

SYMBOLIC PHENOMENA: AESTHETICS APPLIED

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In any coherent definition of art, there are some basic questions that must be answered. The questions which this paper explores are the following: How does an artist choose his subject? What is it an artist expresses? What is the relation between his mode of expression and that which he expresses? What is the nature of expression in art? How does expression in art differ from expression in language? Finally, what is the role of the critic in art?

It seems obvious that the artist chooses a subject only if the subject in some way inspires him. This particular subject or idea impresses him by standing out from ordinary impressions or perceptions. It frequently happens that one is walking on a crowded street seeing people walking by on all sides of him, but the only impressions these people make on the subject are as objects, things to avoid or step around. Then as one continues walking, a beautiful woman is observed who stands out and makes a definite impression on the observer. She is singled out from the general background of the crowded street and the many people all around. In basically the same way the artist's subject captures his attention and impresses him.

What is meant by saying something makes an impression or stands out, that it affects a person? Returning to the example of the beautiful woman, if an alien from some other planet came to earth with no knowledge of humans, the beautiful woman would not impress him any more than a less endowed woman except in so far as different women have different proportions. This observation made by the alien does not rise above general observations. It treats this woman as just another object. There are different degrees of meaning. The alien sees her as an earthman sees a table. When an earthman looks at this same woman, he sees her with more meaning than as a simple object of experience. What makes the man turn his head is the further idea in his experience of her. This process of singling out or experiencing with additional meaning is the process by which the artist chooses his subject.

It is observable that some things impress people while others do not. It is also observable that one object can make different "artistic" impressions on different people. So far that which is being discussed is everyday phenomena. An obvious example of the different ways of seeing a single object is a glass filled with water. One person sees the glass as half empty, another as half full, while a third person says it is half a glass of water. The three ways of viewing the glass of water reveal the different impressions

made on the three viewers. The last viewer like the alien sees the glass of water only as an object, in the same way the alien views the beautiful woman. The first two bring an added meaning to the glass of water. In terms of Gestalt psychology, in understanding an object one must examine its many perspectives and get closer to identifying it by bringing more and more meaning into it. E. H. Gombrich, in his article "Artistic Representation," describes this process in terms of Plato's twenty questions, getting more specific, actually adding more and more description to single out the object from the background of all experience.¹ What differentiates the woman in the man's view from that of the alien is his experiencing of more perspectives which necessitates a more meaningful experience. The artist chooses his subject by the meaningful experience he gets when viewing the subject.

Meanings and ideas arise from the perceiving of the world, and this is what the artist tries to express. The meaning or idea which the artist has is his concept of the world or of some particular aspect of it. Gombrich in the same article says, "All art originates in the human mind, in our reactions to the world rather than in the visible world itself, and it is precisely because all art is conceptual that all representations are recognizable by their style."² For example, an artist may be a black man who has felt persecution. He may conceive an oppressive world and want to express this concept of the world through some art form. He wants to express his concept, how he sees the world. How the artist expresses his concept and the relations between the concept and the expression of that concept are of critical importance.

Without being expressed a concept is a vague notion, a feeling. Expression is necessary to clarify this concept. An example from psychology experiments will illustrate this point. What we call the different emotions are shown to be symbolic labels put on the same physiological condition. The labels do not refer to what the person feels, but to those circumstances around that physiological condition. Once the word "happiness" or "frustration" is introduced, the person learns and makes meaning of his physiological state, he becomes happy or frustrated when all he was aware of before was an excitation. Without expression an idea has no form. As in speech, the artist must use the available forms of expression not only to communicate his ideas to others, but so he can clarify his own ideas to himself. Merleau-Ponty in the chapter "On the Phenomenology of Language" in *Signs*, examines this aspect of expression. "For the speaking subject, to express is to become aware of; he does not express just for others, but also to know himself what he intends."³

Essentially painting, writing, sculpturing, and composing are means of expression like language. In the same way that certain people can express

their ideas better than others through language, so are some artists better at using their means of expression. Also in the same way people develop in their use of language, the artist develops his means of expression, his style. The style, like the language, must develop and reveal the idea. If the style fails to reveal the ideal, then the object is not art; just as a meaningless sentence is not language. As people think by manipulating their language, the artist thinks by manipulating his art form. Kaelin, in *An Existential Aesthetic*, says as much. "After all, the painter thinks by manipulating his paints; if he were not manipulating his paints he would have no symbols and hence no thought."⁴

If the only criteria for art is a high degree of meaning in perception and then an ability to express the meaning in some art form, how can one differentiate between an artist and a philosopher? Certainly it could not be a higher or lower degree of meaning in perception, because when would an artist stop being an artist and become a philosopher? How could one measure the degree? And if a philosopher is also an artist, as some are, such as Sartre, then to differentiate an artist from a non-artist by degrees of meaning is senseless. One might try to differentiate the two by the forms of expression they use. But this also fails, because a novelist uses prose as does a philosopher. If there is to be any differentiation at all, one must examine a form of expression which is used by both a philosopher and an artist and see if there is any difference in the use of the form in their revealing of meaning.

A philosopher conceives the world with meaning. He then uses the forms of language and organizes it in terms of a logic, a phenomenology, or some sort of epistemology in order to state the meaning. He divorces the sense world from his conception or meaning except for using the sense world to exemplify his statements of meaning. His perspective is meaning, and he tries to state his meaning as simply as possible, and tries to avoid the ambiguity of expression. The artist chooses a different perspective. He expresses his meaning by a non-statement. His interest is in the situation of experience in which meaning is derived. The artist produces a situation such that when it is viewed, the spectator will conceive his own meaning from the experience of the artwork. To use the example of the black man conceiving an oppressed world, the novelist shows different situations involving black men: because of prejudice he does not get the job that he is qualified for; he is not allowed in certain schools, etc. The spectator is led to experience a meaning which is never stated by the author. The art work is substituted for the phenomenal world and the spectator experiences the art object as he does the phenomenal world. The spectator in experiencing an art object must use his own form of expression to clarify the meaning in the experience. The artist by

creating a novel way to express his experience defines his first experience in terms of another experience. The artist creates a new way to express the experience and comprehends the first in terms of the creation of the second. Merleau-Ponty, translated by Kaelin, says, "What defines man is not the capacity to create a second nature—economic, social or cultural—beyond his biological nature, but rather that of surpassing the structures it has created to create still others."⁵

If an artist is continually creating new ways of expressing experience, there must be certain formal relations in the work of art so that recognition of experiences can occur. And these rules of expression must be contained in the work of art, if it is to be described as phenomena that the observer experiences.

What does the artwork consist of? John Hospers explores the aspect of an artwork containing emotion in his article, "Art and Emotion." He explains that an artwork contains emotion through a combination of its tones, lines, or colors and since the tones, lines, and colors are properties of the aesthetic object so must be the emotion. Hospers defends this assumption through his explanation of expression. He uses "expression" in the "primordial sense" in which "a facial expression or gesture may express a person's inner state."⁶ As stated previously, many psychologists label different emotions according to the varying circumstances surrounding the the same physiological state. On the same basis Hospers concludes that a work of art "contains a certain emotion if it possesses features like those which people have when they express those emotions in words or gestures."⁷ He uses the example of music being sad because it contains the same gestures or features which sad people express. For example, the music is soft, slow, and hushed. In painting when he ascribes to the artwork tension and disturbance, he uses the example that the painting has jagged lines and does not emphasize the horizontal. Hospers concludes that the work of art contains those features or gestures that we possess "when we feel the corresponding emotion." What Gombrich calls "signposts"⁸ and Hospers calls "cues" are practically the same thing. The artwork is a combination of images similar to cues in the phenomenal world and we conceive the artwork by its images as we do the phenomenal world by its cues.

The philosopher derives meaning from the "cues" and clarifies and expostulates on the meaning—this is his main interest. The artist's main interest is the "cues," organizing and situating them in his own style. The artist has a style in which to represent these "cues" and styles are changed, adapted, and developed according to the inadequacies the artist feels is inherent in using a certain style in representing and organizing these "cues." The artist now becomes the art critic. The art critic, who may or

may not be an artist, must understand the potentials of a style and must examine the cogency of the images in the artwork. If the "cues" are not recognizable, the object is not art, and in the same way if the "cues" are recognizable but have no relation to each other, then the object is not art. Gombrich says in his article, "Artistic Representation," "The form of a representation cannot be divorced from its purpose and the requirements of the society in which the given visual language gains currency."⁹ In other words, if an object is not understandable, it is not art.

Both speech and artistic expression are symbols. Both are an abstraction from experience, and both are used to express the meaning in experience. The person who has the experience as well as the person to whom he communicates this experience, both learn about the experience through expression. Merleau-Ponty, in "On the Phenomenology of Language," not only says that the spoken word teaches the speaker his thoughts, but explains that it is necessary to understand accepted expressions and word usage which is the connection of words in language. Once connection and accepted expressions are known, the speaker can organize words into patterns. Once this pattern ceases to be words and culminates in a speech, the speaker has expressed an idea or meaning.

Artistic language works on the same format where both accepted images and the connection of images or the relation of images to one another must be understood. With this knowledge the artist can organize images into forms and once this form is no longer images, then it can be a symbolic phenomenon. The difference between speech and artistic expression is that speech can abstract from experience to get meaning, while artistic expression abstracts from experience to create symbolic phenomena that are themselves only new experiences in that way that speech is not.

Symbolic phenomena are those descriptions of man in the world and those possibilities of aesthetic experience wherein an observer discovers a life experience in an artistic creation.

NOTES

¹ E. H. Gombrich, "Artistic Representation," *Aesthetics*, ed. Jerome Stolnitz (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1965), p. 65.

² *Ibid.*, p. 65.

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "On the Phenomenology of Language," *Signs*, translated by Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 90.

⁴ Eugene F. Kaelin, "Aesthetics as a General Theory of Linguistics," *The Existentialist Aesthetic* (Madison, Milwaukee, and London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), p. 259.

⁵ Kaelin, "Phenomenological Philosophy," *The Existentialist Aesthetic*, p. 198. Merleau-Ponty is quoted from *La Structure du comportement* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967), p. 189.

⁶ John Hospers, "Art and Emotion," *Aesthetics*, p. 53.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁹ E. H. Gombrich, p. 70.

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