

THEME I

ORIENT AND OCCIDENT

Towards symbolical representation

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In his "Philosophie der Symbolischen Formen" (1923, 1944 in English), Ernst Cassirer presents the means of symbolical expression as an essentially human faculty. For Cassirer, a new dimension, unique of its kind, resides in the power to express oneself symbolically, in a spiritual universe, by means of the language of sounds and images. Animals are only capable of using certain signals which have a direct bearing, as sensorial messages, on profitable or perilous vital situations. On the other hand man, through his ability to express himself already in ordinary everyday language, forged for himself an abstract mean of communication. Suzanne Langer, of the school of A.N. Whitehead, in her book which was published in 1942, "Philosophy in a new key", and in a more recent work, "Feeling and Form", stresses the use of symbols in the artistic field, and brings out the fact that it is in this very field that the things that logic cannot explain can be effectively expressed by an abstract and imaginative method.

In the plastic arts, over and above the formal and aesthetic aspect, it is clear that there is a growing interest in the inner activity, the "significance", of the form. For by passing the experiences of the outer world through the transforming filter of the emotional regions, the language of symbols produces a creative "Imago", which exists outside all imitation of reality and is bound up with deeper universal regions beyond the artist's consciousness. Alongside the different scientific categories (mathematics, physics, logic, psychology) in which symbolical expression plays an increasingly important part, art is in a class of its own. Its function is to represent man's inner life and the whole of the emotional content of its epoch, by means of this symbolical language. All these contents, conditioned by their different periods, naturally express, when they are powerful enough, a more general content, the expression of what is eternal in humanity.

In the history of the development of modern art, this need for symbolical expression always starts with a quest of growing intensity for a spiritual content; for the artist looks more and more beyond visible form towards the domain of the immaterial. As soon as it is a question of "making the invisible visible", the methods of illusionism are no longer sufficient. By deformation (fauvism, expressionism) and transformation (cubism) of the object and of the human form a deeper and more multiple life comes into being. Moreover a new spiritual vision is created in this world of forms which has ceased to have any relation or association with the details of the material world. (Kandinsky). And even things which are identifiable but irrationally "out of context" become messengers of the inner life ("pittura metafisica" or surrealism), the "sicologica delle cose" as Giorgio de Chirico calls it. It is everywhere an interpretation of life, activated by means which go beyond the material static reproduction perceptible to the senses, and manifest themselves in a dynamic way. The modern artist introduces into this imagery the metaphor of his vision of the world. Klee even speaks of a "consolation" which the symbols offer to man.

In the work of Klee the use of symbols expresses the psychic and genetic forces behind nature (latent gesticulations, interlacing spirals, hieroglyphs of thought), while in the work of Kandinsky symbolical imagery has only made its appearance in his last period, and is a product of memory, closely bound up with the roots and regions of

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his youth. What Joyce achieves with the dynamism and multiplicity of his word-coining, Kandinsky does with an optical language, thus creating a new spiritual and significant universe.

Alongside the evocation of the inner life and the penetration of natural mysteries, art today also tries to express in a universal language man's everyday experience in the setting which he has built for himself, the modern city, in its essence and function, beyond its outward appearance. Robert Delaunay's "Eiffel Tower" (1909) becomes a symbol of urban constructivism, space and dynamic power, and in a more abstract stage his "Simultaneous Windows" (1912) evoke the multiplicity of the town by the juxtaposition of the colours. Using other significant methods, Fernand Léger sums up in abbreviated and fragmentary signs the modern metropolis by the simultaneous appearance of its elements: technique, publicity, metallurgical construction, letters, numbers, etc... In the series of works which he did for the Audincourt chapel (1950) the story of Christ's Passion is told by the "mystical objects", the instruments of torture, which evoke the event.

In another field of plastic arts, Picasso has shown that the modern historical painting, "Guernica", is not just the dramatization of an event. With the triple lighting he shows us the simultaneous nature of Past and Present: the candle (past), the electric light (present), and sunlight (the "eternal" in nature). In the same way the action is stamped with the terror of the present event, while the terrible emotion of the fugitives and the resurrection (a bird singing) reconcile all epochs in a permanent and universal message.

Modern sculpture, in its two principal methods - building up of volumes, and construction in space - shows the same tendency towards symbolical expression. "The Bird" by Brancusi, a primordial and mythical oval, symbolically combines the flight of the bird with human elevation and liberation. Pevsner, in his "Colonne Développable de la Victoire" (inspired by the liberation of Paris), sets out to interpret the feeling of triumph by widespread wings of bronze capturing space. In both cases spatial gesture expresses a movement of the soul by means of a language of universal forms.

In the different aspects and methods of contemporary artistic expression, the functional activity of the symbol is clearly evident in all its qualities: its universality, its capacity of uniting the multiple and contrasts, its flexibility, its evocative force, "suggesting rather than stating" which Alfred Jarry claimed as indispensable to poetry. And so it is no longer beautiful form, but significant form, dynamic form which is the centre of interest. This language, born of vision and inner creative force, still not understood by many even today, can one day become a universal convention, such as has existed in every great period of the past, uniting, in fact, through the symbol that which was accessible to everyone - the esoteric.

The definition of the symbol given by the Swiss mythologist, J.J. Bachofen: "to strike every cord of the human mind simultaneously, awakening presentiment where rational language can only explain" also throws new light on the force and quality of this instrument of the emotions, about which Mallarmé said: "it gave reality its only meaning, by calling up the deep inner voice of things." It is this ancient and modern imagery of the imagination which enables us to enter the secret places of life, and also to understand the specific character of an epoch.