

THREE OBSERVATIONS ON
LANGUAGES OF ART

I

Languages of Art is a significant work that stands the test of time. This it does because it hits its mark more than any other work written in English and of its view known to me. The main theme takes art as a special kind of symbolic system. Goodman's analysis proved that this kind of symbolic system has indeed nothing in common with language *sensu stricto*. Goodman's arguments and reflections paralleled the semiological research carried out in France and Italy since the 1960s. However, his method was different and his contribution more closely approaches, as I see it, the findings of the phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne than those of the semiotician Umberto Eco. I entirely sympathize with Goodman's conclusion that art cannot be considered in the strict sense a language even in the sense of a script (as literature, or to some degree theater or film), because it is notoriously at odds with the requirements of notational scheme, i.e., syntactic disjointedness and semantic lack of ambiguity. My own methodological orientation does not rest on logical analysis applied as the principal procedure. However, the more I admire Goodman's subtlety in treating art, the better I realize how the analytico-logical approach has usually neglected or omitted the peculiarly aesthetic characteristics. Not until Goodman's well-conceived achievement had any traveler on his philosophical route been able to employ its intrinsic method to defend the view that fundamentally art is equivocally articulated (with growing obscurity that leads to 'density'), expressive ('metaphorically exemplificational') and both syntactically and semantically endowed with fullness that entails contingency ('replete'). When situated with regard to the paradigms of present-day aesthetics, Goodman's results are not novel. None the less they are original because of *the way* Goodman arrives at them. Another fresh idea is his strategy for coping with works of art as sets of symbols and accordingly of comprehending the arts in a general theory of symbolic systems. In his introduction

Goodman refers to Cassirer, Morris and Langer; I find him closer to Leon Chwistek, the Polish philosopher and logician who in the early 1920s ventured to open new vistas by describing the distinctive existence of four kinds of art which correspond to four epistemological projects, that is to say, based on things as they appear in our praxis, in the physical reality as scientifically grasped, in impressions, and in imagination.

The remaining portion of my commentary will turn to two theses which are implicated in Goodman's procedure. The first considers the aesthetic experience and art as primarily cognitive; and the second stresses that whatever the artist experiences and embodies in the work of art and whatever the audience response may be to artistic (aesthetic) values has to be culturally determined, it can be referred to definite standards of perceiving, feeling and thinking. Goodman does not explicitly treat the two theses as absolutely joined but the entirety of his book seems to assume some such postulate. He furthermore does not state as such that to conceive art as a kind of symbolic system one must consider it as primarily cognitive and wholly dependent on social standards. But again, I read this out of his entire argumentation. I have reservations about these theses, and to make them clear, I shall formulate each separately. First concerning the cognitive status of art, then concerning possible supracultural aspects of aesthetic experience.

II

On p. 258, Goodman emphasizes that the "use of symbols beyond immediate need is for the sake of understanding, not practice". He concludes that art's primary purpose is cognition "in itself and for itself". Therefore we may well ponder for a time what the cognitive status of art may be and also the resultant aesthetic attitude (and experience). At least four somewhat different meanings can be listed:

(a) Anything that appears as an object which has to be classified and characterized as so-and-so provides us with some cognition. Cognition is here recognition or receiving enough information to name and locate, say, a piece by Brancusi or concrete poetry by Gomringer or a Beckett play performed by a Polish student theater.

(b) Anything that presents in an artistic object some virtual equivalents

of the world which is the context, composed in some fictive patterns to some extent corresponding to the authentic situations, events and processes. What the actual contexts which allow for correspondences and/or equivalences may be, is of no matter here. What matters is the fact of cognition by a representation which triggers a special kind of *gnosis* in the aesthetic response.

(c) Anything in the work of art which instead of or beyond 'telling a story' makes a commentary on the human condition, conceptualizes the author's viewpoint and stimulates the audience toward abstract thinking. One can call this kind of cognition para-philosophical or semi-philosophical. Or borrowing from Goodman's terminology one could term it an explicit hypothesis in contradistinction to the implicit ones found in the best cases of (b).

(d) Anything in the world of arts that demands our striving to repeat through virtual identification the emotions and aspirations of other human beings or simply to discover through intuition what they have experienced (Dilthey's and his followers' hermeneutic procedure). This is a special kind of cognition.

Professor Goodman's analysis certainly includes (a) and (b) but does not distinguish between them. Moreover, it seems not to discern (c) and to leave (d) out of the scheme entirely. In my view these omissions are not minor for they cause Goodman to miss the chance to establish the continuum comprised by the arts from the minimum to the maximum cognitive dimension. Starting already at the minimal end we have to cope with other-than-cognitive functions and purposes of art. I will exemplify the above statements.

Cognition (a) includes not only art objects; and because it can be universally applied it becomes a zero-dependable instrument when one seeks to dwell on aesthetic characteristics. When, however, we consider such cases as Magdalena Abakanowicz' tapestries of the late 1950s ('Night Landscape' and 'Andromeda') or Moholy-Nagy's 'Konstruktionen' (1922) or any great specimen of the geometrical abstraction which is defined in Marcel Brion's *L'Art abstrait* (Paris, 1956) – Kandinsky, Delaunay, Klee, Kupka, etc. – we have no doubt that the response is primarily hedonistic. Granted, cognition is implied by impressions that build relevant patterns which are more or less adequate to the inner

structure of the works. Yet the main attention is focused by an arousal of pleasant feelings. Again, if we take a long step onward to the abstract expressionism of the late 1940s and the 1950s, i.e. to the works of Pollock, Wols, Hartung, Vedova, their chief impact is emotional due to the dynamic expression of colors, lines, shapes. Finally, when John Cage's well-known composition for silence (4'33") is considered, or Ben Vautier's happening called 'Audience' in which he participated only as initiator and observer, the cognitive elements are almost wholly absorbed by happy or awkward play, or else by unease due to the failure to play along with the artist and others. Still another significant reaction which has pushed the cognitive factor into the background is environmental art, or, say, Moholy-Nagy's 'Space Modulator' of the 1930s and Abakanowicz' 'Situations' of the 1960s, a tapestry devoid of closed form to organize the spatial disharmonious rhythms. The response that is evoked is basically a feeling of familiarity or of strangeness, somewhat akin to what one experiences in visiting a foreign home or a new city.

Cognition (d) is founded either on the disengaged reconstruction of an extrinsic emotional life or on a commitment which sometimes may be emphatic. When I traced Emma Bovary's love affair or the passions of Swann, there was in truth nothing more than Goodman's "discerning what properties a work has and expresses" (p. 248). However I was completely ravished by the poetry of T. Rozewicz and the novels of T. Borowski - Polish writers of my generation who excelled in expressing *our* existential and historical tragedy under the Nazi yoke. Any film or theater appealing to the needs and expectations of the audience, exciting in most of its audience a self-projection mechanism which identifies with the hero(s), or any piece of music of 'romantic' stamp, especially when its main motifs evoke folkloric and native tunes, is sufficient proof that cognition may be inundated with strong emotions and that whatever the artist's aim the primary response is of enchantment (or repulsion). Cognition (c) stretches from an involvement with here-and-now given things or human beings in which perceptions and feelings alloyed with thoughts make an indivisible whole, and on towards a thoughtful reflection on the human fate. The range, strength and depth of the cognitive response depends on the richness and intricacy of the work's structure and texture, on the author's insight and power to involve us in the asking of the crucial questions

which either have too many answers or no answer at all. Literature due to the characteristics of the medium is in this aspect superior to the other arts; while the verbal vehicle also found in theater or film, in opera or cantata, is a better means to embody the cognitive message than are colors, sounds, gestures. But one should not compare the incomparables, for instance, novels with paintings. However, other comparisons can be instructive. Otto Dix's portrait of his parents seems to be endowed less with cognitive meaning than, say, Käthe Kollwitz' series of woodcuts entitled 'War' or the great murals of Siqueiros, Orozco and Rivera. Chagall's 'Drunken Soldier' (1913) or the portraits of rabbis (1912-1916) are cognitively weaker than his 'White Crucifixion' (1938) and 'Martyrdom' (1940). Any B-grade American Western film will not bear comparison with Zinneman's 'High Noon' which owing to its exciting cognitive values started a new wave. Chaplin's 'M. Verdoux' on this scale must be placed above his otherwise brilliant *Charloterie* of the 1910s. In each of the mentioned instances, impressions and emotions, yearnings and fantasies are interwoven with thoughts; only in confronting the selected works of art do the cognitive dimensions come conspicuously to the fore. Cognition (c) is possible and enabled only owing to the verbal medium. I have called it para-philosophical because it is always informed by artistic structure and the fragments (aspects) containing the discursive thought are very rarely ordered by the strict requirements of the philosophical treatise. Density and repletion - to employ Goodman's terms - are usually just as characteristic of these aspects as they are of the artistic mode of thinking considered as a whole. Even for instance when Sartre conducts his existential discourse in *La Nausée* it is somehow different from Sartre as the author of *L'être et la Néant*. If one can speak free of any metaphor about the hypotheses that are put forward by authors, it will be in the masterpieces that category (b) presents: The 'Shoes' of Van Gogh, Faulkner's saga of Yoknapatawpa; and those of category (c): *La Chute* by Camus, Witkiewicz' play *Utmost Confusion alias Hyrkanese Worldview*. Some works blend the attributes of (b) and (c), and hypotheses of this cognitive order have a central place there. On the other hand neither category (a) nor (d) permits the interfacing of the scientific with the artistic hypothesis.

I am inclined to draw the conclusion that while symbols are necessary

devices of art, the arts differ among themselves in striking fashion as to symbolic structures that are not outfitted equally with cognition. As a result the responses to different domains of art and to particular works will not all be primarily cognitive. Goodman's analysis stopped with the comparison of art and science, whereas inquiry into the aesthetic characteristics calls for further probing based on the distinctive proportions of the cognitive and non-cognitive elements of the art structures and of the aesthetic experiences that correspond to them. Thus Goodman's remarks on the 'Concerto for Piano and Orchestra' by Cage (pp. 187-189) need elaboration with respect to the composer's aleatoric strategy and the aim of turning *homo symbolicus* into *homo ludens*. One further consideration emerges here from my concerns, namely the need to take into account the attitude of the audience (individuals or the group) in relation to the artist's approach. In referring to cognitive category (d) I noted how the audience's emotional engagement is determined by prior knowledge of the world that is virtually represented by the given work of art. One must add that the opposite also occurs - the more one is acquainted the less one is moved. The reader or the viewer can respond cognitively in another way than the artist foresaw and 'programmed' it. If one isn't aware of Mondrian's specific philosophical ideas one *sees* his vertico-horizontal structures only as delightful geometry. In contrast, the critic who views and several times digests a film can finally lose track of some of its cognitive qualities which will be meaningful to the average movie-goer. The most promising study of the cognitive and non-cognitive structure of the work of art and of aesthetic experience will take as its focus the clash between certain conventionalized approaches of the given audience, and the strategy of the artist who is breaking the rules in this sphere too. Philosophy in this regard must base itself on the semiotics of culture. Accordingly the arts as symbolic systems appear as varying not only into different grades of density and repletion but also in cognitiveness.

III

Art as a symbol-system is culturally made. Its conceptualization, if any, will rest on social standards. Today these assumptions seem to be commonplace and, inasmuch as I am of Marxist persuasion, I should be the last

to deny their importance. Marx's arguments in the *1844 Manuscripts* as to the socialized senses which constitute the human *Wesen* stand uncontradicted. Nevertheless the Marxist position, as I understand it, states no more than the indubitable truth that culture permanently and everywhere *mediates* nature. There is moreover much to be said for the recurrent suggestion that art continually tries to break on through the culturally fixed provenance back to nature itself. As long as there is no evident generalized proof to the contrary, I remain willing to consider whether, too, there is not the possibility of intervention of a human nature into the acculturated sphere. I recognize that since the beginnings of human civilization there have been innumerable examples testifying to differences of rendering nature (landscape) and the human face (portraiture); the way these phenomena are depicted by the artists and seen by their audiences vary according to cultural canons. I remember also that evidence has been compiled to argue against a single perspective (the Renaissance perspective) as the proper vehicle for human and artistic renderings. None the less, when one analyzes the bison from Altamira or the horse from Font de Gaume, one finds a twofold frame of reference: the peculiar mental structure based on the animistic totemism, and an exceptionally clever and perceptive pictogram based on the natural object. It might be rejoined that this occurred only in the primitive epoch. I am not going to accept this rejoinder because it seems to me the continuity of this approach is seen, for example, in Hobbema's or Ruysdal's landscapes or later those of Constable or the Barbizon School. It might still be objected that in our century this kind of artistic goal has vanished. To this I answer that Mondrian's geometry is seen by some eminent Dutch art historians as the very pictogram of their native landscape. Let me also remark that there is a quite significant trend in present-day architecture toward organic structures (Lloyd Wright's heritage and the Oriental, basically Japanese tradition). The same pertains to the sculpture of H. Moore and his followers. However, even if I cannot make my point stick, the victory cannot go to my opponents. For what matters are not the novelties, the anti-nature trends of the Twentieth Century, but rather the fact that any human individual who confronts the Magdalenian survivals or the Hobbema line – *if* he has ever seen a bison or a normal Dutch countryside – has to recognize and appreciate them *as such*. What happens to the tem-

poral socio-cultural standards? In this encounter they are as it were bypassed. Decisive is the basic human psycho-physiology in conjunction with the general conditions which determine the universally-human social status – man as an animal *loquens et laborans* against the encompassing world – which enable everyone to grasp the meaning of the representation. A similar case is that of portraiture. Again each model is culturally rendered, its socio-historical aspect is more or less discernible. But what about the intrinsic individuality of the portrait-sitter? It emerges to the extent that the beholders compare the persons they know with the outstanding personalities in portraiture. Canon van der Paele by Jan van Eyck, the Francesco d'Este of Van der Weyden and the B. Castiglione of Raphael, the Pietro Aretino of Titian, Frans Hals' Gypsy, David's Saint-Just, the Shrimp Girl of Hogarth, Doña Isabel by Goya, N. Bertin by Ingres – these are just a few instances. If we take these conjectures as to supracultural traits of a given symbolic system and consider them together with Goodman's approach to expression we will see there is a close bearing. Goodman stresses that expressive characteristics are always culture-bound and explicable only in the definite setting. Expressions are as relative as representations because they too are molded by custom. The example of Japanese body motions and gestures is given: are we able exactly to guess what they are to mean? Yet Goodman's example misses the point; are there really no expressions which convey the same meaning the world over? Let the Japanese look at 'Saint-Just' by David or the 'Van der Paele' by Van Eyck. They will see what we will see: sweetly dreaming features in the one, a decisive face expressing strong will in the other. What the Japanese will miss through lack of acquaintance with our culture is the surprising contrast between what we know of the fierce revolutionary ardor of Saint-Just and his Rousseauian portrait; or the contemplative piety we would expect of Van Eyck's Canon and the wordly firmness we in fact see in the portrait. On the other hand we Westerners shall not be deceived by a Japanese warrior's face distorted in a grimace – it may express pain or it may express fury but it surely does not contain joy or benevolence. I find that it is worth a second thought to consider the results of R. L. Saltz' and R. I. Cervenka's work (*The Handbook of Gestures*) who stated that the common traits and the differences between the Columbians and the North Americans are equally well founded. Thus too in following Birdwhistell, Goodman

perhaps goes too far in stating, on p. 50, that no relationships are universal. This leads up to my last argument. I believe that the way of the artist through culture to the veritable nature is gained most often and most poignantly by the full and stubborn expression of one's individuality against the sociohistorical setting. Granted, the general and the individual aspects will be entangled, not to be entirely distinguished. However, the self-portraits of Rembrandt and Van Gogh, or the works of Villon and Sade, Blake and Trakl, Wilde and Gombrowicz, are certain evidence that cultural equivalents can never be claimed to subsume the creation they mediate. Indeed among these artists the *œuvre* and the *personality* articulate as one fascinating whole, which is not explicable only by the *mœurs* of the moment.

In conclusion? Well, if my exemplifications and reasoning are persuasive, why not leave open the difficult question of the nature-and-culture syndrome as it conditions the artistic process and the aesthetic responses? Among experts an almost unanimous opinion exists that, for instance, the imagination when intoxicated by peyote reacts in identical ways despite the cultural or time-space coefficients. Chomsky offers strong arguments for the deep structure of language. It may be that some mental foundations of mimesis and expression are universal. Art as systems of symbols may draw not only on cultural standards and competences but also on supra-historical, anthropological regularities. Goodman leaves to cosmology the explanation of why things have the properties whether literal or metaphorical which are grasped as greenness or sadness (p. 78). I would say rather that the question belongs to genetic epistemology, where no final word can be said. None the less, my contention is that the nature-and-culture tension – from which we are unable to extricate some kinds of art (landscape, portraiture, biography), some stylistic periods and some great works dealing with human existence through the selfhood of the artist – is not to be ignored as an aesthetic constituent. I speak of tension because the artist never can be successful in seeking to break through the walls of culture into the ideal of pure nature, and the challenge must be met again and again. Thus, this antinomy seems to be characteristic at least of some artistico-aesthetic systems.

Of my three observations, two were objections. I must therefore emphasize that I learned much from Professor Goodman's *Languages of Art*

and I believe this book must be read and reread by students of aesthetics. I shall be honored if Professor Goodman finds my objections sensible and worth answering. My aim was to pay homage to him by launching a dialogue with his always inspiring thought.

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Manuscript received 9 December 1975