

CHAPTER 3

The Baroque Text

Scholars who have chosen to adopt the term baroque text approach the idea of the baroque as a mode of poetic discourse rather than as a literary period. Nevertheless Sørensen and Storstein (1999) emphasize that the baroque text is the product of a specific society at a particular time and that its social context is of fundamental importance: the text's social, political, and textual environment "tegnér dens særegne fysiognomi" [creates its distinctive physiognomy] (Storstein and Sørensen 1999, 16). They argue that renaissance and baroque are so intricately and inseparably linked that it is impossible to identify one as the precursor of the other. Storstein and Sørensen also show that modernism is not the same as baroque and that post-modernism does not correspond to the so-called "neo-baroque;" though the two have much in common there is a fundamental difference, as will be discussed in this chapter. We should note at the outset that by baroque text they mean a particularly complex form of composition rather than particular works (Storstein and Sørensen 1999, 32). It may be said that by referring to texts rather than a period scholars are avoiding the problem of having to demarcate that period, though clearly the seventeenth century lies at its core, with some debate as to how far beyond the century at either end its influence extends. The present discussion takes no view as to the merits of viewing the baroque as a discursive mode or an historical period, but seeks rather to examine the various ways in which the baroque text has been characterized,

in order to refine our understanding of seventeenth-century Icelandic poetry.

The baroque poet rejects medieval tradition, preferring to make use of rhetorical models from classical antiquity, notably from Latin poetry. The baroque text emerges after a struggle with the vernacular, whose rough edges and want of elegance required attention before its poetry could stand comparison with the great works of the past. A new sense of the literary potential of vernaculars developed during the sixteenth century and soon spread throughout Europe. It finds expression in Bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson's Prologue to his *Sálmabók* [Hymn book] (1589), in which we read that though the new poetic works are to serve primarily as a vehicle for spiritual nourishment they should "so og eirnen modurmale voru til sæmdar og fegurdar" [also be to the honor and enrichment of our native language] (*Sálmabók* 1589, 6). Guðbrandur claims that in terms of its poetic eloquence and resources Icelandic surpasses "morg onnur tungumál, þad vier af vitum" [many other languages known to us] (*Sálmabók* 1589, 6). Yet such was the long tradition of literary creativity in Iceland that the primary task for baroque writers was not so much to develop their language as a tool of literary expression but to preserve and promote their early literary-cultural inheritance. When baroque poets in Denmark and farther afield composed poetry in their own vernaculars to win honor and respect they looked to the traditions of classical antiquity and keenly embraced its metrical and rhetorical inheritance (Storstein and Sørensen 1999, 27). The same may be said of Icelandic poets, except that their own classical inheritance was already to hand in the form of medieval Norse poetic traditions.

The baroque text was associated with the main institutions of social authority—schools, universities, and the church. The attempts of these cultural centers to liberate themselves from medieval conceptual systems were closely associated with artistic experimentation and poetic innovation. Poets were often officials within these institutions. Censorship was common and very few compositions of the period appeared in print. The church's influence was wide-ranging and its literature more extensive, influential, and respected than any other. Luther's belief in the importance of hymn writing represented an aspirational agenda not only during the Reformation

but also for the adherents of post-Reformation orthodoxy and for baroque writers. Storstein and Sørensen indicate that nearly all baroque texts were in some sense occasional pieces; they were not “poems for the poet’s personal use, as Goethe was later to put it, but for social occasions.”¹

In recent years Sørensen and Storstein (1999), Sejersted (1995), and other literary scholars have drawn attention to the importance of traditional biblical exegesis in the interpretation of baroque texts. This methodology identifies in each text a literal (*sensus historicus*) and a transferred meaning (*sensus spiritualis*). The latter has three elements: the allegorical (*sensus allegoricus*), the tropological or moral (*sensus tropologicus*), and the anagogical or prophetic (*sensus anagogicus*) that relates to the afterlife (see Þorleifur Hauksson and Þórir Óskarsson 1994, 206–208; Gunnar Kristjánsson 1995, xci).² Einar Sigurbjörnsson (1994) and Ingeborg Huus (1996) have shown that this exegetical model lies at the heart of Hallgrímur Pétursson’s *Passíúsálmar*. Sørensen and Storstein argue that baroque period historians viewed the world as a manifestation of the divine plan for mankind. God had revealed his thoughts in the Bible and thus biblical interpretation was not only a fundamental theological methodology but also the key to understanding nature, society, and history. However, God’s message in nature was often difficult to understand and required interpretation, and therefore “baroque allegory should be interpreted just like biblical parables—there is no alternative.”³ Thus the Bible serves to legitimize and confirm all other textual interpretation. Baroque texts are often based on other texts, which may be called “prætekster” [pre-texts], especially the Bible, and this ought to ensure that their interpretations are correct. The baroque text is thus in a sense tautologous, restating that which is already known, unlike romantic symbolism, which seeks to create new contexts and perceptions.

Storstein and Sørensen emphasize that both the poet and the

1. digtning til digterens egen personlige lejlighed, som Goethe senere formulerede det, men til sociale begivenheder (Storstein and Sørensen 1999, 60).

2. This method has been called the “interpretatio allegorica,” “allegorese,” or simply “allegory” (see Storstein and Sørensen 1999, 258–259).

3. den barokke allegori udlægges efter de bibelske lignelser—der er ingen anden vej (Storstein and Sørensen 1999, 82).

theologian believed the whole world to be meaningful; it was the role of scholars to decode and articulate that meaning. This process demanded both a learned individual and a theoretical system that could help to identify the meaning of things, and analogies are frequently used to facilitate this process. An analogy is the dynamic force between the literal and spiritual senses, and links between the two are established through the church's exegetical system. Storstein and Sørensen emphasize the importance of analogy as a structuring element in literary works (Storstein and Sørensen 1999, 77); it is perhaps the most characteristic feature of the baroque text.

Storstein and Sørensen point out that in and of itself nature has no importance in the baroque text—it is useful only if it helps to promote understanding of that which is intangible and therefore needs to be presented metaphorically. Thus, for example, in the poetry of Bjarni Gissurarson (1621–1712) and others the sun always has a secondary and more spiritual meaning. The poet, of course, praises all creation including the sun but reminds us that the same sun also has a hidden meaning: it represents Jesus Christ, the Savior. In another of Bjarni's poems the sun is an affectionate wife. In order to decode a particular symbol readers must distance themselves from that symbol as it appears in nature. The phenomena of reality are thus both important and yet worthless when read allegorically. Through metaphor and allegory, the cornerstones of the orthodox baroque text, the world is explored with a theologian's eye. The baroque text does not try to create the kind of imaginative intimacy to be found in romantic works, in which the symbol unites the special and the mundane. On the contrary, intimacy is a deception; intellectuals during the baroque period viewed the world not as a whole but as a fragment, a part of a different and larger reality.

In his compositions the baroque poet strives for that which is complex, colorful, and exaggerated, but also for formality, symmetry, and wholeness. In the conceptual world of the baroque the self (the subject) is of no importance; what matters is an ordered world in which everything obeys the Creator's laws. The baroque text is also a contradictory space in which innovatory impulses interact with profound respect for tradition. In such texts reasoning and imagery do not develop in any natural context but rather form

themselves into a meaningful sequence, often with the help of metaphors. Imagery needs to be vivid and arresting, a source of wonder and surprise for reader and listener alike. Therefore the action can often be dramatic, marked by exclamations and imperative verbs. Readers or listeners need to visualize the event for themselves: the text is a theater of the imagination.

Scholars studying baroque texts often refer not only to the links between the baroque and modernism, but also to the differences between the baroque and romanticism. As Storstein and Sørensen note, interpreting the baroque text requires readers to abandon romantic preconceptions, especially those promoting the twin notions of the writer or artist as a uniquely gifted and sensitized individual and the work of art or literature as an independent organic entity. In 1928 Walter Benjamin proposed the idea that the key to understanding baroque poetry was allegory, whose function was similar to that of the symbol in romantic poetry (see Benjamin 1978). Storstein and Sørensen claim that the link between the baroque and modernism lies partly in the fact that modernism derived many of its ideas from the baroque period, after the influence of romantic symbolism declined during the twentieth century. They cite the ideas of Theodor W. Adorno (1984) who argued that the symbol as an aesthetic priority had run its course during the twentieth century. This opened the way for (or people felt the need for) allegory, as adopted by modernism, and for baroque rhetoric (Storstein and Sørensen 1999, 12; Adorno 1984, 431). An allegorical-rhetorical poetic tradition was needed, and in fact it already existed: indeed, it was older than romantic symbolism.

The interest in the baroque that developed during the period of German impressionism arose in part because the generation that had endured the horrors and humiliations of the First World War identified with baroque poetry; in a world in which everything was in flux they responded to its despair and nihilism. Poets marveled at and imitated the rich and violent baroque imagery. The difference between the poetry of these two periods is nevertheless profound. Despite everything the baroque world is immutable, suffering was the lot of mankind, and the only hope lay in God's mercy, whereas the expressionists engaged with and criticized society and sought

fundamental change. Attitudes to tradition were also very different. The baroque poet revered it, adhering to its rhetorical rules, and seeking merely to revitalize its individual elements, whereas the modernists had a much more radical agenda. Baroque poets refer frequently to the past, to the Bible, and to their folkloric inheritance, which they treated as a living reality rather than part of some sclerotic and obsolete past. The two periods differed not least in attitudes to “authority,” in every sense of the word. The baroque poet would write first about what was generally acknowledged and accepted and then about his own experience of reality, and always in an accessible manner: subjectivity has no place in the baroque text (Storstein and Sørensen 1999, 232). The baroque poet’s theological understanding of the world meant that faith and hope would always provide the answer to transience, destruction, and death, because ultimate reality lay not in death but in resurrection and eternal life. The unhesitating acceptance of this doctrine is far removed from the modernist mindset, especially in those texts that have been associated with “neo-baroque,” a term often used as a synonym for postmodernism (Storstein and Sørensen 1999, 220).

T.S. Eliot (1921) and Hugo Friedrich (1956) played an important part in reviving interest in the baroque text in their own countries, partly by associating baroque with modernism. The two movements share a strong awareness that the link between language and meaning is neither natural nor straightforward. Modernism saw both the world and the self as unraveling or fractured, and in such circumstances language cannot express wholeness or harmony. In the 1960s literature became increasingly about language itself, giving rise to the question as to whether (or to what extent) a self-reflexive text can bear meaning. Sejersted (1995) argues that seventeenth-century Norwegian literature is characterized by experimentation, mainly involving poets who place a high priority on style and form, which in turn directs attention onto the text itself. The baroque poet has no interest in discursive simplicity and transparency, striving rather for repetition, variation, paradox, and contrast:

far from being the most important factor, clear and unambiguous meaning was secondary to fascination with the text as text. The

truly baroque text leads readers away from meaning and clarity by seducing them with rhetoric and sending them off into mazes of repetition and periphrasis.⁴

However, the fundamental difference between baroque and modernism involves their respective worldviews: seventeenth-century baroque perceives God as the undisputed foundation and center of everything, whereas for modernists, the existence of God or any all-embracing truth is undermined by their nihilism and skepticism. It remains the case that neither the baroque nor the modernist text strives for uniqueness and clarity as the highest priority (Sejersted 1995, 120). Sejersted suggests that Jacques Derrida's theory about "the metaphor of the trace" (Derrida 1970, 147ff.) can help us to understand the nature of the baroque text. Derrida argues that each sign contains a clue to another sign that is unlike itself. However, the clue/trace is to be found not in the word/sign but somewhere else, and meaning is created by its absence. Such "traces" are frequent in modern texts. They signal or indicate something else, and this in turn leads to a new indication, and in this sense of movement lies the notion of unstable meaning, while the trace metaphor suggests that something not present has left a trace of itself, whose meaning is thus always absent. Similarly, Sejersted suggests that in the baroque text the various allegorical elements refer to each other in a mode of unresolved tension: the overall meaning always eludes the reader. Derrida discusses how attitudes to written and spoken language have changed over time. Speech involves the idea that the person speaking or delivering an address is in direct contact with the truth. Written discourse, on the other hand, is by its very nature metaphorical and is therefore regarded by a rationalist culture as detached from any individual, imperfect and liable to yield a misleading sense of the original utterance. However, Derrida believes that written language shows best the paradoxical nature of language. This contrast between spoken and written language reflects the contrast

4. Den entydige, klare meningen var ikke det viktigste, den var sekundær i forhold til fascinasjonen ved teksten som tekst. Den virkelig barokke tekst leder oppmerksomheten bort fra mening og klarhet ved å forføre leseren med retorikk og sende ham ut i labyrinter av gjentakelser og omskrivninger (Sejersted 1995, 118).

between rationality and baroque ambiguity: the game of meaning. Derrida includes the seventeenth century in his historical overview, though, unlike Walter Benjamin, he does not specifically deal with the baroque period and the baroque text. Benjamin theorized that the difference between a symbol and allegory was the difference between the romantic and the baroque. A symbol is not paradoxical but embraces wholeness and harmony, whereas allegory—at least as it appears in the baroque text—always involves paradox. Whereas in the romantic text the symbol is something desirable, allegory produces semantic ambiguity that was once regarded as a flaw but now seems natural and lends the text additional depth (Benjamin 1978, 139ff.; Sejersted 1995, 122).

Stanley E. Fish (born 1938) is well known for his work on stylistics and interpretation, and in his *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (1972) he argues that some works of art and literature deliberately attempt to deflect attention from themselves and to subvert the reader's confidence in the text, preferring instead to draw attention to extra-textual reality. In this way, the text explains itself but at the same time creates space for experience that is always new because it is unique to each reader. In his readings of seventeenth-century English poets, especially George Herbert and John Donne (Fish 1972, 43–77 and 156–223), Fish argues that with the religious texts the reader gradually senses that no text can ever verbalize reality, the one true reality that is God, because everything else, including the text, is nothing other than imagination and sound (Fish 1972, 156ff.). In this way the reader can access a religious experience that is beyond language. It may be said therefore that the baroque text differs from the modernist text (which breaks down meaning) in that the baroque religious text moves steadily closer to zero, which, however, proves ultimately not to be zero because of the existence of a God, an almighty Creator who bears responsibility for the whole world. The destructive (in terms of meaning) baroque text leads in fact not to nihilism but to the presence of God: “by highlighting itself as ornament, the text signals not so much emptiness, as a comprehensive, impregnable fullness of meaning.”⁵

5. Gjennom å fremheve seg selv som ornamentikk, viser teksten ikke til tomheten, men til en altomfattende, uangripelig meningsfylde (Sejersted 1995, 142–143).



Decoration in a 1722 manuscript written by Pétur Jónsson of Sviðnur on Breiðafjörður (Þjms 11072, before the first numbered page). Þjóðminjasafn Íslands [National Museum of Iceland]. Photograph: Jóhanna Ólafsdóttir.

A fundamental difference between the baroque and modernism is that the baroque poets were not nihilistic but believed in meaning on the other side of reality. That meaning could be found in Christianity and also in numerology and the occult. Symbols do not dissolve into nothing but rather find their meaning in God, in the laws of Kabbala or mathematics, and in ancient script and runes: the baroque sought to find meaning in apparently incomprehensible texts of former times (Sejersted 1995, 119). Such ideas certainly had a lengthy history. They were well known in the Middle Ages (see Hopper 1938) and remained just as valid in the seventeenth century. Magnús Ólafsson of Laufás's elegy on Bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson reveals an interest in numbers and it is clear that behind them lies a hidden message which men can interpret and from which they can derive wisdom. Magnús and other scholars were very interested in runes and not just for scholarly reasons. We find runes used in poetry, as in Magnús's eulogy for the Danish scholar Ole Worm.

It has been suggested that one characteristic of the baroque period is the care taken to distinguish between public and private poetry. Poetry with a public role ought not to be personal or private. The personality of the poet will, of course, always influence a work's subject matter and effect. It is more the sense that in expressing personal feelings or experiences a writer ought to follow specific rules, as for example when verbalizing deep sorrow or joy in his faith. Icelandic circumstances differed from those elsewhere in Scandinavia in that relatively little literature was printed while much was preserved in manuscripts. Nevertheless the same distinction applied in Iceland as in other countries concerning what could be made public, what could be printed, and what was thought to be worth copying in manuscripts. It was thus natural to distinguish between printed, unprinted, and unprintable texts (Storstein and Sørensen 1999, 52).

Baroque texts were both secular and sacred. They not only praised God but also people, places, and phenomena, yet they could also be full of fun and play, obscenity and insults. Sørensen and Storstein argue that in comic works all the elements that religious poems take seriously are subverted; high-flown praise becomes irony

and mockery, “unmentionable” bodily parts and functions are duly mentioned, the sins of the flesh extolled, and matters of faith made light of. Yet these secular and sacred texts are creations of the same world view. Reality is not always what it seems. What we see or sense can on closer inspection have a quite different meaning, while life itself is transient and full of contradictions. Hallgrímur Pétursson’s *Leirkarlsvísur* [Clay man’s verses] is a fine example of an Icelandic baroque work (*Ljóðmæli* 2, 152–153) that is allegorical from start to finish. The poet is both himself (or some other human being) but also a drinking vessel known as a “skeggarl” [a bearded man]. The first interpretative level refers to tangible phenomena from reality (*sensus litteralis*): man and vessel have a beard and are made of clay. By stating that man is made of clay, the poem recalls a biblical verse (Jeremiah 18) and reminds us of earthly decay: that all flesh is grass or dust. Man and vessel are fragile and easily damaged. This image is developed further in the next stanza, in which both are described as unstable on their feet and in danger of falling over. Here the meaning moves from the literal to the symbolic level (*sensus spiritualis*). The vessel can topple over and many are the afflictions of man. In baroque texts the link between literal, moral, and spiritual falls is always made, and this points ultimately to the Fall of Man. Yet it is still possible to continue to interpret the image literally, as a reference to the stumbling fall of someone who has drunk to excess. The two bearded men can both be wine containers in need of a helping hand to ensure that each does not self-destruct. Man can allow wine to get the better of him and needs to tread carefully; drunkenness can lead to vomiting. This is the warning for the reader. At the anagogical level man is a vessel of the faith, of the Holy Spirit, of that treasure preserved in the vessel. Both require assistance: the vessel needs man’s hand and man needs God’s hand to uphold the true faith. In the last verse we arrive at the tropological level of meaning, relating to the soul and eternity. We are reminded that there is a vast difference between the vessel and the man, for even if all goes wrong the man can still hope to be saved, unlike the vessel. In other words, in faith man may look to the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting. Yet the literal meaning remains valid: the drunken

man can always expect to sober up. Thus, by reading this text according to the church's traditional four-level exegetical template its rich range of meaning can be appreciated. And we should note how in the baroque text the boundaries between sacred and secular are far from clear; indeed, they are closely intertwined.