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The Arts and their Traditional Conception

We have frequently emphasized the fact that the profane sciences are only the product of a relatively recent degeneration brought about by a misunderstanding of the ancient traditional sciences—or rather only of some of them—the others having completely fallen into oblivion. This is true not only for the sciences, but also for the arts, and furthermore 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" included subjects which the modern world would assign to either one or the other group. This one remark is already enough to show that art was once something other than what is now understood by this name, and that it implied a real knowledge with which it was incorporated, as it were, and this knowledge obviously could only have been of the order of the traditional sciences.

By this alone can one understand that in certain initiatory organizations of the Middle Ages, such as the "Fedeli d'Amore," the seven "liberal arts" were considered to correspond to the "heavens," that is, to states which were identified with the different degrees of initiation.[1] For this the arts as well as the sciences had to be susceptible of a transposition giving them a real esoteric value; and what makes such a transposition possible is the very nature of traditional knowledge, which, whatever its order, is always connected to transcendent principles. This knowledge is thus given a meaning which can be termed symbolic, since it is founded on the correspondence that exists between the various orders of reality; but here it must be stressed that this does not involve something superadded to them accidentally, but on the contrary something that constitutes the profound essence of all normal and legitimate knowledge, and which, 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 point of view should cause no astonishment, once one sees that the crafts themselves, in their traditional conception, serve as a basis for an initiation, as we have explained.[2] In this connection we should also recall that we spoke at that time about how the distinction between the arts and the crafts seems specifically modern and, in short, appears to be only a consequence of the same degeneration which has given birth to the profane outlook, for this latter literally expresses nothing other than the very negation of the traditional spirit.

After all, whether it was a question of art or craft, there was always to one degree or another the application and the implementation of various sciences of a higher order, gradually linked to initiatic knowledge itself. Furthermore, the direct implementation of initiatic knowledge also went by the name of art, as can be seen clearly by expressions such as "sacerdotal art" and "royal art," which refer to the respective applications of the "greater mysteries" and the "lesser mysteries."

Let us now consider the arts and give to this word a more limited and at the same time more customary meaning, that is, what is more precisely called the "fine arts." From the preceding we can say that each of them must constitute a kind of symbolic language adapted to the expression of certain truths by means of forms which are of the visual order for some, and of the auditive or sonorous order for others, whence their customary division into two groups, the "plastic arts" and the "phonetic arts." In previous studies we have explained that this distinction, like that between two kinds of corresponding rites founded on the same categories of symbolic forms, originally refers to the difference that exists between the traditions of a sedentary people and those of a nomadic people.[3] Moreover, whether the arts are of one or another genre, it is easy to see in a general way that in a civilization they have a character all the more manifestly symbolic as the civilization itself is more strictly traditional, for their true value then lies less in what they are in themselves than in the possibilities of expression which they afford, beyond those to which ordinary language is confined. In a word, their productions are above all destined to serve as "supports" for meditation, and as foundations for as deep and extensive an understanding as possible, which is the very *raison d'être* of all symbolism;[4] and everything, even to the smallest details, must be determined by this consideration and subordinated to this end, without any useless addition emptied of meaning and simply meant to play a "decorative" or "ornamental" role.[5]

One sees that such a conception is as far removed as possible from all modern and profane theories, as for example that of "art for art's sake," which fundamentally amounts to saying that art is what it should be only when it has no meaning, or again that of "moralizing" art, which from the standpoint of knowledge is obviously of no greater value. Traditional art is certainly not a "game," to use an expression dear to certain psychologists, nor is it simply a means of procuring for man a special kind of pleasure, qualified as "superior," although no one really knows why, for as soon as it is only a question of pleasure, everything is reduced to purely individual preferences, among which no hierarchy can logically be established. Moreover, neither is it a vain and sentimental declamation, for which ordinary language is certainly more than sufficient without there

in any way being a need to resort to more or less mysterious or enigmatic forms, and in any case forms far more complicated than what they would have had to express. This gives us an opportunity to recall in passing—for one can never insist too much on these things—the perfect uselessness of "moral" interpretations which certain people aim to give to all symbolism, including initiatic symbolism properly speaking. If it really were a question of such banalities, one does not see why or how one would ever have thought of "veiling" them in some way, for they do very well without this when expressed by profane philosophy, and it would then be better to say quite simply that in reality there is neither symbolism nor initiation.

That said, one may ask on which of the various traditional sciences the arts most directly depend. This, of course, does not exclude their also having more or less constant relations with the others, for here everything necessarily holds together and is connected in the fundamental unity of the doctrine, which could neither be destroyed in any way, nor even affected by the multiplicity of its applications. The conception of sciences which are narrowly "specialized" and entirely separated from each other is clearly anti-traditional insofar as it manifests a lack of principle, and is characteristic of the "analytic" outlook that inspires and rules the profane sciences, whereas any traditional point of view can only be essentially "synthetic." With this reservation, it can be said that what lies at the very heart of all the arts is chiefly an application of the science of rhythm under its different forms, a science which is itself immediately connected with that of number. It must be clearly understood that when we speak of the science of number, it is not a question of profane arithmetic as understood by the moderns, but of that arithmetic to be found in the Kabbalah and in Pythagorism (the best known examples), whose equivalent also exists, under varied expressions and with greater or lesser developments, in all the traditional doctrines.

What we have just said may appear especially obvious for the phonetic arts, the productions of which are all constituted by sequences of rhythms unfolding in time. Poetry owes its rhythmical character to having originally been the ritual mode of expression of the "language of the gods," that is to say the "sacred language" *par excellence*,[6] a function of which it still preserved something until a relatively recent time when "literature" had still not been invented.[7] As for music, it will surely not be necessary to insist on this, since its numerical basis is still recognized by moderns themselves, distorted though it is through the loss of traditional data; formerly, as can be seen especially well in the Far East, modifications could only be introduced into music in consequence of certain changes occurring in the actual state of the world in accordance with 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 way they even expressed the connections between the one and the other. The Pythagorean conception of the "harmony of the spheres" belongs to exactly the same order of considerations.

For the plastic arts, the productions of which are developed through extension in space, the same thing cannot appear as immediately apparent, and yet it is no less strictly true; but rhythm is then as it were fixed in simultaneity, and not in a state of successive unfolding as in the previous case. This can be understood especially by observing that in this second group the typical and fundamental art is architecture, and in the final analysis the other arts, such as sculpture and painting—at least in regard to their original intention—are only simple dependencies thereof. Now, in architecture, rhythm is directly expressed by the proportions existing between the various parts of the whole, and also through geometric forms, which, when all is said and done are from our point of view only the spatial translation of numbers and their relations.[8] Here again, of course, geometry must be considered in a very different way from that of the profane mathematicians, and its anteriority in respect to the latter most completely refutes those who would like to attribute an "empirical" and utilitarian origin to this science. On the other hand, we have here an example of the way in which, from the traditional point of view, the sciences are linked together to such an extent that at times they could even be considered the expressions, as it were, of the same truths in different languages. Furthermore, this is only a most 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 at least suffice for an understanding of what is most essential in the traditional conception of the arts and what differentiates this conception most profoundly from a profane one with regard to the basis of these arts as applications of certain sciences, with regard to their significance as different modalities of symbolic language, and with regard to their intended role as a means for helping man to approach true knowledge.

NOTES

[1] See *The Esoterism of Dante*, chap. 2.

[2] See "Initiation and the Crafts" herein.

[3] See "Cain and Abel" in *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, chap. 21, and also "Rite and Symbol" in *Perspectives on Initiation*, chap. 16.

[4] This is the Hindu notion of *pratîka*, which is no more an "idol" than it is a work of imagination or fantasy. Each of these two Western interpretations, opposed to a certain extent, is as wrong as the other.

[5] The degeneration of certain symbols into ornamental "motifs" because the meaning has ceased to be understood is one of the characteristic features of the profane deviation.

[6] See "The Language of the Birds" in *Symbols of Sacred Science*, chap. 7.

[7] It is rather curious to note that modern "scholars" have come to an indiscriminate application of the word "literature" to everything—even to the sacred scrip-tures, which they have the pretension to study in the same way as the rest and by the same methods—and, when they speak of "biblical poems" or of "Vedic poems," while completely misunderstanding what poetry meant for the ancients, their intention is again to reduce everything to something purely human.

[8] 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" primal origin.

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