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“A Figure of Speech, or a Figure of Thought?” (Part 2)

by

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We can now, perhaps, consider, with less danger of misunderstanding, Plato's longest passage on inspiration. "It is a divine power that moves" (Gr. *theia de dynamis, hē ... kinei*)¹ even the rhapsodist or literary critic, insofar as he speaks well, though he is only the exponent of an exponent. The original maker and exponent, if he is to be an imitator of realities and not of mere appearances, "is God-indwelt and possessed (Gr. *entheos, katechomenos*)...an airy, winged and sacred substance (Gr. *hieron*, Skr. *brahma-*) unable ever to indite until he has been born again of the God within him (Gr. *prin an entheos te genētai*)² and is out of his own wits (Gr. *ekphrōn*), and his own mind (Gr. *nous*) is no longer in him,³ for every man, so long as he retains *that* property is powerless to make (Gr. *poiein*) or to incant (Gr. *chrēsmōdein*, Skr. *mantrakṛ*)... The men whom he dements God uses as his ministers (Gr. *hypēretai*)... but it is the God⁴ himself (Gr. *ho theos autos*)

¹ *Ion* 533E. For the passage on inspiration, see *Ion* 533D—536D. Plato's doctrine of inspiration is not "mechanical" but "dynamic"; in a later theology it became a matter for debate in which of these two ways the Spirit actuates the interpreter.

² *Ion* 533E, 534B. *Gignomai* here is used in the radical sense of "coming into a new state of being." Cf. *Phaedrus* 279B, *kalō genesthai tandothen*, "May I be born in beauty inwardly," i.e., born of the immanent deity (*d' en hēmīn theiō*, *Timaeus* 90D), authentic and divine beauty (*auto to theion kalon*, *Symposium* 211E). The New Testament equivalents are "in the Spirit" and "born again of the Spirit."

³ *Ion* 534B. "The madness that comes of God is superior to the sanity which is of human origin" (*Phaedrus* 244D, 245A). Cf. *Timaeus* 71D-72B, *Laws* 719C; and MU VI.34.7, "When one attains to mindlessness, that is the last step." The subject needs a longer explanation; briefly, the supralogical is superior to the logical, the logical to the illogical.

⁴ "The God" is the Immanent Spirit, Daimon, Eros. "He is a maker (Gr. *poiētēs*) so really wise (Gr. *sophos*) that he is the cause of making in others" (*Symposium* 196E). The voice is "enigmatic" (*Timaeus* 72B, and poetry, therefore, "naturally enigmatic" (*Alcibiades* II 147B), so that in "revelation" (scripture, Skr. *śruti*, "what was heard") we see

that speaks, and through them enlightens (Gr. *pthenzetai*) us.... The makers are but His exponents (Gr. *hermēnēs*) according to the way in which they are possessed.”⁵ It is only when he returns to himself from what is really a sacrificial operation that the maker exercises his own powers of judgment; and then primarily to “try the spirits, whether they be of God,” and secondarily to try his work whether it agrees with the vision or audition.

The most immediately significant point that emerges from this profound analysis of the nature of inspiration is that of the artist’s priestly or ministerial function. The original intention of intelligible forms was not to entertain us, but literally to “re-mind” us. The chant is not for the approval of the ear,⁶ nor the picture for that of the eye (although these senses can be taught to approve the splendor of truth, and can be trusted when they have been trained), but to effect such a transformation of our being as is the purpose of all ritual acts. It is, in fact, the ritual arts that are the most “artistic,” because the most “correct,” as they must be if they are to be effectual.

The heavens declare the glory of God: their interpretation in science or art—and *ars sine scientia nihil* [art without science is nothing - Ed. trans.]—is not in order to flatter or merely “interest” us, but “in order that we may follow up the intellections and revolutions of the All, not those revolutions that are in our own heads and were distorted at our birth, but correcting (Gr. *eksorthounta*) these by studying the harmonies and revolutions of the All: so that by an assimilation of the knower to the to-be-known (Gr. *tō katanooumenō to katanooun eksomoiōsai*)⁷, the archetypal Nature, and coming to be in *that* likeness,⁸ we may attain at last to a part in that ‘life’s best’ that has been appointed by the gods to men for this time being and hereafter.”⁹

This is what is spoken of in India as a “metrical self-integration” (*candobhir ātmānaṃ saṃskaraṇa*), or “edification of another man” (*anyam ātmānaṃ*), to be achieved by an imitation (*anukaraṇa*) of the divine forms (*daivvyāni śilpāni*).¹⁰ The final reference to a good to be realized here *and* hereafter brings us back again to the

“through a glass darkly” (*en ainigmati*, I Cor. 13:12). Because divination is of a Truth that cannot (with human faculties) be seen directly (Skr. *sākṣāt*), the soothsayer must speak in symbols (whether verbal or visual), which are reflections of the Truth; it is for us to understand and use the symbols as supports of contemplation and with a view to “recollection.” It is because the symbols are things seen “through a glass” that contemplation is “speculation.”

⁵ See *Ion* 534, 535. Related passages have been cited in notes 82-84, above. The last words refer the diversity of the gifts of the spirit; see I. Cor.12:4-11.

⁶ “What we call ‘chants’ ...are evidently in reality ‘incantations’ seriously designated to produce in souls that harmony of which we have been speaking” (*Laws* 659E; cf. 665C, 656E, 660B, 668-669, 812C, *Republic* 399, 424). Such incantations are called *mantras* in Sanskrit.

⁷ *Timaeus* 90D. The whole purpose of contemplation and yoga is to reach that state of being in which there is no longer any distinction of knower from known, or being from knowing. It is just from this point of view that while all the arts are imitative, it matters so much *what* is imitated, a reality or an effect, for we become like what we think most about. “One comes to be of just such stuff as that on which the mind is set” (MU VI.34).

⁸ “To become like God (*homoiōsis theō*), so far as that is possible, is to ‘escape’” (*Theatetus* 176B; *phygē* [flight] here = *lysis* [release] = Skr. *mokṣa*). “But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image ... looking not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen...the things which ... are eternal” (II Cor. 3:18, 4:18). “This likeness begins now again to be formed in us” (St. Augustine, *De spiritu et littera* 37). Cf. Coomaraswamy, “The Traditional Conception of Ideal Portraiture,” in *Why Exhibit Works of Art?*, 1943.

⁹ *Timaeus* 90D.

¹⁰ AB VI.27.

“wholesomeness” of art, defined in terms of its simultaneous application to practical necessities and spiritual meanings, back to that fulfillment of the needs of the body and soul together that is characteristic of the arts of the uncivilized peoples and the “folk,” but foreign to our industrial life. For in that life the arts are *either* for use *or* for pleasure, but are never spiritually significant and very rarely intelligible.

Such an application of the arts as Plato prescribes for his City of God, arts that as he says “will care for the bodies and the souls of your citizens,”¹¹ survives for so long as forms and symbols are employed to express a meaning, for so long as “ornament” means “equipment,”¹² and until what were originally imitations of the reality, not the appearance, of things become (as they were already rapidly becoming in Plato’s time) merely “art forms, more and more emptied of significance on their way down to us”¹³—no longer figures of thought, but only figures of speech.

We have so far made use of Oriental sources only incidentally, and chiefly to remind ourselves that the true philosophy of art is always and everywhere the same. But since we are dealing with the distinction between the arts of flattery and those of ministration, we propose to refer briefly to some of the Indian texts in which the “whole end of the expressive faculty” is discussed. This natural faculty is that of the “Voice”: not the audibly spoken word, but the *opyavov* [means] by which a concept is communicated. The relation of this maternal Voice to the paternal Intellect is that of our feminine “nature” to our masculine “essence”; their begotten child is the Logos of theology and the spoken myth of anthropology. The work of art is expressly the artist’s child, the child of both his natures, human and divine: stillborn if he has not at his command the art of delivery (rhetoric), a bastard if the Voice has been seduced, but a valid concept if born in lawful marriage.

The Voice is at once the daughter, bride, messenger, and instrument of the Intellect.¹⁴ Possessed of him, the immanent deity, she brings forth his image (reflection, imitation, similitude, *pratirūpa*, child).¹⁵ She is the power and the glory,¹⁶ without whom the

¹¹ *Republic* 409-410.

¹² See Coomaraswamy, “Ornament” [Chapter III below - Ed.].

¹³ Walter Andrae, *Die ionische Säule* (Berlin, 1933), p. 65 [see Chapter XVIII below —Ed.]. The same scholar writes, with reference to pottery, especially that of the Stone Age and with reference to Assyrian glazing, “Ceramic art in the service of Wisdom, the wisdom that activates knowledge to the level of the spiritual, indeed the divine, as science does to earthbound things of all kinds. Service is here a voluntary, entirely self-sacrificing and entirely conscious dedication of the personality ... as it is and should be in true divine worship. Only this service is worthy of art, of ceramic art. To make the primordial truth intelligible, to make the unheard audible, to enunciate the primordial word, to illustrate the primordial image—such is the task of art, or it is not art.” (“Keramik im Dienste der Weisheit,” *Berichte der deutschen keramischen Gesellschaft*, XVII:12 [1936], 623.) Cf. *Timaeus* 28AB.

¹⁴ ŚB VIII.1.2.8; AB V.23; TS II.5.11.5; JUB I. 33.4 (*karoty eva vācā ... gamayati manasā*). Vāc is the Muse, and as the Muses are the daughters of Zeus, so is Vāc the daughter of the Progenitor, of Intellect (*Manas, nous*)—i.e., *intellectus vel spiritus* [intellect or spirit – Ed. trans.], “the habit of First Principles.” As Sarasvatī she bears the lute and is seated on the Sunbird as vehicle.

¹⁵ “This the ‘Beatitude’ (*ānanda*) of Brahmā, that by means of Intellect (*Manas, nous*), his highest form, he betakes himself to ‘the Woman’ (Vāc); a son like himself is born of her” (BU IV.1.6). The son is Agni, *brhad uktha*, the Logos.

¹⁶ RV X.31.2 (*śreyāṅsam dakṣam manasā jagrbhyāt*); BD II.84. The governing authority is always masculine, the power feminine.

Sacrifice itself could not proceed.¹⁷ But if he, the divine Intellect, Brahmā or Prajāpati, “does not precede and direct her, then it is only a gibberish in which she expresses herself.”¹⁸ Translated into the terms of the art of government, this means that if the Regnum acts on its own initiative, unadvised by the Sacerdotium, it will not be Law, but only regulations that it promulgates.

The conflict of Apollo with Marsyas the Satyr, to which Plato alludes,¹⁹ is the same as that of Prajāpati (the Progenitor) with Death,²⁰ and the same as the contention of the Gandharvas, the gods of Love and Science, with the mundane deities, the sense powers, for the hand of the Voice, the Mother of the Word, the wife of the Sacerdotium.²¹ This is, in fact, the debate of the Sacerdotium and the Regnum with which we are most familiar in terms of an opposition of sacred and profane, eternal and secular, an opposition that must be present wherever the needs of the soul and the body are *not* satisfied together.

Now what was chanted and enacted by the Progenitor in his sacrificial contest with Death was “calculated” (*saṃkhyānam*)²² and “immortal,” and what by Death “uncalculated” and “mortal”; and that deadly music played by Death is now our secular art of the “parlor” (*patnīsālā*), “whatever people sing to the harp, or dance, or do to please themselves (*vr̥thā*),” or even more literally, “do heretically,” for the words “*vr̥thā*” and “heresy” derive from a common root that means to “choose for oneself,” to “know what one likes and to grasp at it.” Death’s informal and irregular music is disintegrating. On the other hand, the Progenitor “puts himself together,” composes or synthesizes himself, “by means of the meters”; the Sacrificer “perfects himself so as to be metrically

¹⁷ AB V.33, etc. Śrī as *brahmavādīnī* is “Theologia.”

¹⁸ ŚB III.2.4.11; cf. “the Asura’s gibberish” (ŚB III.2.1.23). It is because of the dual possibility of an application of the Voice to the statement of truth or falsehood that she is called the “double-faced”—i.e., “two-tongued” (ŚB III.2.4.16). These two possibilities correspond to Plato’s distinction of the Uranian from the Pandemic (*Pandēmos*) and disordered (*ataktos*) Aphrodite, one the mother of the Uranian or Cosmic Eros, the other, the “Queen of Various Song” (*Polymnia*) and mother of the Pandemic Eros (*Symposium* 180DE, 187E, *Laws* 840E).

¹⁹ *Republic* 399E.

²⁰ JB II.69, 70, and 73.

²¹ ŚB III.2.4.1–6 and 16–22; cf. III.2.1.19–23.

²² *Samkhyānam* is “reckoning” or “calculation” and corresponds in more senses than one to Plato’s *logismos*. We have seen that accuracy (Gr. *orthotēs*, Latin *integritas*) is the first requirement for good art, and that this amounts to saying that art is essentially iconography, to be distinguished by its *logic* from merely emotional and instinctive expression. It is precisely the precision of “classical” and “canonical” art that modern feeling most resents; we demand organic forms adapted to an “in-feeling” (*Einfühlung*) rather than the measured forms that require “in-sight” (*Einsehen*).

A good example of this can be cited in Lars-Ivar Ringbom’s “Entstehung und Entwicklung der Spiralornamentik,” in *Acta Archaeologica*, IV (1933), 151-200. Ringbom demonstrates first the extraordinary perfection of early spiral ornament and shows how even its most complicated forms must have been produced with the aid of simple *tools*. But he resents this “measured” perfection, as of something “known and deliberately made, the work of the intellect rather than a psychic expression” (“sie ist bewusst and willkürlich gemacht, mehr Verstandesarbeit als seelischer Ausdruck”) and admires the later “forms of freer growth, approximating more to those of Nature.” These organic (“organisch-gewachsen”) forms are the “psychological expression of man’s instinctive powers, that drive him more and more to representation and figuration.” Ringbom could hardly have better described the kind of art that Plato would have called unworthy of free men; the free man is not “driven by forces of instinct.” What Plato admired was precisely not the organic and figurative art that was coming into fashion in his time, but the formal and canonical art of Egypt that remained constant for what he thought had been ten thousand years, for there it had been possible “for those modes that are by nature correct to be canonized and held forever sacred” (*Laws* 656–657; cf. 798AB, 799A). There “art ... was not for the delectation...of the senses” (Earl Baldwin Smith, *Egyptian Architecture*, New York, 1938, p.27).

constituted,”²³ and makes of the measures the wings of his ascension.²⁴ The distinctions made here between a quickening art and one that adds to the sum of our mortality are those that underlie Plato’s *katharsis* and all true puritanism and fastidiousness. There is no disparagement of the Voice (Sophia) herself, or of music or dancing or any other art as such. Whatever disparagement there is, is not of the instrument; there can be no good use without art.

The contest of the Gandharvas, the high gods of Love and Music (in Plato’s broad sense of that word), is with the unregenerate powers of the soul, whose natural inclination is the pursuit of pleasures. What the Gandharvas offer to the Voice is their sacred science, the thesis of their incantation; what the mundane deities offer is “to please her.” The Gandharvas’ is a holy conversation (*brahmodaya*), that of the mundane deities an appetizing colloquy (*prakāmodaya*). Only too often the Voice, the expressive power, is seduced by the mundane deities to lend herself to the representation of whatever may best please them and be most flattering to herself; and it is when she thus prefers the pleasant falsehoods to the splendor of the sometimes bitter truth that the high gods have to fear lest she in turn seduce their legitimate spokesman, the Sacrificer himself; to fear, that is to say, a secularization of the sacred symbols and the hieratic language, the depletion of meaning that we are only too familiar with in the history of art, as it descends from formality to figuration, just as language develops from an original precision to what are ultimately hardly more than blurred emotive values.

It was not for this, as Plato said, that powers of vision and hearing are ours. In language as nearly as may be identical with his, and in terms of the universal philosophy wherever we find it, the Indian texts define the “whole end of the Voice” (*krtsnam vāgārtham*). We have already called the voice an “organ,” to be taken in the musical as well as the organic sense. It is very evidently not the reason of an organ to play of itself, but to be played upon, just as it is not for the clay to determine the form of the vessel, but to receive it.

“Now there is this divine harp: the human harp is in its likeness. . .and just as the harp struck by a skilled player fulfills the whole reason of the harp, so the Voice moved by a skilled speaker fulfills its whole reason.”²⁵ “Skill in any performance is a yoking, as of steeds together,”²⁶ or, in other words, implies a marriage of the master and the means. The product of the marriage of the player, Intellect, with the instrument, the Voice, is

²³ AĀ III.2.6, *sa candobhir ātmānam samādadhāt*; AB VI.27, *candomayam ... ātmānaṃ saṃskurute*.

²⁴ For what Plato means by wings, see *Phaedrus* 246-256 and *Ion* 534B. “It is as a bird that the Sacrificer reaches the world of heaven” (PB V.3.5). *Phaedrus* 247BC corresponds to PB XIV.1.12-13, “Those who reach the top of the great tree, how do they fare thereafter? Those who have wings fly forth, those that are wingless fall down”; the former are the “wise,” the latter the “foolish” (cf. *Phaedrus* 249C, “It is only the philosopher’s discriminating mind that is winged”). For the Gandharva (Eros) as a winged “maker” and as such the archetype of human poets, see RV X.177.2 and JUB III.36. For “metrical wings,” see PB X.4.5 and PB XIX.11.8; JUB III.13.10; AV VIII.9.12. The meters are “birds” (TS VI.1.6.1; PB XIX.11.8).

²⁵ ŚA VIII.10.

²⁶ BG II.50, *yogaḥ karmasu kauśalam*. If yoga is also the “renunciation” (*saṃnyāsa*) of works (BG V.1 and VI.2), this is only another way of saying the same thing, since this renunciation is essentially the abandonment of the notion “I am the doer” and a reference of the works to their real author whose skill is infallible: “The Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works” (John 14:10).

Truth (*satyam*) or Science (*vidyā*),²⁷ not that approximate, hypothetical, and statistical truth that we refer to as science, but philosophy in Plato’s sense,²⁸ and that “meaning of the Vedas” by which, if we understand it, “all good” (*sakalam bhadram*) is attainable, here and hereafter.²⁹

The *raison d’être* of the Voice is to incarnate in a communicable form the concept of Truth; the formal beauty of the precise expression is that of the *splendor veritatis* [splendor of truth – Ed. trans]. The player and the instrument are both essential here. We, in our somatic individuality, are the instrument, of which the “strings” or “senses” are to be regulated, so as to be neither slack nor overstrained; we are the organ, the inorganic God within us the organist. We are the organism, He its energy. It is not for us to play our own tunes, but to sing His songs, who is both the Person in the Sun (Apollo) and our own Person (as distinguished from our “personality”). When “those who sing here to the harp sing Him,”³⁰ then all desires are attainable, here and hereafter.

There is, then, a distinction to be drawn between a significant (*padārthābhinaya*) and liberating (*vimuktida*) art, the art of those who in their performances are celebrating God, the Golden Person, in both His natures, immanent and transcendent, and the *in-significant* art that is “colored by worldly passion” (*lokānurañjaka*) and “dependent on the moods” (*bhāvāśraya*). The former is the “highway” (*mārga*, Gr. *hodos*) art that leads directly to the end of the road, the latter a “pagan” (*deśī*, Gr. *hagriōs*) and eccentric art that wanders off in all directions, imitating anything and everything.³¹

If now the orthodox doctrines reported by Plato and the East are not convincing, this is because our sentimental generation, in which the power of the intellect has been so perverted by the power of observation that we can no longer distinguish the reality from the phenomenon, the Person in the Sun from his sightly body, or the uncreated from electric light, will not be persuaded “though one rose from the dead.” Yet I hope to have shown, in a way that may be ignored but cannot be refuted, that our use of the term “aesthetic” forbids us also to speak of art as pertaining to the “higher things of life” or the immortal part of us; that the distinction of “fine” from “applied” art, and corresponding manufacture of art in studios and artless industry in factories, takes it for granted that neither the artist nor the artisan shall be a whole man; that our freedom to work or starve is not a responsible freedom but only a legal fiction that conceals an actual servitude; that our hankering after a leisure state, or state of pleasure, to be attained by a multiplication of labor-saving devices, is born of the fact that most of us are doing forced labor, working at jobs to which we could never have been “called” by any other master than the

²⁷ ŚA VII.5 and 7; cf. *Phaedo* 61AB.

²⁸ What is meant by *vidyā* as opposed to *avidyā* is explicit in *Phaedrus* 247C-E, “All true knowledge is concerned with what is colorless, formless and intangible (Skr. *avarṇa*, *arūpa*, *agrahya*)” “not such knowledge as has a beginning and varies as it is associated with one or another of the things that we now call realities, but that which is really real (Skr. *satyasya satyam*).” Cf. CU vii.16.1 and 17.1, with commentary; also *Philebus* 58A.

²⁹ ŚA XIV.2.

³⁰ CU I.7.6–7. Cf. Coomaraswamy, “The Sun-kiss,” 1940, p. 49, n. 11.

³¹ For all the statements in this paragraph, see CU I.6–9; *Sāhitya Darpaṇa* I.4–6; and *Daśarūpa* I.12–14.

salesman; that the very few, the happy few of us whose work is a vocation, and whose status is relatively secure, like nothing better than our work and can hardly be dragged away from it; that our division of labor, Plato's "fractioning of human faculty," makes the workman a part of the machine, unable ever to make or to co-operate responsibly in the making of any whole thing; that in the last analysis the so-called "emancipation of the artist"³² is nothing but his final release from any obligation whatever to the God within him, and his opportunity to imitate himself or any other common clay at its worst; that all willful self-expression is autoerotic, narcissistic, and satanic, and the more its essentially paranoiac quality develops, suicidal; that while our invention of innumerable conveniences has made our unnatural manner of living in great cities so enduring that we cannot imagine what it would be like to do without them, yet the fact remains that not even the multimillionaire is rich enough to commission such works of art as are preserved in our museums but were originally made for men of relatively moderate means or, under the patronage of the church, for God and all men, and the fact remains that the multimillionaire can no longer send to the ends of the earth for the products of other courts or the humbler works of the folk, for all these things have been destroyed and their makers reduced to being the providers of raw materials for our factories, wherever our civilizing influence has been felt; and so, in short, that while the operation that we call a "progress" has been very successful, man the patient has succumbed.

Let us, then, admit that the greater part of what is taught in the fine arts departments of our universities, all of the psychologies of art, all the obscurities of modern aesthetics, are only so much verbiage, only a kind of defense that stands in the way of our understanding of the wholesome art, at the same time iconographically true and practically useful, that was once to be had in the marketplace or from any good artist; and that whereas the rhetoric that cares for nothing but the truth is the rule and method of the intellectual arts, our aesthetic is nothing but a false rhetoric, and a flattery of human weakness by which we can account only for the arts that have no other purpose than to please.

The whole intention of our own art may be aesthetic, and we may wish to have it so. But however this may be, we also pretend to a scientific and objective discipline of the history and appreciation of art, in which we take account not only of contemporary or very recent art but also of the whole of art from the beginning until now. It is in this arena that I shall throw down a minimum challenge: I put it to you that it is not by our aesthetic, but only by their rhetoric, that we can hope to understand and interpret the arts of other peoples and other ages than our own. I put it to you that our present university courses in this field embody a pathetic fallacy, and are anything but scientific in any sense.

And now, finally, in case you should complain that I have been drawing upon very antiquated sources (and what else could I do, seeing that we are all "so young" and "do not possess a single belief that is ancient and derived from old tradition, nor yet one science that is hoary with age"³³) let me conclude with a very modern echo of this ancient wisdom, and say with Thomas Mann that "I like to think—yes, I feel sure—that a future

³² See John D. Wild, *Plato's Theory of Man* (Cambridge, Mass., 1946), p. 84.

³³ *Timaeus* 22BC.

is coming in which we shall condemn as black magic, as the brainless, irresponsible product of instinct, all art which is not controlled by the intellect.”³⁴

*Dost not thou know that the light of the sun is the reflection
of the Sun beyond the Veil?*

Rumi.

³⁴ In *The Nation* (December 10, 1933). Cf. Socrates’ dictum at the head of this chapter.