

Brexit and the Baroque

by Peter Davidson and Alison Shell



I.

Baroque is a word that glides the tongue most agreeably down the palate to a firm halt behind the teeth. Or savour the more cosmopolitan *barocco* with its twirl of air in the mouth and the little languishing sigh (sacred or profane) that is inevitably pronounced with it. Despite the loveliness of the word itself, and the global diversity of wonders which it evokes, it still sits awkwardly on an Anglophone tongue, and there are many texts and objects, from the poetry of John Donne to the architecture of Hawksmoor and Vanbrugh, which are explained away for the insular reader as ‘Metaphysical’ or ‘neo-classical,’ or (a personal favourite) ‘artisan mannerist.’ Say anything, however foolish, rather than use the B-word.

The B-word, with all its sophisticated and cosmopolitan implications, is dubiously British and belongs too much to an international movement to be acceptable. I received an Easter e-card this year (from an organisation which should have known better), which hedged its bets by describing a standard late seventeenth-century drawing of the risen Christ as ‘this classical baroque image.’ It is as though the word ‘baroque’ still needed to be rendered respectable by the (in context meaningless) word ‘classical,’ as though the word ‘baroque’ by itself rendered the image dubious or alien.

Anglophone culture thinks that it can write itself out of the international culture of the late Renaissance and the early modern world, indeed write itself out of international culture altogether. Depressingly, that presumption seems to have been questioned afresh in every generation. It is as if there are two possible versions of history, versions which map with depressing ease onto the major

divisions which kept Britain in a state of simmering civil strife for two centuries after 1560, and which seem all too much with us.

There is the insular version of English history, in which the closed frontiers and cultural isolation of the reign of Elizabeth I somehow constitute an unsurpassed golden age, because of the extraordinary vernacular literary production of the time, disregarding its lack of achievement in most other spheres. Opposed to this is the kind of cosmopolitan aesthetic which stretches from the Earl of Arundel's employment of Inigo Jones, through the cultural achievements of the Stuart courts, to the haunting fallout of the Grand Tour, the temples in the green gardens, the long British attempt to create 'the south in the north.'

Needless to say the latter has always attracted the dislike and suspicion of the former. This steady hostility could be said to stretch from Puritan hatred for the court of Charles I, to Victorian writers of ghost stories who often imply that His Lordship returned from his Grand Tour bringing corruption and necromancy home along with his *pietra dura* and his Piranesis. As at the end of John Meade Falkner's brilliantly-voiced *Lost Stradivarius*, the young squire's guardian swears that *given what happened to Papa in Italy* the boy will be brought up to hold a cricket bat, but never touch a violin bow.

The extraordinary assumption of exceptionality characterises the formation of the university curriculum in the English-speaking countries: in no other jurisdictions does the renaissance Latin which was the daily medium of international communication receive such cursory attention. This is bad in England and Wales, troubling in Ireland, and stupefying in Scotland: for two centuries after the era of Dunbar and Henryson, Scottish literature is, in essence, a Latin literature. On Saturday mornings in the 1990s, when we met in the baker's shop in Leiden, I was invariably greeted by the Professor of Theology as 'the countryman of the universally-celebrated (Scottish, Latin-language) poet Buchanan.' Some universities are just more universal than others.

The nation state is an enemy of international Latin, which it pushes to the margins to make exclusive room for the vernacular. It is also the bitter enemy of the lovely, supple, permeable, cosmopolitan baroque, the style which hybridises with beguiling ease, the style whose literary stylisations are never at a loss for words in any tongue. We remember, however, the words of Theresa May: it is essential to be an unequivocal citizen of somewhere, rather than a cosmopolitan citizen of nowhere. (The clergy, including Mrs May's father, mostly had their sherry supplied by expatriated Lancastrians and Aberdonians, usually Catholics. As a descendant of this cosmopolitan merchant community, I take her remarks deeply personally.) Never has *Nowhere* looked more beautiful, since Mrs May phrased it thus: its skyline bristling with obelisks, statues, and gilded trophies of arms.

It is ridiculous to assert that there is no English baroque: Donne's poems and sermons, the palaces and collections of the Stuart Kings, the music and machines of their masques, Milton's *Comus* and Marvell's *Nymph Complaining*, Purcell's *Funeral Music*, Blenheim and Seaton Delaval, the temple-scattered lake landscapes of Stourhead and Stowe, all of these are exercises in the cosmopolitan international mode, exercises in that international visual and verbal language which we call "baroque". But after Waterloo, the climate turned rainy and spiky, and Pugin and Ruskin contrasted the purities of Gothic with the international evils of the renaissance and those nameless decadences which followed it. The B-word was hardly heard again in the land until the 1920s, when the Sitwells and Ronald Firbank uttered it all the time with mischief aforethought, never doubting its power to annoy, never doubting the queer power of cosmopolitan complexity to rile insular simplification.

II.

This refusal to recognise connection, while advancing a belief in an insular exceptionalism, has affected even the selection of those vernacular works which are edited, published and taught. All too often, English literature is constricted into little-England literature by those who control the canonical borders. Take, for instance, the continuing use of the term 'metaphysical' in preference to 'baroque' when discussing the work of poets operating between the heyday of the sonnet and the Restoration. An early route inland can be found in Samuel Johnson's life of Abraham Cowley, where he describes 'a race of writers that may be termed the metaphysical poets', in whose work 'the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together'. Heterogeneity, complexity, tension and violence feature regularly in present-day discussions of baroque aesthetics, and if the term 'baroque' had been more widely used in Johnson's time, one suspects he would have gone for it.

By the early 20th century, thanks to theorists such as Heinrich Wölfflin and Walter Benjamin, notions of the baroque had achieved wide scholarly currency – meaning there was less excuse for the titles of Sir Herbert Grierson's anthology *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century* (1921) or Helen Gardner's *The Metaphysical Poets* (1957). The latter was a staple feature of reading lists for half a century, despite the fact that in 1975 – the year that the British people voted to stay in the European Economic Community – an alternative anthology, *Baroque Poetry*, had appeared from Everyman. Alongside canonical favourites like John Donne, George Herbert and Henry Vaughan, the anthology featured such European poets as Guillaume Salluste du Bartas, Luis de Góngora, Joachim Du Bellay, Andreas Gryphius, and even a Mexican woman writer, Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz.

The editors of *Baroque Poetry*, J.P. Hill and E. Caracciolo-Trejo, asserted in their introduction: "Metaphysical Poetry" seems too parochial, too English, and decades of readers and students have sweated under the load of ambiguities that the word contains. ... Baroque, however, in the common tongue, carries some notion of period, some notion of the unusual, dramatic, and inspired portrayal of nature and love and religion, some notion of style and, most importantly of all, a strong overtone of internationalism.' As this indicates, the anthology was both outward- and

forward-looking, anticipating humanities departments' present-day interest in comparative literature and intercultural encounter. Yet it never went into a second edition, losing out to Gardner in the anthology wars. One hopes this had nothing to do with the fact that Gardner was writing from Oxford, while Hill and Caracciolo-Trejo were from a newer university, Essex.

A more charitable assumption is that the very unsatisfactoriness of the term 'metaphysical poets' has ensured its longevity, as a teething ring for undergraduates and a scratching-post for academics. It has surely also lasted because of its cachet: to highlight the cerebral qualities of its key writers is to speak well of their readers. As the seventeenth-century writer Jasper Mayne commented on Donne's verse, 'We are thought wits; when 'tis understood'. Later, T.S. Eliot was to contend that the metaphysical poets anticipated the difficulties of literary modernism. Yoking together literature and philosophy, the idea of metaphysical poetry sounds positively daunting. As John Dryden complained, again of Donne: 'he affects the Metaphysics ... in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts ...'

Despite Donne's flirtatious proclivities, his verse – it seemed – wasn't for girls. Given the intimate relationship between the opening of universities to women and the study of English literature at degree level, Dryden's Yorkie-bar comment must have posed an irresistible challenge to the early generations of women who went into higher education. No wonder that expertise in the field became an acceptable way for women to appear clever: in 1966, Gardner became the first woman to hold Oxford's Merton Professorship of English Literature. Another, though, was an early opponent of the term 'metaphysical'. In 1917, Grace Bagnall Bramham commented: 'It was thrown off ... before scholarship was in a state to receive it, and has been in the way ever since. ... Conceits were not the independent invention of a few poets but a craze prevalent all over west Europe.' Predating Grierson's anthology by four years, Bramham's analysis has lasted better than his.

Yet even though Grierson succeeded in clinching a bespoke canonical deal for British poetry, he was well aware of its European context. His was a softer Brexit than that set out by Gardner, whose introduction to *The Metaphysical Poets* manages not to mention any continental writer later than Tacitus. From this, one would never gather that even the term has continental antecedents: long before Johnson or even Dryden, Fulvio Ludovico Testi wrote of Italian poetry as replete with *concetti metaphysici et ideali*.

But then, the compulsion to link metaphysical poetry and Englishness has overborne even critics who start out with other intentions. Within an article on Robert Southwell published in 1964, Helen C. White began by identifying the problems with opposing the terms 'metaphysical' and 'baroque', but ended with an obedient attempt to discriminate on national grounds. Despite

Robert Southwell's 'Baroque luxuriance', she asserts, 'there is a certain underlying firmness of purpose' in his writing 'that is very much in the contemporary English tradition.'

It is no coincidence that Southwell, a Jesuit martyr-poet who studied on the Continent, prompts these confused reflections – nor that Richard Crashaw, a contemporary of Donne and Herbert who lived on the Continent after his conversion to Catholicism, used to be routinely maligned for his un-English bad taste. Both poets have had a fitful presence in the canon compared to their Anglican counterparts, precisely because they have been deemed too 'baroque' and not 'metaphysical' enough. Protestant English poets, we gather, are tough, intellectual and masculine, while poets associated with the Catholic continent are lachrymose, emotional and feminine: a religious *cordon sanitaire* which is all the odder because any list of 'baroque' characteristics is easy to parallel in 'metaphysical' poets. In search of extravagant, operatic emotion, for instance, one might turn to Herbert's 'Sighs and Groans', 'For thou only art / The mighty God, but I a silly worm; / O, do not bruise me!', or Donne's 'Take me to you, imprison me; for I / Unless you enthrall me, never shall be free, / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.'

In the past, the notion of 'metaphysical' poetry and poets gave intellectual heft to the relatively new discipline of English literature. It has its uses too within today's crowded canon – if it means that Donne, Herbert and the rest are actually read, this must be a good thing. *Metaphysical Poetry* (2006), the most recent anthology to go out under the heading, is pragmatically titled, even while its editor, Colin Burrow, foregrounds the term's difficulties. Naturalising the idea of baroque verse would, though, make life easier, and bypass the political implications of 'metaphysical': a term which tells one less about literary characteristics than about how the English have wished to be seen. As it becomes more difficult for students from continental Europe to study in the UK, and language departments in British universities wither, it is time to caution against isolationism in all its forms.

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