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Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko*: Intimations of the Baroque

The colonial baroque

In *The American Crucible,* the third volume of his magisterial history of the making and overthrow of colonial slavery, Robin Blackburn cites the work of Latin American scholars – in particular that of Jose Antonio Maravall and Bolivar Eccheverria – in describing a distinctive style of cultural and aesthetic power which they call the 'colonial baroque'. Extrapolating from their work he suggests:

> The baroque itself can be seen as a celebration of royal power and of its universal destiny. The baroque was the aesthetic of the new Absolutist state in which over-arching royal power supposedly *offered protection* to all, and guaranteed an elaborate and differentiated hierarchy. Popular feasting and carnival were absorbed by royal spectacle. The baroque features of empire stressed a harmonious, elaborately articulated constellation of social and ethnic corporations orbiting around the monarch. The baroque responded to the turmoil generated by the Reformation and the Discoveries by re-affirming order and hierarchy, and by recognising all subjects so long as they reciprocated with the deference owed to clerical and royal authority. Mainly associated with the Counter-Reformation *it also appealed to some Protestant monarchs and mercantile elites*. The inclusion of exotic flora and fauna in decorative and sensuous classical tableaux was characteristic and helped stimulate and impress the populace with the resources of the royal power. Fountains, stretches of water and fireworks were mobilised to the same end. In baroque art the trope of the faithful black servant was to multiply, as if a retinue of supposedly attentive Africans could help to overawe the restive Native American or the wayward European servant. (Blackburn 2011, 38)

Aphra Behn's proto-novelistic *Oroonoko* (1688), while clearly lacking the order and the discipline of the hierarchical impulse that Blackburn stresses, may be usefully read

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as the 'unconscious of the baroque', with its very own intimations of the wider project. The ragged, hurriedly composed, contradictory *novella* from the hand of the very first professional woman writer in English contains a series of projections, displacements, and oppositions both within and against this putative baroque hierarchy. Blackburn goes on to describe how:

> In the Americas the baroque was sometimes adopted and reshaped, as it were, 'from below'. Though regulated by the Church and royal officials, the festivals of the colonial baroque foregrounded suffering and torment. Subaltern groups and individuals helped to elaborate the colonial baroque when they sought to assert the spiritual power of suffering. Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz in Mexico asserted a *feminine* dimension of the baroque, which evoked native resistance to the coloniser. (Blackburn 2011, 39)

In 1689, exactly a year after the publication of Behn's novel Sor Juana, a Mexican nun, wrote one of her four 'secular' plays for the Corpus Christi festivals ordained for New Spain. *The Divine Narcissus* conflates the story of Narcissus, with those of both the Aztec god of seeds and Jesus Christ. This allegorical conflation is of course typical of the baroque theatre more generally, as well as in its paternalistic incorporation of the exotic other (and we shall find examples in the English theatre of the period). Such theatrical display is also a feature of the visual arts until the end of the next century, not least in Latin American continent, where the rococo and neo-classical innovations in European art scarcely found root.

Oroonoko's disorderly sympathies

Both the Behn and *Oroonoko* itself now enjoy quasi-canonical status in Anglo-American feminist and post-colonial studies. In fact the novel enjoyed a rich European afterlife in theatrical form, adapted first in 1695 by the English playwright Thomas Southerne (Lipking 1997, 125) and then in 1748 by the French dramatist Pierre Antoine de la Place, appearing in seven separate editions before 1800 (Lipking 1997, 52-53).

Behn appears to have spent some part of her early life in what was the then English colony of Surinam, but which by 1667 had been ceded to the Dutch in exchange for New Amsterdam, as part of their continuing encroachments on Portugal's Brazilian territories. Not only is the novel the work of the very first English woman professional writer, herself already a prolific and popular playwright, but it is almost certainly the first work of imaginative literature in Europe to include as its eponymous hero an African slave (who is also of West African royal descent).

Its climactic action – after some rather fanciful scenes set in the apparently francophile African court of Oroonoko's grandfather, and the betrayal of his mistress Imoinda and himself into English slavery, – is that of his leadership of an unsuccessful slave revolt in Surinam. What is striking and I think unusual is that from the very outset Behn's narrator – speaking *in propria persona* – expresses her total identification with the Native

American inhabitants of the colony, while at the same time making Oroonoko's heroic centrality quite explicit. While the former sympathy is consistent with that of some of the Jesuit missionaries following the work of Bartolomeo de las Casas (and indeed some early northern European accounts), it is rarely if at all accompanied by an equivalent attention to the integrity and humanity, let alone the heroic stature of African slaves. Even more remarkable then is Behn's persistent excoriation of the English merchants and slave-traders – 'such notorious Villains as *Newgate* never transported' and her delight that some of them 'were afterwards Hang'd, when the *Dutch* took possession of the place; others sent off in Chains' (Lipking 1997, 59). She also takes a certain lugubrious pleasure in the prospect of native revolt against the Protestant Dutch on their succession to the territory:

> About this time we were in some mortal Fears, about some Disputes the *English* had with the *Indians*; so that we cou'd scarce trust ourselves, without great Numbers, to go to any *Indian* Towns, or Place, where they abode; for fear they shou'd fall upon us, as they did immediately after my coming away: and that it was in the possession of the *Dutch*, who us'd 'em not so civilly as the *English*; so that they cut in pieces all they cou'd take, getting into Houses, and hanging up the Mother, and all her Children about her; and cut a Footman, I left behind me, all in Joynts, and nailed him to Trees. (Lipking 1997, 47)

The baroque; the counter-reformation; the ancient regime

How might these fictional perspectives, though evidently based on some first-hand experience of New World settlement, form part of an English form of 'colonial baroque'? We might think the enterprise largely confined to the Iberian maritime powers. The sixteenth century Hapsburg Empire stretched '….from Spain to the Andes, from Austria to Peru, from Lombardy to the Philippines, from the Low Countries to Mexico' (Blackburn 2011, 39). It was thus an appropriate global stage for the performance of a great Imperial extravaganza. The new styles of the baroque, however, in sculpture, painting, architecture and more general aspects of display were forged in the heart of Italy, particularly with the sponsorship of the Papacy. Much earlier of course, with the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas, within two years of the discovery of the New World, Spain had submitted to Papal authority in accepting the division of the world with Portugal, initially its only plausible rival in the Atlantic and Indian oceans. These two powers had consolidated their home territories through the *reconquista,* which, with its forced conversions and expulsions, had brought a new totalising ruthlessness in the name of the Catholic church.

The baroque, however, a cultural system determined by the Counter-Reformation initiated by the Council of Trent sought new emphases moving beyond the simple insistence on rigid orthodoxy. Boosted by the wave of imported 'imperial' luxury goods (and, we might add, bodily addictions: sugar, tea, coffee, chocolate, and tobacco, as well as new sources of peasant vitamins; Indian corn, the potato and the tomato) it brought a new human sensuousness into play, not least in its regard for the human body, articulated

in more dynamic and fluid forms than hitherto. While some of this was already present in the pageantry and patronage of the courts of early modern Renaissance Europe (including the Tudor and Stuart monarchies in England), it took on vivid sculptural and painterly forms, sensational if not shocking representations of martyrdom and ecstasy, in self-consciously theatrical architectural settings throughout the Italian peninsula and elsewhere. Representation of secular pleasures and agonies of the flesh might accompany, even subvert, the theological programme, addressing a world of paradoxical experience which the Church itself was happy to incorporate as long as it continued to sustain its power: *reculer pour mieux sauter.* Cultural historians have tended to argue that it is with romanticism, particularly as it is shaped by German idealist thought, that the aesthetic realm began to claim for itself unprecedented authority and autonomy. The flamboyant art that flaunted itself throughout the Spanish territories of 17c and 18c southern Europe and beyond suggests otherwise. Implicit in such an argument is that the 'romantic' strategies of aesthetic command that emerge in the aftermath of the European revolutions of the late 18c and early 19c are as indebted to the artistic legacy we call baroque, as they are to Enlightenment ideals of reason and science. If romantic art exhibits all the symptoms of the dialectical play between its historical nostalgias, its heightened individualism, and the forces of progress, industrialisation and emergent nationalism, it seems to me that there is an equally rich mine of human potential in the art that responded to pre-industrial relations of power and economic advance in the *ancients regimes* of Europe. The baroque can, and did, provide ideological cover for ruthless forms of human exploitation, but in its unconscious – or rather its 'real' knowledge of the human condition, it opens up on to another vein of social and individual experience. If the characteristic devices of Enlightenment thought were those of *dissection* and *critique*, then the baroque art that runs in parallel is that of display, surface, and a rich apprehension of the body and its appetites.

Baroque prospects: the English restoration and counter-revolution

Whatever, by the end of the 16c, in the wake of the reformation and indeed the Council of Trent, it had become clear that not only the protestant English and Dutch (to say nothing of the Swedes and Danes), but also the French were establishing competing claims to maritime imperial sway. As Blackburn suggests the forms of baroque 'appealed to some Protestant monarchs'. (Certainly, you can find exemplary baroque palaces, churches, theatres and gardens in both Copenhagen and Stockholm) The seventeenth century European wars of religion compounded this rivalry, and it is in the context of the shifting forces of the English revolution that Behn's work takes its contradictory place. In fact, there are sufficient characteristics of the English monarchy of the late seventeenth century until at least 1688 to suggest it was hardly a protestant one at all. There is a distinctive and momentous shift in English cultural life of the period 1660-1688 where for a variety of reasons it assumes some of the forms and acquires the tastes for

a pan-European baroque style. By the beginning of the next century, not least after the 1707 Act of Union with Scotland, a further shift occurs, and a new aggressively *British* state develops its own distinctively protestant political and cultural agenda, described so effectively in Linda Colley's *Britons* (1992). The putative 'liberties' of Whig parliamentarianism, with its elite Palladian country houses and informally landscaped gardens, combined with an investment in Atlantic slavery that outdid that of all the other European powers was to offer an alternative to the baroque social order, paradoxically attractive to generations of French *philosophes* from Voltaire to Rousseau.

I want briefly to set out some of the conditions of that social-cultural world of the early 1660s that Aphra Behn, born into a lower class, possibly Puritan family, entered 'from below' as it were. It had been the Anglo-Catholic and absolutist policies of Charles I that had provoked the English Civil War and led to his defeat, capture and execution in 1649. His son, the future Charles II, from 1651, together with members of his future royal court, spent the whole period of the Commonwealth in French exile. The restoration of the monarchy in 1660 more or less coincides with the end of the French regency and assumption of power in 1661 by Louis XIV. The restoration marked a problematic return to absolutist and neo-Catholic politics. Charles II, married in 1662 to the Portuguese princess Catherine of Braganza, was almost certainly a covert Catholic. In 1670 he and his cabinet – the notorious Cabal – signed with the French monarchy the Secret Treaty of Dover, the terms of which included breaking the Triple Alliance with the protestant powers of Holland and Sweden, undertaking to support Louis XIV in his invasion of Holland the following year, and the eventual announcement of Charles's own conversion to Catholicism and the return of England to the Catholic faith.

Staging spectacle

If these were the political machinations of the regime then we need also to note that they were accompanied by the return of elaborate court ceremony; a veritable explosion of baroque building programmes led most notably by Christopher Wren; the re-opening of public theatres for often spectacular performance with women appearing on stage for the first time.

In 1664, Behn was still in Surinam while the staging of exotic American material had already begun. The same year saw the premier of John Dryden's *The Indian Queen*. Dryden was to emerge as the leading poet and playwright and probably the most prolific translator of classical verse of the period. He was to become Poet Laureate and later a Catholic convert. The play is just the first in which he uses native American material. (Later he will add material from Spanish history). It mixes promiscuously both Aztec and Inca characters whose tragic nobility is tested through acts of love, war, sacrifice and mercy. Following its success in 1665 Dryden produced a sequel *The Indian Emperor*, again with a cast of heroic native Americans, including Montezuma, but now in conflict anachronistically with both Cortes and Pizarro. This is the play for which Behn, on her

return from America, provided the exotic Indian costumes and feathered headpieces. If this marked her entry into the world of theatre, where Nell Gwynne, Charles II's most notorious mistress, would appear in a revival of the play – her next move suggested a direct implication in royalist politics. At the end of the year she was serving as a government spy in Antwerp, supposedly gathering intelligence about plots against the English crown. Deeply in debt on her return in 1670 her first play, *The Forced Marriage*, was written and professionally performed (Lipking 1997, 265).

Meanwhile Dryden now began to deploy Spanish material in the two-part spectacle *The Conquest of Granada*. As in his New World drama he is more interested in the non-Spanish characters and their capacity for the full range of heroic behaviours. In this play appears the extraordinary speech whose rhetorical trope was to reverberate through European history, often and significantly misattributed to Rousseau among others. Almazor, apparently a Moor, interrupts a street fight, kills one of the combatants, and is sentenced to immediate death by King Boabdelin. This is his response:

> No man has more contempt than I, of breath;
> But whence has thou the right to give me death?
> Obey'd as Soveraign by thy Subjects be,
> But know, that I alone am King of me.
> I am as free as nature first made man
> 'Ere the base laws of Servitude began
> When wild in woods the noble Savage ran. (Dryden 1808, 40)

Thus Dryden's coinage emerges from a nexus of continuing theatrical negotiations between the ethnically heterodox inhabitants (Almazor will turn out to have been born a Christian) of the Spanish empire, where categories of the heroic and the human are represented in a constant struggle with the hierarchical ordering of that empire. As yet this series of provocative stagings does not produce a heroic African. It will be the final stages of the Exclusion Crisis of 1688 that will lead to Behn's imagination of the paradoxically subtitled *History of the Royal Slave*.

Allegories of exclusion

Oroonoko is dedicated to Richard Maitland, later the fourth Earl of Lauderdale, and nephew to the first Duke of Lauderdale, the most personally odious of the members of Charles II's Cabal that had negotiated the Treaty of Dover (Lipking 1997, 5). The Duke, by means of what was seen as a 'wonderful' marriage in 1674 took possession of Ham House in south west London, which was then remodelled into what, remains the finest of baroque palaces in England. But in 1688 for the Catholic royal courtier Maitland the game was up and together with James II he went into exile. The Protestant succession was guaranteed by the arrival of William III from Holland and the defeat of James's army at the Battle of the Boyne the following year.

Thus, Behn's tale of an exiled African monarch and his tragic demise may allegorically enact the fate of the last Stuart king. But if it does so it also releases independently a whole set of emancipatory possibilities which will leave at least a sentimental trace in British consciousness for the next hundred years. Against those traces, however, the surge towards an imperial system rooted in the bourgeois virtues of self-help, self-discipline, the careful keeping of accounts will receive the more potent ideological buttress of the deeply protestant fable that is Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Arguably the British 'vanguard' role in the abolitionist movement of the late 18c is a response to the inefficiency of slavery rather than its inhumanity.

Allegories of inclusion

Of course if what I am here describing as a baroque phase of English history does not immediately disappear. I want to conclude by tracking one particular motif of baroque iconography that will manifest itself as late as the 1720s in English painting, and that flickers fitfully in the poetry of the period.

Prior to the discovery of the New World there had been just three continents, which suited the narratives of Christianity quite neatly. God himself had Trinitarian form; the three sons of Noah provided a post-diluvium ancestry for the three peoples of humankind; there were three peoples of the book (beyond which there were only barbarous Scythians and their ilk). Not only were there three shepherds at the nativity, but also three Magi, who in late medieval and early renaissance painting are more often than not pictured representing the three corners of the earth, with the African often appearing in Oroonoko-style heroic guise.

Indeed, there seems to have been a significant sub-Saharan African community in Lisbon well before the rise of Atlantic slavery by the end of the 15c. All the more remarkable then is the most extraordinary work of Portuguese art to be found in the northern interior. I mean that painting of the Nativity in the gallery at Viseu by Grão Vasco, produced by at the latest 1506, less than a decade after the Portuguese touched the Brazilian coast. At the very centre of the picture, lightly dancing, in the front of the queue and out of the shadows in which the oriental and African monarchs had often lurked, is a Brazilian Indian with a magnificent feathered head-dress (that may look forward to the props provided by Behn for the London theatre a century and a half later!)

As possibly the very first representation of a native American to appear in the European civic-ecclesiastical sphere, it also marks the beginning of a new visual order whose development is tracked by Hugh Honour in *The New Golden Land* (1975). Painters, sculptors and architects (and their patrons) sought to show a wider world with a new quadrilateral symmetry. There was not just new wealth, but new motifs of flora and fauna to be incorporated into an adequate but dynamic account of this expanded material sphere. While the Council of Trent sat from 1545 until 1563, devising policies for a restructured Catholic hegemony, it is roughly from the 1570s that we find, as part of an active cultural

transformation not only a proliferation of images of America in the iconological guide books (for example Maarten de Vos' America of 1574 riding on the back of an armadillo), but also ambitious architectural and frescoed projects such as the pioneering Sala dei Mappamundi in the spectacularly designed Farnese Palazzo Caprarola in Viterbo, representing all four continents. It was Bernini's restructuring of Rome's Piazza Navona and his design of the Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi in 1651 which was to give definitive if fluid shape to the perceived but equal energies of the four continents. The muscular nude bodies of the river gods ripple of course with the passage of water from the fountain.

The work of the Dutch Jan van Kessel with his large canvases of the four continents (1665/6) and that of the Italian Jesuit Andrea Pozzo at San Ignazio (1694) in Rome are key contributors to what will become a veritable tradition, whose most notable examples are the ceiling frescoes of Giambattista Tiepolo. First there is work in Wurzburg (1750/3) and then the later reprise of the subject in the *Apotheosis of the Spanish Empire* (1762/6) for the royal palace in Madrid. All the more remarkable then is the appearance of the same motif in the painted ceiling in the Wren-designed Royal Naval Hospital at Greenwich.as early as 1720. It is the work of James Thornhill, and the more remarkable in that English painting of the period is notoriously 'backward' in both style and technique. The successful court painters of the preceding century were invariably of either Dutch or German origin, and had trained in mainland Europe. Somehow Thornhill seems to have transcended the usual limits of English visual art, and could confidently display this motif of the European baroque.

If Europe tends to take centre stage in these visual manifestations of princely sway, it is equally clear that it is not simply as the grounds of imperial loot that the other continents appear. They are rather images of a richly diverse humankind: exotic, perhaps, but innately noble and certainly equal.

Utopia and prophesy

We live, all of us, *pace* the work of Foucault, constrained by the pathological discourses of historically transforming systems of power. Those of us who come after the modern systems of imperial conquest and slavery, and up to a point are still complicit with them, are as much inducted by the physical addictions and 'necessities' which accompanied and in some sense maintained their continuities, as by any of the 'discursive practices' that form the substance of the Foucauldian critique. I have already indicated some of these: sugar, coffee, tea, tobacco, to which we might add cocaine (the original ingredient of Coca Cola) and opium. The term 'banana republic' is not a misnomer either given the increasing dependence of the European masses – peasantry and emergent working class alike – on New World nutrients: potatoes, maize, tomatoes, and later the preserved beef of the *pampas*.

Rather than the continuing invocation of Foucault however it might be more interesting to look back to some work by Bertolt Brecht and in particular those poems in his

collection of 1926/7: *A Reader for Those who Live in Cities*. These take a full measure of the contradictions of boom years of post-world war one America (its adumbration of a mass consumer society as well as its impact on the German economy). In particular, we find in 'This Babylonian Confusion', excoriating as it does the methods of capitalist speculation and production, these lines, spoken by the later inhabitants of a better, even utopian world:

> They said to me: You should have changed
> Your houses or else your food
> Or yourselves. Tell us, why did you not have
> A blueprint, if only
> In books, perhaps of earlier times –
> A blueprint of men, either drawn
> Or described, for it seems to us
> Your motive was quite base
> And also quite easy to change. Almost anyone
> Could have seen it was wrong, inhuman, exceptional.
> Were there not some such old and
> Simple model you could have gone by
> In your confusion? (Brecht 1976, 174)

It may still be worth finding in the old works of discredited systems the 'blueprints' of which Brecht speaks here. There is, I suggest, even a utopian dimension to some aspects of the colonial baroque, the attempt to find a coherent social and productive order may have released as many new human possibilities as the projects of the emergent Enlightenment. It is not then wholly surprising to find at the conclusion of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's 2000 study *Empire*, the otherwise seemingly remarkable claim by that incorrigible old 'red brigader', Negri, the example of St Francis of Assisi as a model for the contemporary freedom fighter: 'Once again in postmodernity we find ourselves in Francis's situation, posing against the misery of power the joy of being' (Hardt and Negri 2000, 413).

For these reasons and others, the exceptionalism of 18c and 19c Latin American social and political development (and within that the exceptionalism of Brazil itself) must always remain of truly human interest. If in the wake of Bolivarist national liberation we find the first effective enactment of inclusive membership of modern states – regardless of ethnic identity and origin – (and in the case of Venezuela in 1817 the first instance of the formal abolition of capital punishment) – we may wonder how far this is a product of enlightened reason, the economic interests of the *creole* classes, or even the fateful ideological legacy of an over determining baroque cultural order, an example of one of those 'criss-crossed' Brechtian blueprints.

Finally, as we all know, Brazil was, after the fatally premature 1792 abortive Tiradentes revolution, the very last country to abolish institutionalised slavery. What then might we think of the great stairway of the Bom Jesus at Congonhas, the work

of the crippled mulatto, O Aleijadinho, culminating as it does in the images of the 12 Old Testament prophets, their curious, but oddly blank eyes looking westward? The last masterpiece of a by now elsewhere redundant baroque art, but at the same time, surely, together with the paintings and drawings of his contemporary Goya, the most thrilling and challenging work of visual art in the first decades of the new nineteenth century.

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