

The Arts and their Traditional Conception

by

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Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 14, Nos. 3 & 4 (Summer-Autumn, 1980).

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We have frequently insisted on the fact that the profane sciences are but the product of a relatively recent degeneration, brought about by a misunderstanding of the ancient traditional sciences, or rather of some of them only, the others having completely fallen into oblivion. This is true not only of the sciences, but also of the arts; moreover, the distinction between them was once far less accentuated than it is now; the Latin word *artes* was sometimes also applied to the sciences, and, in the Middle Ages, the classification of the “liberal arts” comprised subjects which the modern world would assign either to the one or to the other group. This remark alone will already prove that art was once something different from what is now understood by this name, and that it implied a real knowledge to which it was, as it were, incorporated; and, of course, this knowledge could only have been of the order of the traditional sciences.

From this, one can at once understand that in certain initiatory organizations of the Middle Ages, such as the *Fedeli d' Amore*, the seven “liberal arts” were considered as corresponding to the “heavens”, that is to states which were themselves identified with the different degrees of initiation. It will be seen that, for this to be the case, the arts as well as the sciences must have been capable of a transposition that gave them a real esoteric value; what makes such a transposition possible, is the very nature of traditional knowledge; whatever its order, it is always connected with transcendent principles. Thus this knowledge is given a meaning which may be termed symbolic, for it is founded on the correspondence which exists between the different orders of reality; it must, however, be stressed that it is not here a question of something added accidentally afterwards, but, on the contrary, of what constitutes the profound essence of all normal and legitimate knowledge, and, as such, is inherent in the sciences and the arts from their very beginning and remains so as long as they have not undergone any deviation.

That the arts can be viewed from this standpoint should cause no astonishment, once one sees that the crafts themselves, in their traditional conception, serve as a basis for initiation. We ought, in addition, to recall here that the distinction between the arts and the crafts appears as specifically modern and, to put it briefly, as being a mere consequence of the same degeneration which has given birth to the profane outlook, for this outlook in reality expresses nothing else but the very negation of the traditional spirit. On the whole, in dealing with art or craft, one may say that a certain knowledge of a higher order, which was connected by degrees with initiatory

knowledge itself, was to some extent applied and worked on; furthermore, a direct working on initiatory knowledge also went by the name of art, as can be clearly seen in expressions such as “sacerdotal art” or “royal art”, which refer to the respective applications of the “great mysteries” and the “lesser mysteries”.

If now we consider the arts and give to this word a more narrow and usual meaning, or what is called more precisely the “fine arts”, we may say, after what has gone before, that everyone of them ought to constitute a kind of symbolic language adapted to the expression of certain truths by means of forms, some of which are of the visual order, while others are of the auditive or sonorous order, respectively; hence also their customary division into two groups, the “plastic arts” and the “phonetic arts”. We have explained in other studies that this distinction, as well as that of two corresponding kinds of rites founded on the same categories of symbolic forms, referred originally to the difference that exists between the traditions of a sedentary people and those of a nomadic people. Moreover, whether the arts are of the one or of the other kind, it is easy to see, in an altogether general way, that their character in a civilization is the more manifestly symbolic, as the civilization itself is more strictly traditional, for their real value lies less in what they are in themselves than in the possibilities of expression which they afford and which are beyond those to which ordinary language is confined. In a word, their productions are first of all destined to serve as “supports” for meditation, and as “aids” to as deep and extensive an understanding as possible, which is the “whole point” of all symbolism;¹ everything in them, even to the minutest detail must be determined by this consideration and subordinated to this end, nor must any unnecessary “ornament” or meaningless “decoration” be added.²

One sees that such a conception is as far as can be from all modern profane theories, whether that of “art for art’s sake”, which amounts on the whole to saying that art is only what it should be when it has no meaning, or that of “art as a moralizer”, which obviously has no more worth from the standpoint of knowledge. Traditional art is certainly not “playing”, to use an expression dear to certain psychologists, nor is it merely a means of procuring man a kind of special pleasure, qualified as “superior”, although no one knows, exactly why, for, once it is only a question of pleasure, everything is reduced to individual preferences, among which no hierarchy can be logically established; no more is it a vain and sentimental bombast, for which ordinary language is certainly more than sufficient, without its being in any way necessary to resort to more or less mysterious or enigmatic forms, in any case far more complicated than what they would have to express. This gives us an opportunity to recall in passing, for one can never insist too much on these things, the perfect inanity of “moral” interpretations which certain

1. This is the Hindu notion of *pratika*, which is no more an “idol” than it is a work of imagination and individual fantasy. Each of these two Western interpretations, opposed to a certain extent, is as wrong as the other.

2. The degeneration of certain symbols whose meaning has ceased to be understood, into ornamental “motifs”, is one of the characteristic features of profane deviation.

people want to give to all symbolism, inclusive of initiatory symbolism proper: if it really were a question of such banalities, one does not see why or how one should ever have thought of “veiling” them in any way whatever, for they do very well without it when expounded by profane philosophy, and it would be better to say quite simply that in reality there is neither symbolism nor initiation.

This said, one may ask on which of the different traditional sciences do the arts most directly depend; this, be it understood, does not exclude their also having more or less constant relations with the others, for everything here necessarily holds together and is connected in the fundamental unity of the doctrine, which can neither be destroyed in any respect, nor even affected by the multiplicity of its applications; the conception of sciences which are narrowly “specialized” and entirely separated the one from the other, is altogether anti-traditional, in so far as it manifests a lack of principle, and is characteristic of the “analytic” outlook which inspires and rules the profane sciences, whereas any traditional standpoint cannot help being essentially “synthetic”. With this reservation made, one may say that what lies at the very basis of all the arts is chiefly an application of the science of rhythm in its different forms, a science which itself is immediately connected with the science of number; moreover, it must be clearly understood that when we speak of the science of number, it is not a question of profane arithmetic’s as understood by modern people, but of that science of which the best known examples are found in the Kabbalah and in Pythagorism, and of which equivalents exist, with varied expressions and greater or lesser developments, in all traditional doctrines.

What we said just now may appear especially evident with reference to the phonetic arts, the productions of which are all constituted by sequences of rhythms unfolded in time; it is owing to the rhythmical character of poetry that it was originally the ritual mode of expression for the “language of the Gods”, that is to say the pre-eminently “sacred language”,³ a function which it preserved something of even until the relatively recent time when “literature” had still not been invented.⁴ With regard to music, it will surely not be necessary to insist on this, since its numerical basis is still recognized by the moderns themselves, falsified through it is by the loss of traditional data; in ancient times, as can be seen particularly clearly in the Far East, modifications could not be introduced into music except in accordance with certain changes in the actual state of the world conforming to the cyclical periods, for musical rhythms were at once intimately linked with the human and social order and with the cosmic order, and in a certain

3. See “Language of the Gods” in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Spring 1969.

4. It is curious enough to note that modern “scholarship” has arrived at an indiscriminate application of the word “literature” to everything, even to the sacred Scriptures which it has the pretension to study under the same heading as anything else and by the same methods, and, when its representatives speak of “biblical poems” or of “Vedic poems”, altogether misunderstanding what poetry meant to the ancients, it is once more their purpose to reduce everything to something purely human.

way they even expressed the connections between the one and the other; the Pythagorean conception of the “harmony of the spheres” belongs exactly to the same order of considerations.

In the plastic arts, the productions of which are developed by extension in space, the same thing cannot be as immediately apparent, and yet it is not less strictly true; then the rhythm is fixed, so to say, in simultaneity, and not in a state of successive unfolding as in the previous case. This can be understood more especially by pointing out that, in this second group, the typical and fundamental art is architecture, of which others, such as sculpture and painting, at least with regards to their original destination, are on the whole but simple dependants; in architecture, the rhythm is directly expressed by proportions which exist between the various parts of the whole, and by geometrical forms, which are basically from our standpoint, but the spatial translation of numbers and their relations.⁵ Here again, of course, geometry should be considered in a very different way to that of the profane mathematicians and this way’s priority to the latter most completely gives the lie to those who would attribute to this science an “empirical” and utilitarian origin; on the other hand, we have here an example of the manner, as we have said above, in which the sciences are linked amongst themselves from the traditional standpoint, to such an extent that at times they may be considered as in some way expressions of the same truths in different languages; this is moreover but a natural consequence of the “law of correspondences” which is the very foundation of all symbolism.

These few notions, summary and incomplete as they are, will suffice at least to make one understand what is most essential in the traditional conception of the arts and what differentiates it most profoundly from the profane conception, at once with regard to their basis, as applications of certain sciences, to their significance, as diverse modalities of symbolic language, and to their destination, as a means for helping man to approach true knowledge.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

Someone complained to Meister Eckhart that no one could understand his sermons. He said. To understand my sermons a man requires three things. He must have conquered strife and be in contemplation of his highest good and be satisfied to do God’s bidding and be a beginner with beginners and naught himself and be so master of himself as to be incapable of anger.

For you must know that to the soul in her perfection goodness would come quite natural; she would not merely practice virtues, but virtue as a whole would be her life and she would radiate it naturally. We seem to be vicious or virtuous from being now the one and now the other. This should not be: we ought to be always in a state of perfection. That is one thing to note.

Eckhart.

5. In this connection, it should be noted here that Plato’s “geometer God” is properly identified with Apollo, who presides over all the arts; this, directly derived as it is from Pythagorism, has a particular importance concerning the filiation of certain traditional Hellenic doctrines and their connection with a “Hyperborean” first origin.