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ROMAN JAKOBSON

Language in Literature

EDITED BY KRYSZYNA POMORSKA
AND STEPHEN RUDY

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Futurism

It was in the twentieth century that painting first consistently broke off with the tendencies of naive realism. In the last century the picture was obliged to convey perception; the artist was a slave to routine, and he consciously ignored both everyday and scientific experience. As if what we know about an object were one thing, and the direct content of a presentation of objects were an entirely different thing—and the two completely unrelated. As if we knew an object only from one side, from one point of view, as if, upon seeing a forehead, we forget that the nape of the neck exists, as if the neck were the dark side of the moon, unknown and unseen. Similar to the way in which in old novels the events are presented to us only so far as they are known to the hero. One can find attempts at doubling points of view on an object even in the old painting, motivated by the reflection of a landscape or of a body in the water or in a mirror. Compare likewise the device in Old Russian painting of depicting a martyr in one and the same picture twice or three times in contiguous stages of an action in the process of unfolding. But it was Cubism that first canonized multiple points of view. Deformation was realized in earlier pictorial

art on an insignificant scale: for example, hyperbole was tolerated, or the deformation was motivated by an application that was humorous (caricature), ornamental (teratology), or finally by the data of nature itself (chiaroscuro). Freed from motivational motifs by the acts of Cézanne, deformation was canonized by Cubism.

The Impressionists, applying the experience of science, had decomposed color into its component parts. Color ceased to be subjugated to the sensation of the nature depicted. There appeared blotches of color, even chromatic combinations, which copied nothing, which were not imposed upon the picture from without. The creative mastery of color naturally led to a realization of the following law: any increase in form is accompanied by a change in color, and any change in color generates new forms (a formulation of Gleizes and Metzinger).¹

In science this law was first advanced, it seems, by Stumpf, one of the pioneers of the new psychology, who spoke about the correlation between color and colored spatial form: quality shares in changes of extension. When extension is changed, quality is also transformed. Quality and extension are by nature inseparable and cannot be imagined independently of one another. This obligatory connection may be opposed to the empirical connectedness of two parts lacking such an obligatory character, e.g., a head and torso. Such parts can be imagined separately.²

The set (*ustanovka*)³ toward nature created for painting an obligatory connection precisely of such parts which are in essence disconnected, whereas the mutual dependence of form and color was not recognized. On the contrary, a set toward pictorial expression resulted in the creative realization of the necessity of the latter connection, where the object is freely interpenetrated by other forms (so-called Divisionism). Line and surface attract the artist's attention; they cannot exclusively copy the boundaries of nature; the Cubist consciously cuts nature up with surfaces, introduces arbitrary lines.

The emancipation of painting from elementary illusionism entails an intensive elaboration of various areas of pictorial expression. The correlations of volumes, constructive asymmetry, chromatic contrast, and texture enter the foreground of the artist's consciousness.

The results of this realization are the following: (1) the canonization of a series of devices, which thus also allows one to speak of Cubism as a school; (2) the laying bare of the device. Thus the realized texture

no longer seeks any sort of justification for itself; it becomes autonomous, demands for itself new methods of formulation, new material. Pieces of paper begin to be pasted on the picture, sand is thrown on it. Finally, cardboard, wood, tin, and so on, are used.

Futurism brings with it practically no new pictorial devices; instead, it widely utilizes Cubist methods. It is not a new school of painting, but rather a new aesthetics. The very approach to the picture, to painting, to art, changes. Futurism offers picture-slogans, pictorial demonstrations. It has no fixed, crystallized canons. Futurism is the antipode of classicism.

Without a set, to use a psychological term, without a style, to use a term from art criticism, there can be no presentation of an object. For the nineteenth century, what is characteristic is a striving to see things as they were seen in the past, as it is customary to see: to see like Raphael, like Botticelli. The present was projected into the past, and the past dictated the future, all according to the famous formula: "Another day has gone by, praise the Lord. Lord grant tomorrow be the same."

What art, if not representational art, could serve so successfully the basic tendency of fixing the instant of movement, of breaking down a movement into a series of separate static elements? But static perception is a fiction. As a matter of fact, "everything is moving, everything is quickly being transformed. A profile never remains motionless before one's eyes; it continuously appears and disappears. As a result of the stability of the image on the retina, objects multiply, are deformed, follow one another, like hurried vibrations in the space one is running through. So it is that running horses have not four legs but twenty, and their movements are triangular" (from a manifesto of Futurist artists).⁴

Static, one-sided, isolated perception—a pictorial anachronism—is something in the nature of the classical muses, gods, and lyres. But we are no longer shooting out of a harquebus or traveling in a heavy carriage. The new art has put an end to static forms; it has even put an end to the last fetish of the static: beauty. In painting nothing is absolute. What was true for the artists of yesterday is today a lie, as one Futurist manifesto puts it.

The overcoming of *statics*, the discarding of the absolute, is the main thrust of modern times, the order of the day. A negative philosophy and tanks, scientific experiment and deputies of Soviets, the principle

of relativity and the Futurist "Down With!" are destroying the garden hedges of the old culture. The unity of the fronts of attack is astonishing.

"At the present time we are again experiencing a period in which the old scientific edifice is crumbling, but the crumbling is so complete that it is unprecedented in the history of science. But even that is not all. Among the truths being destroyed are ones which were never even uttered by anyone, which were never emphasized, so self-apparent did they seem, so unconsciously were they used and posited as the basis for every sort of reasoning." A particularly characteristic feature of the new doctrine is the unprecedented paradoxical nature of many of even its simplest propositions: they clearly contradict what is usually called "common sense."

The last sign of substance is vanishing from the physical world. "How do we picture time to ourselves? As something flowing continuously and homogeneously, with an eternal, identical speed everywhere. One and the same time flows in the entire world; it is quite obvious that there cannot be two times which flow in different parts of the universe at different speeds. Closely connected with this are our conceptions of the simultaneity of two events, of 'before' and of 'after,' for these three most elementary notions are accessible even to an infant; they have an identical sense, by whomever or wherever they are used. The concept of time conceals for us something absolute, something completely unrelative. But the new doctrine rejects the absolute character of time, and therefore the existence of 'world' time as well. Every identical self-moving system has its own time; the speed of time-flow is not identical in each such system." Does absolute peace of mind exist, even if only in the form of an abstract concept which has no real existence in nature? From the principle of relativity it follows that absolute peace of mind does not exist.

"Time gets involved in all spatial dimensions. We cannot define the geometrical form of a body which is in motion in relation to us. We define always its kinetic form. Thus our spatial dimensions occur in reality not in a three-dimensional, but in a four-dimensional variety."

"These pictures in the field of philosophical thought should produce a revolution greater than Copernicus' displacement of the earth from the center of the universe . . . Does not the power of the natural sciences make itself felt in the transition from an undisputed experimental fact—the impossibility of determining the absolute motion of the

earth—to questions of the psyche? The contemporary philosopher cries out in embarrassment: There is nothing but deceit on that side of the truth.”

“The newly discovered offers a sufficient quantity of images for the construction of the world, but they break its former architecture, so familiar to us, and can be fit only within the boundaries of a new style, one which far out-distances in its free lines the borders not only of the old external world, but also of the basic forms of our thinking.”

(Direct quotations in this and the preceding four paragraphs are from O. D. Xvol'son, *The Principle of Relativity*, and N. A. Umov, *The Characteristic Features of Contemporary Natural-Scientific Thought*.)

The basic tendencies of collectivist thought: the destruction of abstract fetishism, the destruction of the remnants of statics (Bogdanov, *The Sciences of Social Consciousness*). And so the main lines of the moment are obvious in all domains of culture.

If Cubism, following Cézanne's behests, constructed a picture by starting from the simplest volumes—the cube, cone, sphere—offering its own sort of primitiveness in painting, then the Futurists in search of kinetic forms introduced into the picture the curved cone, the curved cylinder, collisions of cones with sharp, curved ellipsoids, and so on, in a word, destroying the mountings of volumes (see Carrà's manifesto).⁵

Perceptions, in multiplying, become mechanized; objects, not being perceived, are taken on faith. Painting battles against the automatization of perception; it signals the object. But, having become antiquated, artistic forms are also perceived on faith. Cubism and Futurism widely use the device of impeded perception, which corresponds in poetry to the step-ladder construction discovered by contemporary theoreticians.

In the fact that even the most discerning eye is able only with difficulty to make sense of objects that have been totally transubstantiated, there is a particular charm. A picture that gives itself with such reserve expects precisely that it will be questioned again and again. Let us take Leonardo da Vinci's words as a defense of Cubism in this respect:

We know well that our sight, by rapid observations, discovers in one point an infinity of forms: nevertheless it only understands one thing at a time. Suppose that you, reader, were to see the whole of this page at a glance, and concluded instantly that it is full of various letters; you would not at the same moment know

what letters they are, nor what they would mean. You would have to go from one word to another and from line to line if you would wish to know these letters, just as you would have to climb step by step to reach the top of a building, or else never reach the top. (Cited by Gleizes and Metzinger.)⁶

A particular instance of impeded recognition in painting, i.e., a construction of the type—this is a lion, not a dog—is like a riddle which deliberately leads us to a false solution; compare the so-called “false recognition” of classical poetics or the negative parallelism of the Slavic epic. Aristotle: “For men delight in seeing likenesses because in contemplating them it happens that they are learning and reasoning out what each thing is, e.g. that this man [in the painting] is that [sort of man]; for if by fortune one has not previously seen what is imitated, the likeness will not produce pleasure as an imitation, but because of its execution, or surface coloring, or some other cause of this sort.”⁷ In other words, it was already clear to Aristotle that, alongside a type of painting that signals the perception of nature, there exists a type of painting that signals our direct chromatic and spatial perception (it does not matter whether the object is unknown or whether it has simply dropped out of the picture).

When a critic looking at such pictures is at a loss and asks: “What in the world does this mean, I don't understand”—and what precisely does he want to understand?—he is like the metaphysician of the fable: they want to pull him out of the hole in the ground he's in and all he can do is ask: “What sort of thing is rope?” More briefly: for him, perception that is valuable in and of itself does not exist. He prefers paper currency to gold: currency, with its conventionally assigned value, seems to him more “literary.”