

Kronegger, Marlies. *The Life Significance of French Baroque Poetry*. Series II: Romance Languages and Literature 81. (New York; Frankfurt am Main; Paris: Peter Lang, 1988). xvi pp. + 160 pp.

Marlies Kronegger offers a study that both reiterates and expands extant notions of French "baroque" poetry. At the same time as pointing out (as have other scholars before her) how strategic binary oppositions such as "intuition vs. reason," "morality vs. nature," "part vs. whole" motivate this corpus, she convincingly demonstrates the importance of the four cosmic elements (water, air, fire, earth) in the "baroque" esthetic and *Weltanschauung*. Professor Kronegger argues for a reading of the metaphors of water as a transforming poetic reflection, of wind (air) as the ephemerality of existence, of fire as the purification of a corrupt existence, and of earth as passions and human mortality in order to emphasize the metaphysical transcendence that her corpus advocates—the ability to "...[see] all things in the cosmos as part of a vast general order in the act of creation" (xii).

This study reveals the significance of these elements by concentrating on the tensions between order and disorder in the representations of human existence and the poet's *persona* in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century poetry. While Kronegger stresses how death and transcendent love are used to harmonize human disorder and divine order, she also indicates the duplicity of the order/disorder duality. Thus, illusion (*le merveilleux*, metaphor or *trompe-l'oeil*) in "baroque" poetry represents not only human inconstancy (disorder), but also the means of overcoming it (order). Furthermore, argues Kronegger, since a "radical commitment to the engagement of the viewer [or reader]" (40) is central to these texts, she or he is reconciled with the cosmos and the divine order through this dichotomy. However, the role of the poet is fundamental, for he embraces the "wild" and the primal in the universe to transform and harmonize it. By internalizing cosmic phenomena and reconciling inspiration with ancient wisdom, the poet's *persona* "...illustrate[s] that upheavals serve to erase that which is disharmonious in

time and space, and that a spiritual essence flows throughout the universe" (81).

One of the most appealing aspects of Professor Kronegger's study is that she, unlike many proponents of the "baroque," does not give an abstract, but rather a demonstrative definition of this esthetic. So doing, she treats a wide variety of texts—from the well known and predictable (d'Aubigné, Saint-Amant, Sponde, Tristan l'Hermite, Vau) to the less studied (the devotional poetry of Hopil, La Ceppède, and Le Moyne) and the rather unexpected (Massillon's *Oraison funèbre de Louis le Grand*, La Fontaine, Racine). In this regard, perhaps Kronegger's most incisive and instructive analyses are those that deal with the lesser known texts (Chapter I.1 "The Creative Orchestration of Human Existence and Devotion: Christian Poets in Search of World Harmony" and Chapter V "Classical World Harmony and Louis XIV: Does Massillon Glorify the Sun King?") and those in which she brings to bear her expertise as a comparatist and her knowledge of the arts in seventeenth-century France (especially in Chapter II "From Macrocosm to Microcosm").

While much of the time this study demonstrates the extent and importance of the aspects of "baroque" poetics outlined above, at other times the definition of this esthetic is somewhat more difficult to follow. For instance, readings of texts such as *Phèdre* (Chapter III) as a presumably "baroque" play that "dissolve[s] the immanent world in the name of transcendent value" (85) leads to a number of questions about the historical specificity of this poetics. In particular, this reader would ask what difference there is between the "baroque" poet, whose "truth," in Kronegger's words, "seems to lie in becoming totally intermingled with creation, making metaphysics and the act of writing a constant intervention into reality" (93) and any writing subject? At the very end of the book, the author even seems to assert the universality of the "baroque" esthetic: "...baroque poetry exemplifies both the philosophical and literary effort that aims to look at the living man in the full spectrum of his vibrant, unique concreteness. ...Present in all creative endeavors, in myth,

dance, plastic art, ritual, poetry, it lifts the human life to a higher and authentically human level of the existential experience of man" (140-41). While one can certainly argue with this statement for its universalist and essentialist notions, more pertinent here is the fact that it tends to problematize the usefulness and specificity of the "baroque" label. Perhaps this inconsistency could have been avoided if the argument had been further developed and if much of the quoted material had been explicated in greater detail.

Be these points as they may, Professor Kronegger has given us a new critical perspective from which to further discuss the "baroque" in literature and, more important, to grasp the complexity and appeal of seventeenth-century poetry.

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