

## Form in Art: A Psycho-analytic Interpretation

I FIND in the clouds today the splendid shapes of Tang figures. I turn my back on the fabulous scene, except on the invariable quality of all aesthetic sensation. Art re-creates experience, projects emotional stress. Much conversation does likewise. Art cannot be distinguished from some other "useless" activities except by what in modern jargon is called Form. If that quality is much in evidence, it may please us to call conversation an art, and we may find that it is practiced, consciously or unconsciously, with the predominant aim of achieving Form. Then every part should have a felicitous note as if pervaded with a certain music: conversation becomes an entity, one might feel, an epitome of much that goes beyond it, of much that happens psychically and physically, transformed into "a world of its own". This metaphor is pertinent so far as the greater physical actuality causes visual art to become representative of all art. (The artist *par excellence* of popular idiom is the painter.) If this word "entity" is felt to be gross and inappropriate to the nebulousity, perhaps airiness, equivocation, that some works of art are deemed to convey, in that case we can be sure that full aesthetic experience has not been transmitted.

The work of art, then, because it is expressively self-subsistent, should invoke in us some such idea as the one of "entity." It is as if the various emotions had been rounded like a stone. We compare occasionally a many-sided yet harmonious personality to a work of art: the comparison suggests the notion of a psyche for once so integrated, that in contemplating it we experience the kind of pleasure we have in a well-proportioned object, and the uniformity of its surrounding space. But together with the sense of a clear totality, of an individual yet varied object (one among many), the notion, it must be remarked, contains a reference to a non-differential medium (space) which embraces the whole visible

world. Now, an impression occupies real salience for an artist when it suggests an entire and separate unity, though, at the same time, it seems to be joined to the heart of other, diverse, experiences, to possess with them a pulse in common: that is the feeling the artist strives to re-create. Thus, a good poem has the closed air of an entity, of something compact that makes a dent, but its poetry is a contagion that spreads and spreads. We can always discover from aesthetic experience that sense of homogeneity or fusion combined, in differing proportions, with the sense of object-otherness.

As well as the vivid impress of self-contained totalities, we renew at the instance of aesthetic sensation the "oceanic" feeling, upheld by some of the qualities of id "language," such as inter-changeability, from which poetic identifications flow.

Because it combines the sense of fusion with the sense of object-otherness, we might say that art is an emblem of the state of being in love: this seems true if we emphasise the infantile introjections and reparative attitudes that are strengthened by that state. These attitudes are the fount of Form. When the artist joins them in the creative process, infantile psychic tensions concerning sense-data renew in him some freshness of vision, some ability to meet, as if for the first time, the phenomenal world and the emotion it carries.

The sublimation is highly wrought. Art is, of course, a cultural activity: the "good" imagos at the back of Form are identified with the actualities or potentialities of a particular culture; indeed, the artist, "child of his age," is limited by the parent culture he serves, whose immediate yet deeper moods he portrays, as well as his own, however isolated he may be. He labours also with artistic tradition and convention, whether to swell their fruit or whether, upon desiccation, to recombine the stock.

The face is another indispensable metaphor for the work of art. We construe faces every day, interpreting the physical showing of lifelong experience. Art divagates upon this coalescence of inner and outer, particularly upon the instantaneous impact of its apprehension (sometimes, perhaps, with the intention of unifying the "good" and the "bad" into one physical unity). For this reason alone it is inevitable that visual art should be much taken up with human, animal, and vegetable form whether by a treatment that is generalised, or whether of the kind from which portraiture has evolved. But this matter goes further. We look first to building for style or period. By changes of surface and texture, by proportion,

by void and solid, the architect, for long ages supported by his craftsmen, made walls "speak"; imputed a radiant flowering. That is one reason why this extreme or abstract yet ubiquitous art was often the mother of the rest. No other art could show as well how strongly the material itself, the medium, can be cathected.

Now the artist or would-be artist may be distinguished by the extent to which he cathects a medium. Specific forms are derived from that intense engrossment with a material through which a "face", a physical epitome of experience can be envisaged. For the poet, words, for the sculptor, stone, are pregnant materials with which they are in communion, through which they crystallise particular phantasies. In a sense the work of art is not new enactment but reaffirmation of a pre-existent entity.\* This entity is allowed once more a full and separate life: it is restored. The dancer's body, whether or no in relation with music, is not the sole aesthetic hub of the dance. She ornaments an all-embracing space on which she weaves a pattern, whose directions she will have shown to be harmonious at the conclusion of the dance. An old contact will have sustained her attack upon these vistas now left in new repose. The stage or space which the dancer's movement, in a kind of plastic interplay with music, has particularised, is the aesthetic object also. Music itself, perhaps, first cooed and crowed, was pinned as an enhancement to blissful silence. "Music creates her own disorder like doves sent circling from the cote to which they readily return." In art an all-embracing element, the stage, silence, the blank canvas, can serve as the sleep of which dreams, though wakeful and rapid, are the guardians, I shall identify the interchange, between an all-embracing and particularised element (thus antithetical but blended), with "good" imagos that are the bases of Form.

Form bestows not only pattern but completeness, not only the sense of separate life, but the sense of fusion. In art, repose will in some manner encompass energy. This point is crucial. Whatever

\* Cf. the opening lines of Michelangelo's famous sonnet (trans. J. A. Symonds):

The best of artists hath no thought to show  
Which the rough stone in its superfluous shell  
Doth not include: to break the marble spell  
Is all the hand that serves the brain can do.

As is well known, Michelangelo tended to preserve in parts of his sculpture the original surfaces of the marble.

the rhythm, the force, the fierceness, the furor, there is yet calm, for there is also completeness. An identity has been established amid the manifold to whose differences full value is given: just as a mirror's surface makes more comprehensive the turbulent scene reflected there.

Let us now visit the new Rembrandt room at the National Gallery in London. Here, on the walls, faces come softly but vividly from dark backgrounds, faces and hands that "realise" the sitters. Drawing, texture, disposition, echoing toppling shape, seem to be a rich fructification of character rather than the physical representatives. Such an effect depends on eliciting from us muscular response to the drawing and an increase of the usual correlating activities of vision. We feel this apprehension of inner and outer actuality in prior terms of our muscular responses, let us say, to be benign. I would stress the benignity of the synthesis effected by art, whatever the subject matter. Thomas Mann has pointed out that artists themselves tend to speak more of the goodness or badness of a work of art than of its beauty or ugliness. I think that particularly two shades of meaning in the word "good" are taken up here, the excellent or loved and the beneficent. These meanings in their depth are of course unconscious: they spur the artist to the creation of Form, a benign or unifying experience, however dire his subject matter. Pre-Columbian Mexican stone masks often express a powerful sadism or bloodthirstiness: it comes through to us as we look at the masks. It comes through to us, as it was meant to, in terms of the calm, suave yet austere curves that it feeds. No other form of communication is likely to be more expressive of this blood-curdling content, yet the mask does not horrify the aesthete. He is aware, of course, of the blood-thirsty intensity and he perhaps values all the more—but it is obvious that taste will oscillate here a good deal—the powerful serenity, the spare enclosure, the beauty of the form. Mexican artists discovered an enduring pattern for strong emotions without belittling them, without (manic) protestation. There comes to us the perception of a fructifying object, inanimate though it be.

By the side of what I have called the benignity of art I put the non-anxious character or guiltlessness of aesthetic experience. It is not that the artist is without guilt or anxiety—far from it—nor that his subject matter, the content of his work, must be divorced from these emotions. Such inhibition would entail a falsifying that

would rule out art. Better than most, the artist remembers an actual taste, however bitter. In this respect like the scientist, though himself *engaged*, he is also the observer and recorder. No, it is simply that in aesthetic experience we have something inexhaustible on which we feed, a pabulum without surfeit or waste product: something—and, remember, all experience comes within these terms—something nourishing, beneficent, that denotes at the same time an independent object, excellent or loved. These "good" objects, then, are out of harm's way, and they preside over a world more unexpurgated than is usual. A cohesive load of experience—it must be as broad as possible if there is to be weight in so wide a reparative homage—is put by Form at the service of their universal dominion.

The psychoanalytic approach, then, to the aesthetic experience must be primarily in terms of the depressive position and of the ensuing drive to reparation, as conceived by Melanie Klein. I have attempted this approach in a discursive manner, in connection with architecture (1951); but the reference can only be to Dr. Segal's paper (1952). In contemplating the character of art as I have outlined it, I find it necessary to posit the prevalence, the universal prevalence, in this act of reparation, of two unconscious "good" imagos (to be specified a little later) in virtue of which Form embraces the artist's subject matter: whatever other introjected objects are supporting them, the two imagos, identified with a cultural background, are the main, invariable filter, often most narrow, through which content must pass. This filter, if it can be contemplated apart from the cultural identification, the cultural refinement—the metaphor here breaks down—has a primitive content of its own that tends to influence the general content: that is, Form has a content of its own. But if I say that the content of Form sometimes imposes an idealising as well as a connective touch on manifest content, let it not be thought that I am unaware of ferocious treatments, sometimes well within the bounds of Form in modern art especially, or of undisguised obsessional and paranoid traits; or of the protest not only that idealisation is not essential but that art is in contact with the whole man and with the actualities of the cultural chaos which she must take to her heart. There is sometimes seen today a stressed and wilful absence of Form and of selection, challenging our practice of projecting Form about which we are then induced to think. There is reliance here

upon the practice, the habit, of other kinds of art.

These rather negative or anti-art expressions too involve a reparative nucleus though it be sardonically or recklessly confined to the challenging of the spectator's contemplative aesthetic role when confronted by chaos. One sign of it, we have said, is a richness or excellence attributed to the medium: perhaps not to medium but at any rate to art in general. Indeed, it is because there is excellence in art's succinctness and pattern that some trends which are usually inhibited can be so freely displayed: this is part of the bringing together, of a coalescence that provides an emblem to the difficult organisation of the ego. Art is a powerful means for the harmless expression of aggressive trends.

It may be thought that my least equivocal statements have been those concerned with the portraits of Rembrandt, namely, that our apprehension of the sitters' characters in terms of our visual and muscular responses to pictorial textures or realisation of shape, is a benign or unifying experience. I would recall to the reader that my first words were of clouds and of images they embody. We cannot look out upon the external world without any trace of such projection. Its nature will normally be somewhat circumscribed by the character, as it appears to the reality principle, of the object present to the senses. There are a thousand and one gradations between the power, as we feel it, of the object to suggest associations to us and the imputation, as we feel it, of our mood to this object. Anyone who, looking at clouds, with or without conscious phantasy, is increasingly arrested by the shape, tone, disposition, or the spaces between them, by every detail and its interrelation, experiences and aesthetic sensation. In asserting this I am presuming that conscious phantasy, if it makes an appearance, does not merely use the condition of the clouds as a point of departure but that, on the contrary, the movements of phantasy or of judgment have been transposed into, and therefore restricted by, the very particular visual and tactile terms of these cloudy forms: only an animating content that exalts or sharpens the shape and detail of the clouds is felicitous or aesthetic; only what is continuously apprehended in terms of the eye's correlations and of the muscular sense. Then only is it an aesthetic projection, worthy of the epithet "benign." It seems to me that this is so because in such kind of apprehension we are as one with the *virtù* of the object while at the same time we, in turn, are giving to its intrinsic structure in bodily

terms, to its actuality or distinctiveness, to its separateness from ourselves, full value. Such experiences are at the back of art: the artist re-creates them, and in so doing he is re-creating, preserving also, enlivening, older experiences, among them the basic experiences in object relationship, those which, when successfully fused, could have been the benign key to psychical integration (now declared, instead, a form of art); namely, the sensation of oneness with the satisfying breast no less than an acceptance of the whole mother as a separate person, as the sum of conflicting attributes. And so, we come to this definition: Form in art is content conceived in terms of a medium and of a culture that have been profoundly associated by the artist with the imagos described above (or with their prime surrogates).

I have said nothing about creativeness in general except to refer to the reparative aspect. Art epitomises creativeness. This vague term, *tout court*, is permissible for a metapsychological context only, as a synonym for Eros in cultural dress.

But the homage to Eros would be formless were the heavier gifts from Thanatos excluded. I have insisted on certain metaphors and an abstraction: for emotion, a rounded stone; for the work of art, an entity; on something final, comprehensive, and at rest. As *hans cantinne* such intonations accompany the melody of the integrative imagos with which they are used in harmony to make the music of Form.

At the service of life and health, the fusion into sleep may elongate bliss at the satisfying breast: not entirely removed from so single a world is utter ceasing. . . . The more constant entities are those inanimate. . . . Agent for resurrection and for death, the artist furnishes enshrinement.

#### REFERENCES

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