

QUESTIONS OF STYLE TODAY

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THE cultural expression of a given period is recognizable. A work of art, individual and novel though it may appear, always belongs to the time of its creation, even to the place where it was conceived. These temporal and spatial co-ordinates determine style. Style is but the sublimation, in the work of a poet or an artist, of a way of living and a mode of thinking.

Has our time begot a style of its own? Will a painting, a symphonic work or a poem of our day be as recognizable in the future as are, let us say, a fifteenth century Flemish panel, a polyphonic madrigal or a piece of late Gothic architecture? Is there a common denominator for the whole artistic product of this age? At first sight the impression is one of great confusion, but this is because it is difficult to judge one's own time. In the midst of a crowd, the spectator's view is not what it would be from the summit of a tower.

An easy way out is to declare that our epoch is a period of transition. This is no answer. Each period is one of transition. His incorrigible human pride persuades every man, at every moment, that he lives in an exceptional age and that his own lifetime coincides with some extraordinary historical developments.

If we consider the richest periods of civilization, we see that the production of art is not necessarily a superstructure on economic prosperity, but rather the result of a spiritual, philosophic or religious impulse. Sometimes this is generated by a single man, or a group who act as prophets or precursors without being themselves artistic creators. St. Francis of Assisi, the Humanists of the Quattrocento, the leading spirits of the Reformation, of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, Descartes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Hegel, Auguste Comte, Darwin . . . the enumeration of their names evokes a profusion of immortal works which, while in no way derived from the writings of these prophets, are in close association with their spiritual and emotional world. A tragedy of Racine is not a consequence of Descartes' *Discours de la Méthode*; Molière did not imagine his *Tartuffe* as a com-

mentary to Pascal's *Lettres Provinciales*; Beethoven did not seek an inspiration for his *Pastoral* in Rousseau's *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire*. But in each case the work of the thinker provides an introduction to the work of the artist. It is a key to the critical understanding of a literary or artistic masterpiece.

The prophetic spirits of our own time may be limited to four: Marx, Nietzsche, Bergson and Freud. Of course the artistic production of the twentieth century cannot be arbitrarily classified as Marxist, Nietzschean, Bergsonian or Freudian. But in the universal radiation of the thought of these four sages, we find a precious instrument of investigation.

The destruction of the visible object, forecast by Cézanne and achieved by Picasso, Braque and Juan Gris; the destruction of syntax and the verbal clash of images practiced by the Italian futurist poets, and later by Apollinaire, Max Jacob, the French Dadaists, Reverdy and Tzara, and the American Gertrude Stein; and finally the destruction of the logical development of musical patterns by Debussy and Ravel: what else are they but a transposition, into the fields of painting, poetry and music, of the destruction of rationalism and Darwinian evolutionism accomplished by Henri Bergson in his *Critique des données immédiates de la conscience*?

We know the *Zarathustra* of Richard Strauss. A more Nietzschean approach to human pride and grandiose eloquence is to be found perhaps in Markevitch's *Paradise Lost* and in his titanic *L'Envol d'Icare*. And are not the *mannequins* of the early period of Chirico in their inhuman grandeur a kind of visible materialization of the *Uebermensch*?

For many years there have been artists, poets, painters and composers who claim that they create Marxist poems and Marxist works of art. Some have rendered their political conviction esthetically, and in the eyes of orthodox Marxists this expression may represent a considerable achievement. But it has generally little or nothing to do with Marxist thought. On the contrary, one can trace a certain artistic transposition of dialectic materialism in many a page of contemporary music, in Satie's *Socrate*, for instance, or Stravinsky's *Noces* or Hindemith's *Nobilissima Visione* and *Hin und Zurück*. A similar dialectic approach is to be discovered in the paintings erroneously styled humanistic, the harlequins and mountebanks of Picasso's blue and pink periods and the early works of Bérard, Berman, and Tchelitchev. The men, women and children depicted on these canvases are deprived of all social or national characteristics. They are certainly proletarians, though the stress is not on their poverty but rather on their pathetic psychological condition. They all belong to the "fatherland of suffering" and that is precisely what creates a violent emotional reaction in the spectator. The provocative dialectic value of these pictures is like that of Charlie Chaplin's silent films, and also Bunuel's famous

Perro Andalús. It constitutes an antithesis to the Nietzschean trend in contemporary art.

Surrealism is probably the most original and significant spiritual current of our century. To the research of the artist, it has opened new continents. It has amplified and multiplied the visible world. Through surrealism an invisible universe, of which the field of consciousness is but a particle, has been discovered. The poet, the painter and the sculptor have brought to us wonderful and unexpected treasures from their explorations in the new-found total psycho-physical field, as André Breton puts it. In their very first manifestos the surrealists proclaimed their indebtedness to Freud. What compass and portulans were to the navigators of the fifteenth century, Freud's theories and methods are to the surrealist artists of our time. And as for music, though surrealism pronounced a ban against it twenty years ago, clearly that art has long dealt with magic, with the melodies heard in dreams. As they penetrate their new estate, poets and painters must be abashed to meet there Monteverdi, Mozart, Chopin, Debussy and many others, perfectly at home in the mazes of this unknown world.

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Although the four prophetic spirits are no more, they still exert a decisive influence on our time. Their message came to us ninety, seventy-five or forty years ago. Marx, Nietzsche, Bergson and Freud remain present, they participate in the evolution of mankind. They still command the future.

But human society lives more in the past than in the future. And the artist, a social being no different from the rest, frequently returns to the creeds of the past. Today we very often hear of neo-classicism, neo-romanticism, neo-baroque and neo-Thomism. A lack of clarity distinguishes such qualifications. Musicians, for instance, often use the expression neo-classic when they really mean neo-romantic. Now, when we say classical music, classical architecture, classical verse, we use the same word with completely different significance. Classicism, except in music, has in Western Europe only two sources of inspiration: Greece (with Rome) and the Bible (with the Gospels). Even so, the confusion persists. When we speak of a Greek inspiration, a Greek revival, we generally allude to the Athenian civilization of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. Such various creative minds as Poliziano, Monteverdi, Racine, Gluck and Wagner all believed in good faith that they were reviving Greek tragedy.

The confusion around the concept of romanticism is even greater. During the last third of the eighteenth century, all traditional artistic forms in European cultures were pervaded by the spirit which the French call *pré-romantique*. Let us take as an example one of the most typical genres

of classic music, the sonata as it had been built by Carl Philip Emmanuel Bach. In this same mold, Mozart wrote beautiful classic pieces for one or more instruments. And in this very mold he created the great *Symphony in G minor*, a work of despair and exaltation, full of dramatic contrasts that even today strike the listener with awe. Is this symphony romantic or classic? Are we to judge it by its structure or by its magic substance? Do we not recognize the pen that wrote the two last scenes of *Don Giovanni* and the piano *Fantasia in C minor*? And is it possible that the same composer, after an interval of a few months, perhaps a few weeks, wrote the delightful and perfectly classical *B♭ Symphony*?

If we consider other important artistic creations of that period, we are confronted by similar problems: Piranesi's etchings, Chardin's still lifes, Horace Vernet's landscapes, Parini's comic epics (with their extraordinary Byronic flavor), the early poems of André Chénier, the youthful paintings of Goya.

Each new generation has its own interpretation of the trends of the human soul. Words such as romantic and classic grow like fantastic nebulae, swell with antithetic meanings, and in the end do not differ essentially from each other. It is irrelevant to call a work of art in our day neo-romantic or neo-classic. Such appellations only help create confusion.

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Contemporary musicians, like painters, frequently indulge in deliberate revivals of ancient forms. Such revivals are as a whole purely morphological and stylistic. Though Hindemith may use a traditional contrapuntal structure and Alban Berg may introduce the sonata-form in modern opera and Stravinsky may follow the pattern of an early nineteenth century overture, in no case do we find an imitation of an ancient work. The musical substance is entirely new, and the adoption of a recognizable stylistic form adds only novelty to the contemporary work. Those painters of the twentieth century who have adopted a pattern or a composition from Byzantine art or from Caravaggio or Piranesi (the fashionable masters par excellence), do not proceed like the pre-Raphaelites. Their attitude resembles that of the modern musician who utilizes a given form without becoming subservient to a style of the past.

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We know that, in the course of history, certain constant trends can be traced. History never repeats itself, but for any given historical situation there is generally a corresponding esthetic parallel. A period of revolutionary changes implies, in European civilization, a double trend of revivals, one preceding and the other following the revolution.

The pre-revolutionary current is prophetic, individualistic. In religious

matters it begets hermits and heretics. In esthetic creation it returns to primitive forms; it cultivates exoticism and in the vestiges of savage tribal life seeks to revive the prehistoric elements of art. In the plastic arts it favors nature more than man, landscape rather than portrait. In poetry, in music, it abandons traditional forms, logical developments. It is naturally inclined toward mystic revelation and magic intuition. It is favorable to lyricism and it transposes into the fields of art the experimental research of the scientist. Although it is tolerant toward post-revolutionary doctrines surviving from the past, it rejects academism of any kind, and is as thoroughly opposed to classical Athenian civilization, as it is to the ethic conceptions of Israel in the age of the Kings. It is destructive of fixed and imposed esthetic canons (verse, rhyme, formal epics, hero-worship in painting and sculpture, traditional anatomy and perspective, scholarly counterpoint and melodic development in music) as it is hostile to military discipline and social hierarchy.

The post-revolutionary current is social, collectivist. Its religious conceptions are theological and monastic. It favors orthodoxy. It chastises and outlaws the heretics. On esthetic grounds it seeks and cultivates the formal heirlooms of the past. It feels an irrepressible nostalgia for the ethic and artistic achievements of Athens and Israel. It is civic and patriotic. It favors historical compositions, oratorios, traditional symphony, character and portrait painting, huge architectural ensembles, anything that is analogous in spirit to the deploying of an army in the field. It will establish the control of law in the most secret recesses of human thought. (It would control dreams if that were possible.) And it will cultivate all artistic productions that may be immediately controlled by a law: fugue, sonata, representative art, ballet. It is intolerant of any surviving pre-revolutionary tendency. It evicts lyricism and condemns all magic appeal in the field of art. Plato, let us remember, had the poets expelled from his Republic.

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In the present state of the Western world, the pre-revolutionary tide is still coming in (except perhaps in Russia). The approaching upheaval is not necessarily a class or even a social revolution. It may take a religious and ethnical, a technological form, with a corresponding modification in the spatial and temporal conditions of human life.

Many characteristic symptoms of this pre-revolutionary period are clearly to be perceived: There is, first, a new-born interest in the esthetic values created by primitive and prehistoric cultures. (Since 1905 artists and critics have penetrated the field which, during the past century, had been the exclusive possession of the ethnologist.) Picasso's Negro period, Stravinsky's *Sacre du printemps*, Milhaud's *L'homme et son désir* were directly inspired by "primitive" life. Many other important works have

been created under a kindred impulse: most of the surrealist paintings and sculpture of Tanguy, Ernst, Masson, Matta, Francès, Giacometti, Henry Moore, and the achievements of that forerunner of surrealism, Paul Klee. In music there are the Italian futurists and Varese, and the religious primitive trend recognizable in the large compositions of Kodaly, of Lourié, in Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints*, and the very original Eastern primitivism of John Cage.

Further there is the general distaste of the contemporary artist for the accepted classical Greek and Biblical themes. If he does use them, he prefers a coloration, say, of Greek primitivism. He avoids the traditional white columns and porticos, the tunic and peplos, and replaces them with variegated polychromy in architecture and costume (the settings of André Masson for Darius Milhaud's *Médée*, the choreography by Martha Graham for Hindemith's *Hérodiade*). The modern writer tends to set a classic theme in the atmosphere of the present (André Gide's *L'Enfant prodigue*, Anouilh's *Antigone*).

Another sign of the times is the repugnance most musicians and painters feel for the nationalist and folklore emotionalism that was such an essential element in many important works of the last century (Dvorak, Smetana, Grieg, Rimsky-Korsakov, Albeniz; of course Verdi and Wagner, and, on the other hand, nearly all the French impressionist painters). A musician of this age such as Bartok or Martinu uses folk resources scientifically, as an experimental material, or with more detachment like Satie in his *Tyrolienne Turque* or Stravinsky in his *Norwegian Moods*.

The artist's life today is more a hermit's life than it was in the nineteenth century. As Carl Einstein observes in his splendid book on Braque, the artist is now so much involved in the social and ethnical currents that he seeks a shelter and a refuge in his own creation, and naturally makes it not too easily accessible to the multitude. Groups, clans and schools are always with us. But today, for instance, the composers who have been influenced by so didactic a personality as Nadia Boulanger have little in common with each other. And Schönberg's great pride is to have formed two such disciples as Berg and Webern, entirely different from each other as well as from him.

We are living today in an epoch of extremely diversified artistic production. The mid-twentieth century will reveal its own style and spiritual unity to the following generation. In the meanwhile we can only observe and try to interpret its visible symptoms.