Literatura europeană şi Evul Mediu latin*, Ed. Univers, Bucureşti, 1970
Hocke, Gustav Réne, *Lumea ca labirint*, Ed.Meridiane, Bucureşti, 1973
Hocke, Gustav Réne, *Manierismul în literatură*, Bucureşti, Ed.Univers, 1977
Huizinga, Johan, *Amurgul Evului Mediu*, Ed. Humanitas, Bucureşti, 2002
Villari Rosario, *Omul baroc,* Ed. Polirom, Bucureşti, 2000

BDD-A5814 © 2010 Universitatea din Piteşti
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:08:28 UTC)