



Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT SPECIAL ISSUES

Number 64 October 2021

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

An Australian Neobaroque: The Latin American neobarroco and Antipodean transgression

Stuart Cooke

To cite this article: Cooke, S. (2021). An Australian Neobaroque: The Latin American neobarroco and Antipodean transgression. In J. Wilkinson, C. Atherton & S. Holland-Batt (Eds.) *Poetry Now*. TEXT Special Issue 64.

Griffith University

Stuart Cooke

An Australian Neobaroque: The Latin American neobarroco and Antipodean transgression

Abstract:

This essay will argue for the relevance of the ‘neobaroque’ in relation to recent examples of Australian poetics. The baroque and neobaroque are central strains of Latin American poetry, and much has been made of the neobaroque turn in Latin American theory, with the alternatives it proposes to hegemonic, linear narratives of modernity and rationalism. However, despite the fact that some of Australia’s greatest writers have profoundly baroque qualities, the baroque as an aesthetic, ontological and/or political category receives scant attention in Australian criticism. In light of these concerns, this essay will provide an outline of both baroque and neobaroque poetics with relation to Australian, European and Latin American examples. I then address the work of leading Mexican poet Coral Bracho, and consider her influence on the last collection of the late Australian poet Martin Harrison (*Happiness*, 2015). In examining the relations between Bracho’s neobaroque contortions and Harrison’s ‘late style’, I propose that *Happiness* is illustrative of an alternative trajectory of Australian poetics, which turns from the discipline and reticence of Anglophone models in order to embrace ambiguity, disorder and incompleteness – an imagination of complexity (as opposed to its reduction).

Biographical note:

Stuart Cooke’s books include *Speaking the Earth’s Languages: A Theory for Australian-Chilean Postcolonial Poetics* (2013), and the poetry collections *Lyre* (2019) and *Opera* (2015), and he is the co-editor of *Transcultural Ecocriticism: Global, Romantic and Decolonial Perspectives* (2021). His recent scholarship also appears in *Auto/Biography Studies*, *Environmental Humanities*, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, and *Swampen*. He is Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing and Literary Studies at Griffith University.

Key words: Baroque poetics, neobaroque poetics, Australian poetics, Coral Bracho; Martin Harrison

Introduction

This essay addresses the emergence of a neobaroque mode in late twentieth century and contemporary Australian poetics. Much has been made of the neobaroque turn in Latin American criticism, and its basis in the baroque's resistance to hegemonic, modernist narratives of progress and rationalism. However, despite the fact that some of Australia's most significant writers have profoundly baroque qualities, and despite the fact that we can find evidence of the baroque all over the continent, the neobaroque as an aesthetic, ontological and/or political category receives scant attention in Australian criticism. A canonical Australian baroque might be most readily associated with Patrick White, but the term could usefully describe the work of a diverse range of contemporary writers including Michael Farrell, Lisa Gorton, Corey Wakeling and Alexis Wright. That these last four authors are published by Ivor Indyk's Giramondo is perhaps no coincidence: Indyk has been a particularly vocal advocate for baroque writing. Most Australian literature, he argues, labours under 'a predisposition towards reticence and understatement'; any writing that 'is openly expressionist is likely therefore to be regarded as excessive, ill-mannered and ... naïve' (or, as in the case of White, 'too difficult'). Consequently, the baroque, 'with its emphasis on the uninhibited emotions, on theme and variation, repetition and elaboration, gesture and performance, appears to have hardly any legitimacy at all, so little is it spoken of' (Indyk, 2012, n.p.) [1].

In light of these concerns, I want to explore here some of the implications of an Australian neobaroque, with relation in particular to its manifestation in principles of poetics: What sort of poetry might it look like? How does it work? What does it do? Firstly, however, I will provide a brief overview of some of the characteristics of the baroque, including those most commonly associated with its 'classical' incarnation in seventeenth-century Europe, as well as an outline of the Latin American neobaroque as it has developed across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Turning then to Australia, I use the relation of Martin Harrison's last collection (*Happiness*, 2015) to the work of prominent Mexican poet Coral Bracho as a valuable site of Australian-Latin American encounter. In examining the influence of Bracho's neobaroque contortions upon Harrison's 'late style', I will propose that *Happiness* is illustrative of an alternative trajectory of Australian poetics, which turns from the discipline and reticence of Anglophone models in order to embrace ambiguity, disorder and incompleteness – an imagination of complexity (as opposed to its reduction). In light of this discussion, I conclude with some provocations, which make a provisional case for the relevance of the neobaroque to Australian cultural ecologies.

But first: an attempt at a definition. In general, baroque forms – whether in literature, architecture or the visual arts – are ample, dynamic, exuberant and porous. But the baroque is also endlessly mutating, both in terms of the experiences it engenders and as a form of representation across four centuries of European and colonial histories, from its seventeenth-century origins as a Catholic and monarchical aesthetic, to its contemporary function as a postcolonial rupture of entrenched power structures and perceptual categories. After all, in the regions colonised by Catholic Europe, the Baroque was itself eventually colonised. Throughout

the Americas, baroque transplants began to reflect the cultural perspectives and iconographies of the Indigenous and African artisans who built and decorated Catholic structures, and, in turn, Europe's own cultural products were radically altered. Accordingly, in the essay that follows I follow a variety of theorists in using the baroque not to refer exclusively to three centuries of European art (the Baroque with a capital B), but rather to a 'state' that can catalyse in diverse contexts (Conley, 1993, p. x). In Gilles Deleuze's famous formulation, '[t]he Baroque refers not to an essence but rather to an operative function, to a trait' (Deleuze, 1993, p. 3).

A brief history [2]

As Édouard Glissant (2006) writes, the baroque emerged in the West 'at a moment when a particular idea of Nature – as harmonious, homogenous, and thoroughly knowable – was in force' (p. 77). Knowable Nature was also reproduceable, so that 'knowledge and imitation set themselves up as mutual guarantors' (p. 77). Crucially, the capacity to imitate presupposed that all things, beneath the veils of their appearances, had indubitable essences or truths that could be discovered – primarily by the sciences, but also through the systemisation of perspective in art. But the sciences threatened Western theological systems and, at the same time, European colonialism was unsettling Enlightenment thought, like a faint echo of the violence it had wrought on the colonised. Through the cracks of rationalism, a baroque 'rerouting' emerged – fuelled by vast sums of Catholic capital, and by the vast resources of the lands that Catholic empires invaded – and thrived:

Baroque art was a reaction against the rationalist pretense of penetrating the mysteries of the known with one uniform and conclusive move ... Baroque techniques, moreover, would favour 'expansion' over 'depth.' (Glissant, 2006, p. 77)

The regime of truth becomes fluid; 'all ideology is considered fiction' (Echavarren, 2010, p. 11, my translation). Against a reality ordered by luminous rationalism, the baroque introduces something like a complex materialism, where myriad truths irrupt from ever-shifting contexts. The 'non-exclusive, de-centering principle' of the baroque constituted what Monika Kaup (2006) argues was the West's first modernity. Unlike Enlightenment rationality, 'baroque reason conjoined the contradictory impulses of the pre-modern and the modern, faith and reason, the scientific and the mythic, thus marking the crisis and outer limit of modernity' (p. 129). In the Anglophone world, we might be more familiar with the appearance of this 'crisis and outer limit' in the guise of the postmodern (p. 129).

As an operative function, the baroque has had various faces. On the one hand, there was 'the conservative, monumental baroque of Spain's absolutist monarchs and of the Counter-Reformation' (Kaup, 2006, p. 138). On the other, we see 'the hybridizing, transculturated New World baroque celebrated by neobaroque theorists' (p. 138). To be sure, the baroque arrived in the Americas as an instrument of Spanish-Catholic imperialism; Spain effectively weaponised the baroque as the soft arm of the Counter-Reformation and its global project of a Catholic empire, 'erecting magnificent baroque cathedrals everywhere in the New World, and typically

choosing as sites the centers of large indigenous populations, because “the Spaniards felt a need to match a new splendor against the former glories of the Indians so as to displace their pagan gods” (Mariano Picón-Salas, as cited in Kaup, 2006, pp. 138-9). ‘Through its capaciousness and proliferation,’ writes Roberto González Echevarría, ‘the Baroque inscribed the American’ (as cited in Menocal, 1994, p. 30). But the baroque can never be the exclusive property of one power or position; at heart it is an aesthetics of difference via ongoing syntheses (and their ever-possible disassemblage): ‘the baroque incorporates the Other; it plays at being the Other’ (González Echevarría as cited in Menocal, 1994, p. 30). Ultimately the baroque exceeded the ‘adversarial role’ that Spain had assigned it, and produced an innovative, syncretic conception of the New World, which it modified as the New World also modified it (Glissant, 2006, p. 78).

Consequently, in an extraordinary process that is illustrative of the baroque’s proliferating many-sidedness, a transplanted, imperialist baroque was appropriated and transformed:

The churches were built by indigenous labor from local materials, and crafted by indigenous and, later, mestizo artisans, who surreptitiously introduced elements and ornaments from their own cultures into the official Catholic iconography. The Central Mexican churches of Tonantzintla and Tepotzotlán, for example, or the façade of the Church of San Lorenzo in Potosí, Bolivia – the work of a sculptor known as El Indio Kondori – are masterpieces of the hybrid New World baroque. (Kaup, 2006, p. 139)

To this list we could add some Australian correlates, too. Think, for example, of the Anglican churches throughout the islands of the Torres Strait, which were built by Indigenous labour and inlaid with pearls from the surrounding waters. Or, on the other side of the continent, there is the lesser-known example of the Sacred Heart Church at Beagle Bay on the Dampier Peninsula, on Nyul Nyul and Jabirr Jabirr lands. Supervised by German Catholic missionaries, Indigenous labourers built the church from local clay and with lime from crushed shells. Sacred Heart features an altar inlaid with mother of pearl, where mosaics of gleaming pearl shell combine Catholic, Nyul Nyul and Jabirr Jabirr iconography. Although they may be far less prominent or widely-known than their Latin American counterparts, these examples are germinal signs of an Australian baroque. After all, the English word ‘baroque’ is thought to come, by way of French, from a thirteenth century Portuguese word, *barroco* – a term for a misshapen, inexpensive pearl (Johnson, 2012, p. 121).

Baroque forms, then, ‘live with passionate intensity a life that is entirely their own ... They break apart even as they grow; they tend to invade space in every direction, to perforate it, to become as one with all its possibilities’ (Henri Focillon, as cited in Conley, 1993, p. xviii). In turn, baroque literary style is marked by similar levels of expansion and sophistication. Baroque writers have challenged conventional notions of decorum by using, and abusing, metaphor, hyperbole, paradox, anaphora, hypo- and para-taxis, and oxymoron; a single image or idea might be amplified well beyond any ‘reasonable’ mode of representation (Johnson, 2012, p. 122). In terms of poetics, the expansiveness, elaboration and ornamentation of baroque art and

architecture can be found in a variety of poets of the European Baroque. Typically, their work is fluid and complicated, running in multiple streams, perhaps, where one image blends with another, or metaphors might be so rapidly juxtaposed as to mix, producing something akin to phantasmagoria. In all, Baroque poetics has tended to cultivate an aesthetics of difficulty, valuing erudition, ingenuity, and what might be anathema to many creative writing classrooms: rhetorical excess. This is a mode that insists on ‘the refusal to simplify by eliminating, [and] the accumulation of imagery born from the need to multiply points of view because no one point of view is capable by itself of seizing a fluctuating and fleeting reality’ (Rousset, as cited in Johnson, 2012, p. 123). As opposed to concision, clarity or resolution, then, baroque poetics seeks the paradoxical, the unstable, the tenuous and irreconcilable (p. 123). Each interval, each line, is the site of a new differentiation, or ‘folding’ in Deleuze’s words, spiralling into a ‘fractal mode by which new turbulences are inserted between the initial ones’ (1993, p. 17).

In turn, the world of the senses, while enticing, is but a world of appearances; everything is shifting, restless; everything might harbour the miraculous. The baroque ‘boldly hears colours and sees sounds’ (Wellek, 1946, p. 95); synaesthesia runs rife; the universe consists of innumerable webs of interrelations and correspondences. As a result, otherwise alien, incongruous spheres and fields might here be gloriously interwoven, or blended together entirely. The attitude towards language is more relaxed than conservative variants of Anglophone poetics, but it is not necessarily the same as a post-structuralist’s scepticism; rather, in the baroque it is possible to see all kinds of linkages between word and thing, meaning and form, but as one sees them, one must also accept they might be about to fall apart. Often this has manifest as a poetics of turbulence, or torn, convulsed souls struggling with language, ‘piling up asyndetons and epithets’ (Wellek, 1946, p. 96) (think of the first volume of Pablo Neruda’s *Residencia en la tierra*).

But at the same time that it speaks of this world, even struggles with it, the baroque poem is also able to speak of itself, of the process of its composition and the practice that engendered it. Like painterly chiaroscuro, thematic and formal ambiguities are produced through self-reflexivity and mise en abyme. In the canonical example of Luis de Góngora’s *Las Soledades* (1613), the act of writing constitutes both the re-presentation of reality and the means by which the work insinuates itself into reality. Writing is everywhere for Góngora, and produced by all kinds of actors; rowing is a form of writing, as is the flight of birds, while rivers inscribe a ‘fluent discourse’ (Góngora, 2007, p. 123) and woodsmen remove arboreal texts from the forests:

The tree that had withstood
 the blustering south wind, the hoarse easterly,
 a game poplar whose smooth trunk
 had served the shepherds for a makeshift book,
 is off to the village to reveal secrets
 Love forbade even other trees to read. (p. 151)

As Roberto Echavarren outlines, with alphabetic inscription Góngora sees myriad equivalences:

[Writing] is interwoven into an incomplete version of combined dynamics. It is not a mirror of reality, but rather it passes through (atravesar) reality on an elliptical orbit with respect to other phenomena. (2010, p. 12, my translation)

Amidst such contortions and confusions, the baroque poem alters the sense of an ending; it does not attempt to reach a conclusion but gives over instead to process, however indeterminate, even infinite. *Soledades*, for example, doesn't reach the end of a story, but rather the provisional closure of one particular manifestation of spiralling, conflicting trajectories, which otherwise might continue indefinitely (Echavarren, 2010, p. 12). 'The Baroque invents the infinite work or process' (Deleuze, 1993, p. 34).

Such a 'rerouting' inaugurated a radical pluralism, or 'a stubborn renouncement of any ambition to summarize the world's matter in sets of imitative harmonies that would approach some essence' (Glissant, 2006, p. 78). Baroque art generated 'bypasses, proliferation, spatial redundancy, anything that flouted the alleged unicity of the thing known and the knowing of it' (p. 78). In sum, it constituted a powerful reaction 'against the so-called natural order, naturally fixed as obvious fact' (p. 78). And as the world evolved, the baroque impulse also broadened: 'the baroque, the art of expansion, expanded in concrete terms'; it blossomed through 'vertiginous styles, languages and cultures' so that:

what it expressed in the world was the proliferating contact of diversified natures. It grasped, or rather gave-on-and-with, this movement of the world. No longer a reaction, it was the outcome of every aesthetic, or every philosophy. Consequently, it asserted not just an art or a style but went beyond this to produce a being-in-the-world. (Glissant, 2006, p. 78)

Indeed, the developing sciences encountered and confirmed the baroque evolution: as science entered an age of fundamental uncertainties, 'the conceptions of Nature expanded, became relative, which is the very basis of the baroque tendency' (Glissant, 2006, p. 79). The baroque brought a new physics to life, 'a colourful and amazing world where universes explode, space collapses into bottomless holes, time sags and slows... and the unbounded extensions of interstellar space ripple and sway like the surface of the sea' (Rovelli, 2016, p. 9).

The Neobaroque

To be clear, what I have outlined is not an aversion from reason altogether (or a manifesto for chaos). Rather, the baroque 'corresponds to turbulent movement's ailinear logic of composition and decomposition' (Carter, 1996, p. 299). As classical reason crumbled under the force of so many 'divergences, impossibilities, discords, dissonances', the baroque was an attempt to *reconstitute* reason by dividing these divergences 'into as many worlds as possible' (Deleuze,

1993, p. 81). The baroque is a proliferation of *reasons*, therefore, as opposed to the worship of Reason. However, confronted by the extraordinary power of dissonance, the European Baroque nevertheless managed to discover ‘a florescence of extraordinary accords’ between the deviations, and thereby created resolutions of harmonic architectural, musical, and poetic structures. David Malouf (2011) provides the lucid example of Rome’s Church of Saint Ignazio di Loyola, the ceiling of which was painted by one of the ‘minor masters’ of the Italian Baroque, Andrea Pozzo:

Looked at from any but a single point on the floor below, Pozzo’s ceiling reels and swirls, it makes no sense. But the moment the viewer, in moving about the church, finds the one right spot to stand in, the painting organises itself, and in a remarkable *coup d’oeil* which is also a *coup de théâtre*, the flat surface of the painting rears up and becomes a dome on perspective columns through which we look clear into Heaven ... (p. 73)

A poetic analogue of Pozzo’s ceiling could be George Herbert’s ‘The Collar’ (1633), in which a bewildering array of ‘fierce and wild’ rhetorical patterns threatens to leave the speaker stranded in the confusion of an atheistic universe – until God calls, like a shaft of light, and calms him to silence. Amidst the cacophony of the world, the Baroque still managed to provide a single point of perspective which the viewer, upon discovering it, entered in order to create ‘an aesthetic event ... a moment of sudden illumination’ (Malouf, 2011, p. 73).

In European art, of course, this burst of illumination was invariably a demonstration of a divine order, previously hidden, but then miraculously revealed, through the viewer’s negotiation of the plethora of textures, colours and sensations in the various regions (or ‘worlds’) of the artwork. But if harmony could always be found in the limited worlds of the European continent, the invasion of the Americas would all but fracture faith entirely in such ‘extraordinary accords’. With the neobaroque, then, divergent series start to unfurl in the *same* worlds, impossibilities now irrupt ‘on the same stage.’ In Europe, the harmony of the Baroque is therefore ruptured by the heightened intensity of the *neobaroque*; dissonance is emancipated, tonality dissipates; harmonic closure opens ‘onto a “polyphony of polyphonies”’ (Deleuze, 1993, p. 82, quoting Pierre Boulez). In decolonising, Latin American contexts, Baroque procedures that had crystallised into the forms of canonical art were jumpstarted so that earlier, alternate modes of thinking that had become obsolete, or vilified as decadent or irrational, were re-sourced by neobaroque theorists and writers as part of a New World discourse of countermodernity (Kaup, 2006, p. 128). If the Baroque was the seed carrying the codes, the neobaroque is its praxis, or baroque as gerund.

For Kaup (2006), the neobaroque’s central achievement is ‘to undo the stigmatization of the baroque as ‘un’-classical and therefore deformed, and to recognize in the baroque a new potential for the production and emergence of alternate forms’ (p. 130). Indeed, neobaroque poetics became one of the dominant Latin American literary trends of the twentieth century (Sefamí, 2012, p. 927). Consequently, in a region with an ever-frustrated relationship to the inequities of rationalist modernity, Góngora has become ‘the most cherished of ancestral

figures' (Menocal, 1994, p. 30). Góngora's baroque broke with the Graeco-Roman classicism of the Old World 'by allowing the fringes, the frills, as it were, to proliferate, upsetting the balance of symmetry, displacing the balance of Renaissance aesthetics' (González Echevarría, as cited in Menocal, 1994, p. 30). Considered anathema by neo-Classicists, the baroque was a plucky runt or a beautiful mutant, 'a distinctly different poetics that "broke away from mainstream European aesthetics"' (Menocal, 1994, p. 29, quoting González Echevarría). Now any number of canonical and even contemporary Latin American writers – from Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz to Raúl Zurita – are linked to the baroque. For modern poets in particular, 'the baroque provides a counterpoint to the formless, enervated sentimentality of the post-romantics'; 'The romantics' diffuse feeling,' notes Echavarren, 'their nervous exasperations, were too private to confront the horrors of the industrial age, namely pollution and genocide' (2010, p. 11, my translation). In fact, for contemporary Mexican poet Verónica Volkow, her country's poetry is distinguished most readily from poetry in English because of its baroque heritage (Volkow, 2009, p. 7). Against the quotidian rationalism of much contemporary English work, Volkow's own poems displace the personal from the centre of experience, favouring instead a proliferating cacophony of overlapping rhythms and conjunctions of scales – from the microscopic to the cosmic. Part of an extraordinary, and very baroque, generation of Mexican women poets, Volkow's contemporaries include Gloria Gervitz, and Coral Bracho.

Of those three, Bracho's work is perhaps most commonly associated with a resurgent, neobaroque mode in Latin American poetics. She is one of only 22 poets featured in the widely-read anthology, *Medusario* (although the editors take pains to point out that *Medusario* is not meant to be an anthology), which proposes, via web-like synergies and juxtapositions, a pan-Latin American poetics of the neobaroque. With Góngora's baroque as a subtext, and following in the mid-twentieth century footsteps of José Lezama Lima, *Medusario* seeks to chart the various forces of neobaroque poetics, rather than curate examples of a style. The editors argue that the neobaroque is defined only by the flexibility and miscellany of its composition, rather than by a particular method, aesthetics or politics:

It doesn't advocate, as was the case with the avant-garde, a single or coherent method of experimentation. Nor does it come down to macropolitical references to the seizure of power or the fight against imperialist aggression. It is impure: sometimes colloquial, sometimes opaque, sometimes meta (*metapoética*). It works both syntax and the phonic substratum, the abstract and the parochial. And goes from humour to joy. (Echavarren, 2010, p. 10, my translation)

The neobaroque poem, we could say, seeks hybridity, bastardry, even a cracked, precarious form of synthesis.

As the *Medusario* editors indicate, neobaroque poetry is just as wary of the avant-garde as it is of 'colloquial' poetics (in Anglophone terms, the distinction here is roughly between 'experimental' and language-based poetics on the one hand, and workshop poems with 'clear' language and 'vivid imagery' on the other). The neobaroque 'shares with the avant-garde a tendency towards linguistic experimentation, but avoids its occasional didacticism'

(Echavarren, 2010, p. 10, my translation). However, if the avant-garde is a poetry of distorted image and metaphor, where images often have iconic and symbolic powers, and traditional grammar is replaced with anaphoric structures and semi-chaotic enunciation, neobaroque poetry often recovers the places of images in grammatical systems, albeit through a complicated syntax (Echavarren, 2010, p. 10) [3]. ‘Neobaroque poets conceive of their poetry as an adventure of thought beyond the circumscribed procedures of the avant-garde’ (Echavarren, 2010, pp. 10-11, my translation). At the same time, the neobaroque is not a poetry of the lyric I (Néstor Perlongher contrasts the confessional poem with the baroque *confusional*; Perlongher, 2010, pp. 16-17). Although the poetry in *Medusario* occasionally can be direct and conversational, the editors reject the notion defended by the writers of direct and conversational poetry – ‘the colloquialists’ – that there’s some kind of ‘via media’ for poetic communication:

The colloquialists operate according to a preconceived model of what can be said, and how, in order to make themselves understood and to indoctrinate a specific audience. Neobaroque poets, on the other hand, pass from one level of reference to another without limiting themselves to a specific strategy, vocabulary or to a fixed, ironic distance. One could say that they have no style, but rather that they slip from one style to another without becoming prisoners of one position or procedure. (Echavarren, 2010, p. 11, my translation)

With all of this in mind, what general comments, if any, can be made about the poetry in *Medusario*? With no set formal priority and little thematic coherence, it is nevertheless possible to sketch the parameters of certain principles, codes, or ‘operative functions’ (to use Deleuze’s term again), which seem to be generative of much of the work. Despite the absence of overt constraints or political or aesthetic objectives, there is a relatively clear (meaning: still somewhat hazy) cluster of common preferences and aversions. As I have already suggested, the poetry in *Medusario* is invariably concerned with the singular and particular, rather than abstracted ideas or images, and uses what the editors term ‘impure’ rather than ‘pure’ languages, mixing a variety of colloquial, sensual, spiritual and opaque registers. The poems tend to focus on movement and the perpetual play of differences, where the emphasis is on dynamic forces, as opposed to static or inert figures and objects, along with an ongoing accumulation of layers and layers of phrases, so that the starting point of the poem quickly vanishes beneath a growing sense of vertigo. The objective is ‘a festival of rhythms and colours,’ in Perlongher’s words (2010, p. 16, my translation). Consequently, rather than develop a single idea or ‘thread’, the poems will often develop multiple threads in parallel, producing what can be an overwhelming experience of doubt and uncertainty, unsettling and expanding the reader’s expectations of the ‘fixed’ text. Finally, there seems to be a need to continuously test the preconceived relationship(s) between the language of the poem and the expectations of the reader, where the poet is always searching for ‘manifestation of experience beyond any limit’ (Echavarren, 2010, p. 13, my translation). In this ‘inflation of meanings’ is what Perlongher (2010) calls a ‘proliferation device’, the ambition of which is

to obliterate the given meaning of a term — not by replacing it with another, but rather by adding a chain of meanings that progress metonymically, and which end in circumscribing the now absent meaning, tracing an orbit around it. (pp. 16-7, my translation)

The aim, in other words, is the saturation of ‘communicative’ language. By betraying the instrumental, utilitarian functions of words, the poems delight in ‘the play of meaning and sound;’ language unfolds, spreads out into ‘pure surface’, sticky, multi-coloured, iridescent (Perlongher, 2010, p. 17, my translation).

Going further, Perlongher’s comments might correspond with the fluid, *nomadic* poetics of trans-Atlantic poet and translator Pierre Joris, with its ‘flux of ruptures and articulations, of rhythm, moving in & out of semantic & non-semantic spaces’ (Joris, 2003, pp. 5-6). Joris’s ‘barocco’ extends the restless proliferation of any national or monolingual baroque into a ‘nomadic language of affects, of free lines of erotic flight.’ Specifically, it advocates that we write in foreign languages ‘in order to come to the realization that all languages are foreign,’ which is to say that any living language is always — after Glissant — irreducibly ‘creolized.’ The need, argues Joris (2003), is to break out of ‘the prison-house of the mother tongue,’ to *choose* languages, rather than work only with those assigned to us at birth (p. 7). Then, it would be ‘our body/mind that speaks and not that of our progenitors’ (p. 7). One’s tongue might therefore become ‘the lover’s ... the other’s’ (p. 7). The crucial point here, which will be illustrated further with the poems of Bracho and Harrison below, is that baroque restlessness and differentiation, its penetration of and seepage into myriad spaces, is an erotics. This erotics is predicated not on the union of like with like but rather a radical amorousness, a desire for everything, which constantly queers its own queerness. This is what Mieke Bal would call the ‘ecstasy’ of the baroque, where all surfaces are so disrupted that inside and outside can no longer be separated. With the singular interiorities of discrete objects punctured, things become part of a larger whole. Then, flowing through countless sites of penetration, ecstasy knows no centre (Bal, 2018, n.p.). As sexual function recedes behind sexual *pleasure*, these elaborate textures might also ‘become a protest against any demand that [poetry] must turn a profit or show a heteronomous use’ (Burt, 2014, p. 7).

Fireflies and Wild Bees: Bracho and Harrison

In what follows I will briefly compare an instance of contemporary Australian poetry with an instance of [semi-]contemporary Mexican poetry. My aim, rather than to establish anything beyond doubt, is to speculate on what might happen if the Latin American neobaroque travelled across the Pacific Ocean. In 2009, when Martin Harrison was writing what was to become his last poetry collection, *Happiness*, I loaned him my copy of Coral Bracho’s selected poems, *Firefly Under the Tongue* (superbly translated by Forrest Gander). Bracho’s poetry had already had a profound impact on what I was writing at the time, but it is the contention of my current discussion that Bracho’s influence can also be seen in Harrison’s *Happiness*. Unlike most of the books that I lent him, Martin was astonished by *Firefly*, and later would speak to me of

Bracho with the same, reverent tone that he reserved for those select few poets who were, in his words, ‘very, *very* interesting.’ However, while I am interested in the possibility that Bracho influenced Harrison and that this constitutes, therefore, a link between the Latin American neobaroque and contemporary Australian poetry, in another sense it matters very little whether or not this influence really did occur. In biological terms, hereditary descent does not provide the only channel for formal consistency. Convergent evolution, or the independent evolution of similar features in species of different regions or epochs in time, also creates analogous structures that have similar form or function in groups without a common ancestor; in other words, similar environments, as well as the transmission of genes, can create similar organisms. So, given the dominance of the baroque in Latin America, and its relative absence in Australia, a convergent evolutionary model might be a better way to think about the possibility of multiple, contemporaneous sites of neobaroque aesthetics. Not focussed specifically on trying to identify clear lines of descent, we can still ask how the baroque might be useful for thinking about a range of Australian writers as diverse as the aforementioned Whites, Wrights, and so on.

While my focus in this present essay is much more modest, I am nevertheless attempting to illustrate, firstly, what baroque operative functions might look like in contemporary Australian poetry and, secondly, why such functions might be relevant on a continent without a history of Spanish colonisation. I am positing, then, that the neobaroque is a pan-continental poetics of deterritorialisation, in that it can enact processes of radical unsettlement and reformation virtually anywhere. As it happens, Deleuze & Guattari are referenced numerous times in *Medusario*. In the context of Bracho specifically, the turn to the French nomadologists is no indulgence in high theory: in 1977, the year in which Bracho published the first of her most important collections of poems, she also published a translation of their *Rhizome* manifesto in the *Revista de la Universidad de México*. Write the *Medusario* editors, Bracho’s poetry ‘is articulated by means of rhizomes: subterranean stems that bifurcate in multiple directions and that, without any progressive order, accumulate without form or root. In this way, Bracho’s poems are made of images that don’t combine into a single whole’ (Echavarren et al, 2010, p. 283, my translation). Recalling the deferral of a conclusion in favour of ongoing, kaleidoscopic process in canonical Baroque poetics, Bracho’s poems ‘don’t conclude (they can finish with a comma, a full stop and a comma, or simply lack punctuation),’ and ‘they don’t form a single idea’ (Echavarren et al, 2010, p. 283, my translation). The majority of her major poems are too sprawling to be read closely here, but selections from one piece from *El ser que va a morir* (‘Being toward Death’) are illustrative enough. Published in 1981, *El ser* ‘probably changed the course of Mexican poetry,’ according to Gander, ‘with its erotic undercurrent, its radically indeterminate syntax, and its phenomenological openness’ (2008, p. xi). In the opening stanza of one of the first poems in the book, ‘In this Dark Tepid Mosque’, anaphoric structures are subsumed almost immediately within broader anaphora; in the Spanish, rhymes flare up apparently at random; a texture of ‘ripe and turbulent echoes’ seems to entwine the speaker with the very objects of her gaze (Bracho, 2008, pp. 10-15).

By the third stanza, ‘In this Dark Tepid Mosque’ has established expansive, albeit wispy parameters; ‘stretched out’, it then ‘impregnates itself’ with its own ‘habitable frenzy.’ After

the slight pause of a colon, suddenly these humid, sweaty niches are filled with salty and alcoholic liquids; the poem will continue in ‘clamorous, palpitating passages’, with ‘unguent’ surfaces opening, filling, then splitting open onto yet more surfaces. Similarly, throughout the collection we find multiple ‘vanishing points, derivative associations of signifiers, [and] semantic twists’ (Echavarren et al, 2010, p. 283, my translation). So much of the poetry depends upon hinges and folds, which seem capable of infinite expansion and replication. After all, in Deleuze’s widely known terms, the baroque ‘endlessly produces folds,’ it ‘twists and turns its folds, pushing them to infinity, fold over fold, one upon the other’ (1993, p. 3). Accordingly, baroque materials offer ‘an infinitely porous, spongy or cavernous texture without emptiness, caverns endlessly contained in other caverns: ...each body contains a world pierced with irregular passages, surrounded and penetrated by an increasingly vaporous fluid’ (Deleuze, 1993, p. 5). Embroiled in this sensuous, gaseous topography, baroque perspective diffracts into innumerable ‘microperceptions’, or ‘little folds that unravel in every direction, folds in folds, over folds, following folds.’ These are the confusing minutiae that compose our ‘conscious, clear, and distinct apperceptions’ (Deleuze, 1993, p. 86). In Bracho’s poems, these microperceptions manifest as ‘radiating lines of perspective and shifting, ambiguous pronouns,’ which overwhelm conventional language tropes to produce a concentration of attention, ‘a bedazzled listening’:

Removed from any central vantage point, we discover a world of uncanny interrelationships, our own world: complex, provisional, yet somehow intact. (Gander, 2008, p. xii)

The editors of *Medusario* write that Bracho’s is an ‘aquatic poetics, in the most exact sense... water erases, rewrites and erases again, in an eternal palimpsest devoured by time’ (Echavarren et al, 2010, p. 283, my translation). As an eternal rhizome, water ‘operates in contradiction of order; it articulates a shapelessness without any principle of unity’ (p. 283). Bracho cultivates her vocabulary on these fluid planes/ins, insisting ‘on external, skin-deep elements: the skin that covers the body; branches and bulbs of plants; the textures of the earth...; the terrain of different kinds of surfaces’ (p. 283). The neobaroque aversion to depth, essence, Truth manifests here as what Joan Retallack (2003) would call ‘a fractal relation between art and life’, or ‘an infinitely invaginated surface of linguistic and cultural coastlines, interconversant edges of past/present/future, [which] gives us, if not depth, then the charged and airy volume of living matter’ (pp. 75-6). Thus, in another of Bracho’s major poems, ‘Water’s Lubricious Edges’, water is ‘mercurial’, ‘slow’, ‘in suspense’, but then it is also ‘silken / with voltaic charge’, and opalescent, luminescent with an ‘interior flame.’ In turn, the textures are at once ‘steely’, ‘smooth’, ‘reverberant’ and also dissolving ‘in graphite surges.’ There is nothing but this ‘living water’, ‘its shifting smoothness, its enchantment’ (Bracho, 2008, pp. 20-3). ‘Water’s Lubricious Edges’ articulates the mercurial core of the baroque: its many-sided surface, its riots of colour and form, its luminescence, but also its flexibility and malleability, its agility, its self-erasure and its eager expansiveness.

It is important to recognise here, however, that unlike water baroque functions are not necessarily infinite or eternal, and that a poet may not be baroque for all of her life. In point of

fact, much of Bracho's subsequent work in the 1980s became more concrete, and more compact, than *El ser que va a morir*. Conversely, prior to his final collection, Martin Harrison's poetry had little in common with neobaroque poetics. While his work had always been conceptually ambitious, Harrison's earlier poems were generally manifestations of what could be termed an essayistic lyric mode; the speaker had an entirely coherent relationship to his language, but the things to which his language referred could be ambiguous or partially concealed. Any such disjunctions, however, between the observation of phenomena and their position within language, tended to dissolve at the level of grammar and form, where the prosody was often pitched at the level of considered (rather than relaxed) conversation, no matter how vague the world it articulated. In other words, the proposed relationship between the sentence and the image of thought was invariably water-tight. A brief example from his 2001 collection *Summer*, 'Letter from America', is illustrative enough:

... The fact is you *could*
be realist here: the settledness of highways, tree-

lined towns, broad waterways through mountains,
and the turn of seasons bringing sometimes
ice-storms but mostly rain, snow, and then

these leafy, pine-scented, bug-infested
summers – encourages confidence in a
history that's studied, researched, known...

(Reprinted in *Wild Bees*, 2008, p. 81)

In functional, mechanical terms, there are thousands, if not millions, of Australian poems just like this. Indyk's emotional reticence is here bound up in a conviction that everything (or nothing, depending on how we look at it) is to be conveyed in the image, which will thereby become the primary vehicle for speech. Put differently, questions such as 'What happens to my language as my self is stretched across the planet?', or 'What does expression do in a world which is both recognisable and alien?' are not at play here. This is not to *underplay* what's genuinely interesting about this poem. As a speculative essay, it is an original meditation on the correlations between culture, landscape and mind. But, also like an essay, this interplay apparently has no expressive implications for the nature of the utterance itself, or for a poetics in which mind and thing are inextricable. Part of what makes *Happiness* such a remarkable book, then, is its illustration of how Harrison's work changed to account for these issues.

To be sure, with *Happiness* things changed quite dramatically; in terms of both form and expression, everything opened, blossomed even:

Lemon intensity in each muscle same as frail winter light in half-leaved trees
glow which is neither coming nor going glow in the world beyond the world
the one where all this breath is going all these ah's and oh's
breath held there at the limit of breath being the same limit as the moment

when a translucent blue green wave starts to topple
 tiny grey fish floating in its upright wall
 the top of it bristling with foam and wind-driven sprays of flowers
 no more no more more no more

(From 'You Do All These Things For Me', 2015, p. 26)

Such sensuous intensity, such oversaturation, could be, in Stephanie Burt's words, 'like looking at Baroque ceilings that just barely resolve into scenes of gods and goddesses, or saints and miracles – were they more crowded they would make no sense at all' (2014, p. 15). With such shimmering restlessness we are back in the realm of Bracho's aquatic poetics – of surfaces being rewritten by yet more surfaces, of the fold of a wave becoming the frame for fish and the ground for flowers. Yes, the verse is less viscous than Bracho's, but it is no easier to extract the phrases from the vertigo induced by their rapid confluence. In Harrison's own exegesis, he writes of wanting to maintain here 'a sense of an immediate connection between compositional process and the 'finished' outcome of that process, as if each poem is *just* finished or is just *about to be* finished' (In press, p. 190). In other words, the poems evoke incomplete, transitory language events. In part, he wrote, this was done 'in order to propose a sort of suspended awareness' of how things may go one way or the other; in part, too, he wanted to 'detain or delay too quick a resolution of the experience of the language within a formal structure and to enhance the sense of expressive immediacy' (In press, p. 190). The baroque, after all, 'never offers us perfection and fulfillment, or the static calm of 'being', only the unrest of change and the tension of transience' (Heinrich Wölfflin, as cited in Johnson, 2012, p. 121).

Grounded in the act of composition, the play here is between thought and writing, an ongoing spiral of assemblage and disassemblage in which concept and sensation surround one another but are never subsumed in each other. What Harrison proposes in *Happiness* is that the reduction of concept and sensation into a merely representationalist language weakens the 'never fully concluded energy of poetic meaning' (Harrison, in press, p. 7). This is Harrison's discovery of the synergy between the 'spontaneity of the inside [poetic energy] and the determination of the outside [representation]' (to adapt Deleuze, 1993, p. 29). In architectural terms, the façade of language known as writing, or that externally determined set of relations to phenomena, could overlap with, but not be one and the same as, cognition, awareness, situatedness, interiority. This is an unmistakably baroque situation; baroque architecture is defined by the *split* symbiosis of façade and interior, allowing for the 'autonomy of the interior' and the 'independence of the exterior' (Deleuze, 1993, p. 28). A new kind of link is required, therefore, between inside and out. Like pre-Baroque architecture, this is a synergy of which more direct modes of poetics often have 'no inkling' (Deleuze, 1993, p. 29).

Fittingly, the final poem of *Happiness*, 'Dry Grass' (Harrison, 2015, pp. 94-5), exemplifies the comingling of inner cognition and external phenomena so that both realities, equally independent, compose together a complex topography (as opposed to a straight line into the soul). Indeed, the poem's title itself could conjure a baroque surface, a yellowing ground of grass starting to wear away in patches to reveal yet another dry surface. In the first stanza we

are presented with the image of rain at night, but it's an unstable image, and its surface is not only porous but flickering between real and unreal:

in a way, it's raining in the night,
but this night's not the real night
with a belt of real rain splayed across it

Then, suddenly, the evanescent scene slips from the night outside into the night of the mind: the rain slanting through the darkness becomes

... your mind's darkness
the always unthought part of thought
the space back of the eyes

What was the ungraspable, unreal quality of the outside world has resolved into an interiority, which thrives with the extravagant fireworks of Caravaggian chiaroscuro:

dry invisible downpour in the night
sparks of rain-like fire
spatters of rain like wind-blown embers

Waking up from this torrid, lucid dream, the poet takes us outside at last, to look 'over the dry, still, quiet land.' Independent of his inner turmoil but nevertheless encasing it, the landscape ripples with the folds of colonial and pre-colonial histories. What seem to be dormant, ancestral forms balloon into psychic tropes of desire, and of distance and despair:

... watch how the empty paddock slopes
stretch out
as if they're sleeping shadow-bodies
able to luxuriate, folded into each other, in the star-dotted cool

Crucially, the darkness of 'Dry Grass' is 'the kind of darkness / you feel in separation'; the poet's desire is enormous, but it is frustrated by distance – his beloved is on the other side of the world. Contrasted with the star-bright cool of the land, the darkness of the poet's interior world is feverish with this grief. Indeed, much of *Happiness* is weighted by the death of the poet's beloved, whose body appears in fragmented images throughout many of the poems; one of the things that emerges in the dissipated structure of Harrison's late style, then, is a charged, and distinctly melancholic, eroticism. But as if embodying the baroque at its most tragic, the interior force of these poems, the mind-world in which Harrison can see and feel and smell his lover, is set free by the complete absence of correspondent determinations in the phenomenal world. In earlier work often there was little complicating the translation of phenomena-to-language-to-reader, and in the prior, epistolary case of 'Letter to America' the poem is addressed directly to Harrison's friend, the artist Ruark Lewis. In *Happiness*, however, the lover's absence unleashes expression like so many lemmings into a void: without forms to

signify, language stutters, halts, but keeps onrushing: ‘no more no more more no more’; many poems begin and end in the middle of sentences, as if the poems themselves were but segments of some vast vortex only touched by the light. The correspondence with Bracho is here most apparent. Where, as the editors of *Medusario* say, the ‘freedom of Bracho’s rhizome is achieved through syntax,’ where constructions are articulated ‘from the lucid dexterity and gymnastics of the language,’ it is also true that ‘[d]esire is the principal motor of the production of images ... The syntax of the language is the membrane at the edge of the skin, it is the very desire of the word’ (Echavarren et al, 2010, p. 283, my translation). The baroque’s typically anti-representational spirit, its will to dissolve subjects and objects into one another, ignites an orgy of erotic materials.

Un neobarroco australiano

My reading of Harrison’s *Happiness* is only the tip of an iceberg. Next to the Sacred Heart Church on the Dampier Peninsula, we could add various literary examples, namely the Indigenous transformation of European forms such as the poetry collection and the novel into original, hybrid structures by writers like Lionel Fogarty and Alexis Wright. Moreover, Michael Farrell has argued that even cattle drovers’ inscriptions on trees in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries could constitute the beginnings of an Australian colonial baroque. While the drovers’ messages are certainly intended to be informative, they are also ‘excessive, extravagant’ and transgressive: spilled from the frames of books and newspapers onto arboreal bodies, they disregard property and state lines; they develop nomadic, translocal networks of exchange that are unbounded by an imperial centre (Farrell, 2015, p. 190) [4]. Like other examples of colonial baroque, the drovers’ inscriptions attempt to reconcile the poetics of settlement with the material richness of a new world. Though a truly neobaroque poetics is not only about the marks left by a drover on a tree, but also the way in which the tree itself responds to such marking, as it slowly distorts and eventually demolishes the lettering altogether to produce instead a set of winding, asemic scars. The result might be another new, creolised literature, a writing that, to use a phrase of Farrell’s, ‘becomes part of the land’ (2015, p. 191).

In the reticent, Protestant climate of colonial Australia, however, where baroque forms might have been celebrated they were often dismissed, or ignored. In Paul Carter’s view, for example, TGH Strehlow’s understanding of Aranda songpoetry ‘was that it was essentially baroque’ (1996, p. 105). Replete as they were with intriguing ambiguities, creative flourishes and multiple meanings, Strehlow explicitly compared Aranda poetics to the ‘veined and mottled surfaces’ and the ‘decorative motifs expressed in lacquer, paint, and gold leaf’ of European Baroque architecture (Strehlow, as cited in Carter, 1996, p. 105). But for Strehlow as for his German, Lutheran father, ‘baroque elaboration suggested irreverent mockery’ (p. 106). The open-ended, malleable structures of the songpoems, their opacity and complexity, their proliferating meanings, their redundant and asemic sounds, seemed to make mockery of the smooth planes of Renaissance reason which Strehlow revered. There was an ideal, received tradition; the artist needed to obey it strictly rather than distort it or elaborate upon it with insignificant flourishes. In his dismissal of the baroque, Carter argues, Strehlow dismissed a

mode of thought that might have opened him to a richer mode of cross-cultural exchange. Because ‘the performative rituals of cross-cultural first contact,’ whether in Latin America ‘or in the multilingual backyards and streets of Newtown and Carlton,’ are for Carter all baroque (1996, p. 299). The key here is that these improvised rituals break down common sense(s). Then, in gradually sketching out the coordinates of a localised communication

they create a space where the tactics of colonization (temporarily at least) fail, where for a while irremediable differences communicate without ceding ground ... syntax and the survey have yet to settle differences, and one-sidedly to settle down. (Carter, 1996, p. 299)

Fast-forwarding back to the present, or to a time closer to it, we might find the neobaroque in all manner of Australian places. In the abundance, density and extravagance of the south-east Queensland hinterland, for example, William Robinson has developed a style of painting that Malouf (2011) identifies as baroque:

Baroque, as it is commonly used, suggests wayward, flamboyant, theatrical, playful, paradoxical, and Robinson’s work can be all of these ... Observe in the landscapes the upward gaze into a sky-space that is as much a theatre of extravagant happenings as in any Tiepolo, the energy that swirls around inside these wonderfully active paintings and goes pouring out of the frame, the frothy turmoil and fluid interchangeability of the forms – of water, foliage, rocks, clouds; the sudden displacement we feel of up for down ... (p. 73)

For Malouf, Robinson’s paintings reflect ‘the real vegetative world of southern Queensland’ (p. 73). Again, the baroque here refers to functions that are not necessarily European, but that might manifest anywhere: the extravagance and unruliness of a Queensland rainforest ecology are strikingly baroque; in searching for a way to paint them, the painter is in turn territorialised by their mode(s) of expression. More than that, however, Malouf’s reading suggests that Robinson is actually very *neobaroque*. Unlike the works of the Italian Baroque, where, despite the reels and swirls, there is possible nevertheless a sudden harmony, a miraculous illumination, Robinson invites us to become ‘a multiple viewer, to see things from several points at the same time’; inside and outside proliferate, we discover ‘how multiple the world can be, and how multiple [the viewer] may be’ (Malouf, 2011, p. 74). In Robinson’s rainforest paintings, then, baroque harmony is split into Deleuze’s ‘polyphony of polyphonies’. In this transcorporeal exchange between artist and ecosystem we might find something resembling an event of transcultural hybridisation.

Also central to such hybridisation should be the Indigenous peoples on whose lands the process is taking place. Here, Peter Minter’s analysis of a major collaboration between plangermairreenner elder and writer puralia meenamatta with the Anglo-Australian painter Jonathan Kimberley, *Meenamatta Water Country Discussion*, is profoundly apposite. Of the neobaroque, González Echevarría argues that it is ‘furiously anti-western, ready to become part

of or enter into hybrid mixtures with non-western cultures' (as cited in Perlongher, 2010, p. 15, my translation). Similarly, puralia and Kimberley's suite of 'painting-writings' – where writing baroquely transgresses painted canvas, and painting elaborates upon and makes resplendent parts of the writing – constitute for Minter (2021) one of the most compelling examples of countermodern, transcultural poetics:

Meenamatta Water Country Discussion is a paradigmatic moment in the expression of a transcultural ecopoetics that is uniquely Australian, not only for its creative synthesis of an Aboriginal cosmology and poetic language with a western 'countermodern' mode of landscape painting (which Kimberley defines in his practice variously as 'Postlandscape', 'Unlandscape' and 'Working Exmodern'), but also for its particularly situated, Australian expression of decoloniality grounded in a worldly Aboriginal eco-philosophy of Country. (p. 192)

At different points, Minter writes of puralia's poems and Kimberley's paintings that they 'narrate an abyssal "middle passage"' through colonial matrices of power, or that they 'actualise a nourishing transcultural ecopoetic by materially substantiating the 'in-between' discussion between puralia and jonathan as it appears between them and meenamatta Country itself' (2021, pp. 201, 198) [5]. In this emphasis on the interstitial we approach what Harrison (2004) has called 'a style of intermediate poetics for Australian writing' (p. 34). Dependent on the turn (or the fold) – on looking forward in order to look back – intermediate poetics charts both the interior and exterior of Australian experience (p. 34). Here Harrison draws on Carter, for whom such agile responsiveness to 'historical contingencies,' such 'improvisation,' is baroque (Carter, 1996, p. 319). Rather than a free-reigning perception and exploration, however, Harrison's intermediate poetics fractures 'under the pressure of the poet's recognition of human limit and dilemma' (Harrison, 2004, p. 34). Such limits and dilemmas will be inscribed by Aboriginal authority and by the histories in which they are situated.

For Farrell, a poetics that unsettles, rather than establishes or defines, the Australian colony would be baroque. Syncretic in its attempts to acknowledge, and occasionally reconcile, different modes and cultures of writing, it would not provide the logic of an official history 'or of reason in perpetual progress,' but rather a cultural logic that is 'open and in perpetual revolt' (Gregg Lambert, as cited in Farrell, 2015, p. 191). It is perhaps too much of a leap to make here, from the porous surfaces of neobaroque poetics to the decolonial, transcultural project of Latin American cultural theory. But the neobaroque is as much a subversion of scale as a subversion of imperial culture, and a book like *Happiness* is, if nothing else, an illustration of how the ground of Australian poetry is both rock dense with the weight of local ecologies, and forever opening out, even losing itself, on an impossibly vast plane of ontological extensions and recursions. Clearly, 'art must let itself reverse direction, must permit folds, interruptions, even falsifications, must juxtapose the pretty ... with the unruly and the bloody,' in order to approach anything like the experience of this near-incomprehensible continent (paraphrasing Burt, 2014, p. 14).

To conclude the inconclusive, we could characterise the neobaroque as a complete commitment to a positive ontology of process, of continuous elaboration and evolution, of ongoing flourishing rather than containment (and death). As a compositional process, it is a system in which the impossible is always present – that is, however minute the probability for something to become, when multiplied to the scale of the universe it might happen, it could be there. We are articulations of nature, formed ‘in the infinite play of its combinations.’ As the spiral continues to expand, ‘who knows how many and which other extraordinary complexities exist, in forms perhaps impossible for us to imagine, in the endless spaces of the cosmos...’ (Rovelli, 2016, p. 74). This is not an ecopoetics or a theological poetics, but a poetics of the ground on which such modes might take shape. The neobaroque, then, is ‘an inflated, capricious and meticulous, transcultural syncretism, capable of piecing together the ruins and scraps of the most varied monuments of literature and history into hallucinatory forms’ (Perlongher, 2010, p. 16, my translation). Its temporality is neither linear nor circular, but twists like a whirlwind (Carter, 1996, p. 299), ‘moving both backward to recreate and forward toward total creativity’ (Emilio Bejel, as cited in Kaup, 2006, p. 142). With its emphasis on syncretism and adaptation, the thoroughly contemporary, but thoroughly antimodernist and anticolonialist, neobaroque might find its boldest expression in the revised constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador – constitutions that radically unsettle Western anthropocentric hegemony by fusing European political democracy with Indigenous Andean understandings of *Pachamama*, or ‘Mother Earth’. In Australia, we need to ensure that a Treaty inaugurates a similarly profound ontological shift on this continent as well.

Notes

[1] There are, of course, some important exceptions to this critical lacuna. See, for example, Michael Farrell (2013) ‘An “Infinitely Flexible” Space: reading Michael Dransfield’s “Courland Penders” poems through the neobaroque and Dobrez’s theory of “the pouch”’. Also, David Musgrave (2018) assesses Les Murray’s relationship to the baroque in ‘Les Murray’s Mannerist Grotesque’.

[2] I appreciate that in what follows I am collapsing important differences between genealogies of European, New World and a-historical baroque theory. However, my interest here is in synthesising aspects of these genealogies that are relevant to poetics.

[3] There is no doubt an important parallel to be drawn here with elements of Black Mountain and New American poetics. Note, for example, Robert Duncan’s ‘artist of abundancies’, who ‘strives not for a disintegration of syntax but for a complication within syntax, overlapping structures, so that words are freed, having bounds out of bound.’ ‘Were all in harmony’, Duncan writes, we would be stuck in ‘the dreadful smugness’ of ‘mere human rationality’ (1968, p. ix). Indeed, Livio Dobrez has written of Duncan’s ‘colonial Baroque’ (cited in Farrell, 2013, p. 140).

[4] The drovers’ inscriptions also recall, however tangentially, Góngora’s arboreal poetics.

[5] Jonathan’s name is not capitalised when mentioned in collaboration with puralia, whose name is never capitalised as per conventions for Tasmanian Aboriginal languages.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the referees of this paper for their invaluable suggestions.

References

- Bal, M. (2018). Standing Outside the Centre: ecstasy as political act. The History of Emotions Lecture in Art History, University of Queensland, February 15.
- Bracho, C. (2008). *Firefly Under the Tongue: Selected poems*. (F. Gander, Trans.). New Directions.
- Burt, S. (2014, April 11). Nearly Baroque. *Boston Review*. <http://bostonreview.net/poetry/stephen-burt-nearly-baroque>
- Carter, P. (1996). *The Lie of the Land*. Faber and Faber.
- Conley, T. (1993). Translator's Foreword: a plea for Leibniz. In G. Deleuze. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (T. Conley, Trans.) (pp. ix-xx). University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1993). *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. (T. Conley, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.
- Duncan, R. (1968). *Bending the Bow*. New Directions.
- Echavarren, R., Sefamí, J. & Kozér, J. (Eds.). (2010). *Medusario: muestra de poesía Latinoamericana*. Mansalva.
- Echavarren, R. (2010). Prólogo. In R. Echavarren, J. Sefamí, & J. Kozér (Eds.) *Medusario: muestra de poesía Latinoamericana* (pp. 9-13). Mansalva
- Farrell, M. (2015). *Writing Australian Unsettlement: modes of poetic invention 1796-1945*. In R. Blau DuPlessis (Ed.) *Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*. Palgrave MacMillan.
- Farrell, M. (2013). An 'Infinitely Flexible' Space: reading Michael Dransfield's 'Courland Penders' poems through the neobaroque and Dobrez's theory of 'the pouch'. *Southerly* 73(1), 138-54.
- Gander, F. (2008). Introduction. In C. Bracho. *Firefly Under the Tongue: selected poems*. (F. Gander, Trans.). (pp. xi-xiii). New Directions.
- Glissant, É. (2006). *Poetics of Relation*. (B. Wing, Trans.). University of Michigan Press. (Original work published in 1997).
- Góngora, L. (2007). First Solitude. *Selected Poems of Luis de Góngora*. (J. Dent-Young, Ed. & Trans.) (pp. 110-71). University of Chicago Press.
- Harrison, M. (In press). *On Composition: five studies in the philosophy of writing*. Vagabond Press.
- Harrison, M. (2015). *Happiness*. UWA Publishing.

- Harrison, M. (2008). *Wild Bees: New and selected poems*. UWA Publishing.
- Harrison, M. (2004). *Who Wants to Create Australia? Essays on poetry and ideas in contemporary Australia*. Halstead Press.
- Indyk, I. (2012). Give Baroque Writing a Break. *The Australian*.
<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/give-baroque-writing-a-break/news-story/c8fbcd4392eb74acf16e0f7c39ada5b8?sv=c9ddb12bdd4e1200e468577bf555544>
- Johnson, C. (2012). Baroque. In R. Greene, S. Cushman, C. Cavanagh, J. Ramazani & P. Rouzer (Eds.) *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (pp. 121-6). Princeton University Press.
- Joris, P. (2003). *A Nomad Poetics*. Wesleyan University Press.
- Kaup, M. (2006). Neobaroque: Latin America's alternative modernity. *Comparative Literature*. 58(2), 128-52. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4125415>
- Malouf, D. (2011). Making Consciousness and the Created World One. In D. Hart et al, *William Robinson: the transfigured landscape*, (pp. 73-4). Queensland University of Technology & Piper Press.
- Menocal, M.R. (1994). *Shards of Love: exile and the origins of the lyric*. Duke University Press.
- Minter, P. (2021). Transcultural Ecopoetics and Decoloniality in *meenamatta lena narla puellakanny: Meenamatta Water Country Discussion*. In S. Cooke & P. Denney (Eds.) *Transcultural Ecocriticism: global, romantic and decolonial perspectives* (pp. 191-220). Bloomsbury.
- Musgrave, D. (2018). Les Murray's Mannerist Grotesque. In A. Kissane, D. Musgrave & C. Rickett (Eds.) *Feeding the Ghost I: criticism on contemporary Australian poetry* (pp. 214-49). Puncher & Wattmann.
- Perlongher, N. (2010). Prólogo. In R. Echavarren, J. Sefamí & J. Kozer (Eds.) *Medusario: muestra de poesía Latinoamericana* (pp. 15-22). Mansalva.
- Retallack, J. (2003). *The Poethical Wager*. University of California Press.
- Rovelli, C. (2016). *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics*. Penguin.
- Sefamí, J. (2012). Neobaroque. In R. Greene, S. Cushman, C. Cavanagh, J. Ramazani & P. Rouzer (Eds.) *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (p. 927). Princeton University Press.
- Volkow, V. (2009). *Arcana & Other Poems*. (L. Ingelmo & M. Smith, Trans.). Shearsman Books.
- Wellek, R. (1946). The Concept of Baroque in Literary Scholarship. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 5(2), 77-109. <https://doi.org/10.2307/425797>