

# Portuguese Literature and the Baroque: the Complex Labyrinth of Creation and Aesthetic Metamorphosis

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**Abstract**—The Baroque European Mouvement influenced Europe from the end of the Neo-Classicism. This period represents a major change in Portuguese literature, as well as in Europe, due to the new approach to life, religion and philosophy that operated a profound metamorphosis in aesthetics and created a complex labyrinth of influences, paradox and innovation that brought to literature a set of domains that were forgotten during Neo-Classicism.

**Keywords**— Portuguese Literature, Baroque, Baroque characteristics.

## I. INTRODUCTION

After a period of equilibrium, aesthetic rules, Latin and greek models, background for a common theoretical framework, a common ideology of creation, a new meaning for the role of the artist and a new horizon of faith in mankind's ability for building a new society with strong values, all this comes to an end when social and politic clashes start all over Europe, mixed with religion criticism and loss of faith in Classics.

The Baroque period comes to life with a new Europe, divided between the celebration of life and wealth and the total loss of Renaissance values of tolerance and respect, preached by the humanists that couldn't change society. In this complex labyrinth, Baroque style is a mixture of all this and brings to Portuguese Literature the ambiguity of life. First of all, we must understand the political changes in Portugal. The Encyclopædia Britannica defines this period as follows:

From a literary and political point of view, the 17th century found Portugal in a state of decadence. Before Portugal lost its independence to Spain in 1580, Spanish influence had introduced the Inquisition and, with it, the censorship and suppression of books. In the 1550s the Jesuits had also gained control of higher education. A preoccupation with Classical Latin was already apparent, in the work of Camões and others, before the example of the Spanish poet Luis de Góngora y Argote was felt; but with the exhaustion of the national spirit that underlay Portugal's political eclipse at the end of the 16th century, the influence of Góngora penetrated deeply. Its extent may be seen in the

five volumes of *Fénix renascida* (1716–28; “Phoenix Reborn”), which anthologizes the poetry of the preceding century and shows the pervasiveness of Gongorism (*gongorismo*; see also *culteranismo*) in Portuguese poetry. This taste for the construction of literary enigmas, puzzles, labyrinths, and visual designs, all presented in an esoteric, Latinate style, led to cabalistic and occult exercises. Satire was used by those who wished to attack the dominant formalist style; the anonymous *Arte de furtar* (1652; “Art of Stealing”) unmasks social deviance in the time of John (João) IV, who was restored as king of a newly independent Portugal in 1640. Yet Spanish influence continued after Portugal regained its independence: use of Spanish was common, and the Portuguese court preferred Italian opera, French plays, and Spanish operettas, to the detriment of local drama and acting. The discovery of gold and diamonds in Brazil at Minas Gerais underwrote and prolonged the wealth of Baroque art in Portugal.

The foremost literary figure of the age was Francisco Manuel de Melo, whose works became classics of both Spanish and Portuguese literature. With *Epanáforas de vária história portuguesa* (1660; “Anaphoras of Diverse Portuguese History”), a series of historical episodes, and *Apólogos dialogais* (published posthumously in 1721), a collection of dialogues on literary and social topics, he strove to free himself from subservience to Spanish form and style. He was more successful in doing so in prose than in verse. Most lyricists of the period remained steeped in Gongorism. Epic poets continued to be active, but few of their productions were more than rhymed chronicles. (...) (2020)

That is why a perfect metaphor for the Baroque is an imperfect pearl, as The Encyclopaedia Britannica tells us:

Baroque pearl, pearl that is irregularly or oddly shaped. Pearl formation does not always occur in soft-tissue areas, where the expanding pearl sac grows regularly because it encounters no appreciable resistance. Pearl cysts are sometimes lodged in muscular tissue, for example, where,

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unable to overcome the resistance of tough muscle fibres, they assume irregular or unusual shapes.

Baroque pearls were highly prized by Renaissance jewellers, who saw them not as misshapen products of sea molluscs but rather as unique and exquisite natural forms. They were often used in pieces of jewellery to form the bodies of figures. A superb example is a piece from the 16th century known as the Canning Jewel (Victoria and Albert Museum, London), in which a large baroque pearl is used for the torso of a sea figure having the body of a man and the tail of a fish, the whole mounted in enamelled gold set with pearls, rubies, and diamonds (2020)

Aguiar e Silva explains why this period has different connections in time and space:

First, it is necessary to note that the European Baroque is not a perfectly homogeneous phenomenon, which has appeared at the same time in different European literature. On the contrary, we must admit its formation and in its diffusion, chronological and geographical diversities, as it happens, moreover, with other literary periods (romanticism, for example, asserted itself in Germany and England long before it manifested itself in France ). Central European Baroque is much later than Italian Baroque and while in French literature the Baroque disappears practically at the end of the 17th century, in certain works of literature, such as Spanish and Portuguese, the Baroque persists vigorously throughout the first half of the 18th century. It is quite understandable the disparity found in the formation and diffusion of the Baroque in European literatures, if one thinks that, in the sixteenth century, each of the European works of literature had very dispersed states of development; when in Italian literature, around 1530, Renaissance values began to decline, Spain began to accept the same values, whereas France only around 1550, with the poets of Pleiades, will have Renaissance literature. (1986, p. 445)

However, Aguiar e Silva identifies a set of similarities between Portuguese Literature and European Literature: the Baroque and the opposition (?) To classicism, the connection between the Baroque and the Catholic Reformation, the Baroque theme and the Baroque style. (1996, p. 437 – 502).

Baroque still arouses many disputes and different interpretations. In the Encyclopedia.com we can read the following:

Its psychology was self-aware, mystical, manipulative, melodramatic, and playful. Its subjects ranged from the abject to the sublime, from caricatures to idealized portraits, from sexualized ecstasies to bloody dismemberings. Its modes of expression were encomia, catafalques, and epithalamia; its key symbols the mask, the labyrinth, and the telescope and microscope.

This popular view holds much truth for many art forms, but in the second half of the twentieth century, scholars led by Ernst Curtius and Wolfgang Stechow began to question the legitimacy of the baroque as a period of style. They accepted *baroque* as a legitimate stylistic term that may be applied to some late Hellenistic, late Gothic, and other arts, but not *baroque* as a period style for the seventeenth century. The new consensus today asserts that the baroque, like any period style, rely on an essentialist Hegelianism that was discredited along with other totalizing prejudices such as sexism, racism, and nationalism. Furthermore, it was questioned whether an originally pejorative term signifying deformation and mawkish emotionalism could fairly represent a heterogenous phenomenon that included Carlo Dolci's pious quattrocento, the limpid mist of Vermeer's rooms, and Cassiano Dal Pozzo's artists conscientiously recording, classifying, and reconstructing the ancient past. (2020)

Different authors like Skrine (1979), Egginton (2010), Hills (2011), Beverley (2008) or Martin (2018) underline the complex labyrinth of Baroque as a period, as movement connected to profound social changes in Europe and notice the several metamorphoses that this period had. In Portugal, we can also say that the Baroque writers were truly amazed in this aesthetic labyrinth and produced literary works that reflect that same complex and mixed feelings towards life and art

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