

TRUTH IN ART

1. ART AND DEFORMATION ACCORDING TO PLATO

It seems at least daring to speak of truth on the subject of art, when Plato, in the *Sophiste*, 234c, likens art to sophistry, in other words, to falsity and deformation. To be sure, this comparison is based on an exaggeration, because elsewhere Plato insists on the necessity of artistic reality: in the same *Sophiste*, 299e, he states that “life would be unlivable without art.” The importance thus given to art becomes obvious when we think that this same expression is already used in the *Apologie*, 38a, with regard to philosophy, the activity that for a man conscious of his own existence is one of scrupulously examining his own life. This similarity in expression testifies to the conceptual and axiological similarity of two (but distinct) activities of the mind effected by Plato who, on a different level, as we have just seen, unhesitatingly condemns one of them, at least apparently; apparently, because basically Plato does not inveigh against art in general but against the art of his

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contemporaries, whom he openly accuses of accepting the postulate of verisimilitude by using artifice and acrobatics, with the sole end of pleasing the crowds by flattery. In other words, they substitute for the search for authenticity that of dexterity in creations conceived only for that effect, which means identifying this type of substitution of values with a prostitution of the artist himself with regard to his public.

Here again Plato makes exaggerated judgments on the art of his day, in fact too oriented toward an excessive imitation of sensory reality (painting in *trompe-l'oeil*,¹ overly-descriptive and realistic music²) as toward a constant search for new, subtle technical means allowing the artists to more easily present their flattering messages to the public. We will admit, however, that up to a point his attitude is excusable, seeing that most of the artists of his time appear to have neglected the sincere side of their creativity in favor of its toadying, seductive and complacent side. From this comes a drifting away from the meaning of the notion of *mimesis*, then that of expression toward that of imitation.³ That said, it is natural to consider Plato's attitude toward art as it was practiced by his contemporaries as being justified by the facts and, at the same time, to indicate the points on which they seem to be exaggerated. Of course, Plato uses the question as only a pretext or, better, a simple point of departure to take up the study of the problem of artistic truth. However, it does not keep this question from being a good introduction to the subject. In effect, Plato was the first to stress the need to allow a spiritual and cultural activity that, from a different point of view, he judged condemnable and showed that all the "negative" side of art consists in the artist's (and viewer's) confusion of the ideas of truth and verisimilitude, of rectitude and exactness.

Since this confusion had been cultivated on the theoretical level by Gorgias and applied at the level of artistic realizations (among

¹ Cf. P.M. Schuhl, *Platon et l'art de son temps (arts plastiques)*, Paris, Alcan, 1933, p. 39 *et seq.*

² E. Moutsopoulos, *La musique dans l'oeuvre de Platon*, Paris, P.U.F., 1959, p. 278 *et seq.*

³ H. Koller, *Die Mimesis in der Antike. Nachahmung, Darstellung, Ausdruck*, Bern, A. Francke, 1954, p. 17 *et seq.*

others, refinements in the construction of the Parthenon⁴), it was easy for Plato to denounce its principle and extol a salutary return to more archaic, severe and less complicated forms having at least the advantage of having been spared by time (*Lois*, VII, 812c) and consequently of a proven solidity which stood as security for its inherent truth.

2. TRUTH AS CREATION OF AN ADEQUATION

Before we proceed to an examination of what artistic truth is, let us try to specify what truth is with regard to artistic demands. Here we cannot neglect the definition of Thomas Aquinas, conforming to the nature of Aristotelian thought, in terms of which truth would be “the adequation of the thing and the intellect”, thus an authentic relationship, differing however from the reality of the thing, that is, the object of consciousness, indeed, reality itself as it is imposed by its very existence on the mind that recognizes it. Traditionally, we make a distinction (which supposes an irreducibility) between true and false. In this context, the epistemological value “false” seems to contain at least two particularly distinct values, that of the erroneous and that of the lie, just as the epistemological value “true” seems to contain at least two other values, that of correct and that of exact. Now, if the erroneous is viewed as deviating from a certain unique norm represented by rectitude and the lie as the contrapuntal antithesis of the correct, obeying the postulate of verisimilitude, it becomes clear that within the now-enlarged domain of the true, the value of the erroneous is less opposed to that of the correct than, in the domain of the false, it is opposed to the lie. To fix these ideas in our minds, let us imagine at the level of Euclidian geometry a plane to any point of which a perpendicular is drawn. The uniqueness of this perpendicular represents the uniqueness of the value of correct.

Any other straight line drawn to the same point would be oblique with regard to the plane. There would be an infinity of possible obliques opposed to the uniqueness of the initial perpen-

⁴P.A. Michelis, “Refinements in Architecture”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 14, 1955, pp. 19-43, especially p. 26 *et seq.*

dicular, and each would represent a particular expression of the value of the erroneous. In addition, any prolonging of the initial straight line of the other side of the plane would represent the negation of the former and consequently the value of the lie, constructed *punctum contra punctum* with regard to the correct, so as to safeguard its own verisimilitude. We could multiply the procedures for attaching organically—and in a global and integral view—the representation of values such as exact, hypothetical or absurd. But let us keep to the essential, that is, the values of the correct, erroneous and lie alone. In the framework of the chosen example, it appears that the field of truth is considerably enlarged in order to admit the correct as well as the erroneous, while the lie is at the same time isolated in its own uniqueness of rectitude and exists only by virtue of it.⁵ This restructuration of the universe of epistemological categories allows the rehabilitation of the category of the erroneous that is no longer taxed with negativity, since it achieves the status of positive and thus can be tolerated. It is within the broad sector it defines within the domain of truth, in which it is integrated, that artistic activity is legitimately practiced from then on. Art thus becomes the possibility of the adequate, appropriate and justifiable expression of an incomparably richer world than that expressed by scientific thought. Everything that at first could be judged as “false” in art is only, in fact and in the same order of ideas, a tributary of the broadening of the idea of truth.

From then on, art benefits from the margin of tolerance that is admitted as its due in terms of the broadening in question, and it is no longer a question of denying its truth but of recognizing a quite different truth from that of the traditional idea of truth. If, for Bachelard, at the level of science, truth is the creation of an adequation,⁶ at the level of art, creation *par excellence*, it can only be the creation of an adequation that does not even need to be sanctioned by facts and which remains valid through its formal and

⁵ E. Moutsopoulos. “Vers un élargissement du concept de vérité: le presque-vrai”, *Annales de la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines d'Aix*, 40, 1966, pp. 189-196.

⁶ G. Bachelard, *L'Expérience de l'espace dans la physique contemporaine*, Paris, P.U.F., 1937, p. 94; “Maximum reality comes at the end of knowledge, not at the beginning of knowledge”.

expressive organization alone.⁷ Art is not the imitation of a reality but the creation of its own reality and truth.

3. ART AS WITNESS

If art is expression, it is not so *in abstracto* but *of* something and *of* someone. In fact, it is, firstly, that of a personal conscience, of a collective unconscious that is personalized through a temperament and, secondly, of a precise fact concretized in the particular form of an experience that is at the origin of any specification of the creative impulse. Under these conditions, if the work of art can be qualified as an objectivated fixing of an event in the consciousness of the artist, organized and established through his care into a suitable form, to his own nature's advantage, art itself, that is, the set of procedures beginning with the initial stimulus of the artistic creation and which, through the most diverse and complicated progressions, ends in a definitively structured work. In the same way, the totality of the works that make up the artistic patrimony of humanity is the concretization of the testimony that man gives of his own condition, in other words, of his nature and history that is none other than the succession of his conflicts with the universe to affirm his liberty. From then on, it is a matter of the artist's establishing the truth of his experiences and thus the adequate relation between those and their objective establishment in a unique and unrepeatable esthetic form. Since it fixes, while retracing, an event that took place within the consciousness, every work of art may be qualified as a historical chronicle. From this viewpoint, the work of art establishes an internal historical truth. However, we may present a historical truth in the manner of Thucydides, for example, or in the manner of Michelet, depending on facts and evaluating them or integrating into them reflections and remarks proceeding from an internal universe that moves the historian and his work with an elevated impulse, the one that Ranke denounced by inviting the modern historian to keep strictly to the

⁷ E. Moutsopoulos, "Du 'faux' dans l'art", (II Congresso de Filosofia, Córdoba (Argentina), 1971), *Actas*, Vol I, Buenos Aires, Editorial Sudamericana, pp. 335-338.

facts, to the “*was es eigentlich geschehen ist*”.⁸ Now, if historiography has its own laws that determine its objectivist vocation, although nuanced by recourse to evaluation and interpretation, art, as testimony, is also compelled to consider the organic and formal demands on it because of its structuring nature. From this come those rational and historical inexactitudes found in *œuvres* that represent real events or authentic attitudes but whose particular structure and form obey laws that most often differ from natural laws or are opposed to the exact, “photographic” reproduction of the incidents they portray.

4. ESTHETIC TRUTH AND “KAIROS”

This “alteration” is a necessary consequence of the “*kairic*” nature of all artistic activity⁹ as well as of any work of art.¹⁰ The notion of “*kairos*”, which proceeds from the occasionally minimal and optimal difference between the categories of *not yet* and *never again* is translated at the level of art by a restructuration and trans-structuration of reality, as well as by the imposition of a specifically artistic truth to sensory reality. Artistic truth is tributary to the imperative of the application of the principle of formal *integrality* as it is to the need for continuous affirmation of the liberty of the creative consciousness in its expression, itself prolonged in its particular means of expression. The Naram-Sin stele, for example, a masterpiece of Babylonian sculpture, commemorates a victory whose development it condenses in its own way, since the artist chooses a particular inversed perspective, “hierarchical”, in the terms of which the most important personages are

⁸ L. von Ranke, *Zur Kritik neuerer Geschichtsschreiber*, Berlin-Leipzig, 1824, p. 7 *et seq.*

⁹ E. Moutsopoulos, “Alternative Processes in Artistic Creation”, *Proceedings of the 8th International Wittgenstein Symposium* (Kirchberg am Wechsel, 1983), part I, Vienna, Hölder-Picher-Tempsky, 1984, pp. 107; *Idem*, “Le modèle de l’œuvre d’art: idéalisme ou pragmatisme? La représentation”, *Actes du XVIIe Congrès de Philosophie de Langue Française*, Strasbourg, 1980, pp. 300-302; *Idem*, “La finition de l’œuvre d’art: contraintes et licences, A filosofia e as ciencias” (IV Semana Internacional de Filosofia, Curitiba), Rio de Janeiro, 1978, pp. 22-24.

¹⁰ E. Moutsopoulos, “Sur le caractère ‘kairique’ de l’œuvre d’art”, *Actes du V Congrès International d’Esthétique*, Amsterdam, 1964, pp. 116-118.

larger than the others, even though they are in the background. The same procedure is seen, this time with respect to a principle of bipolarity, in the Hellenistic mosaic representing Alexander and Darius during the battle of Issos. In the *Persians* Aeschylus draws upon the historical account by Herodotus, but inversely, and places the action inside the palace of Xerxes, thus changing the historical perspective: *a parte Graecorum* in Herodotus, history is experienced *a parte Persarum* in Aeschylus. In his two consecutive versions of the *Sacre de Napoléon*, found respectively in the museums of the Louvre and Versailles, the artist David figured Napoleon's mother, who in fact was not present at the ceremony, in the background of the central part of the composition. In addition to the probable insistence of the emperor, this figure dominating the scene from the center of the tribune lost in obscurity, shows the will of the artist to organize his work by introducing a desired historical reality and imposing a purely artistic truth sanctioned by an esthetic authenticity. Closer in time to us, Picasso's *Guernica* uses a real historical event as occasion for a synthesis representing the tragic nature of the human condition, a synthesis in which the most diverse facts are portrayed and organized according to one esthetic law, that which comes from the inspiration of the artist and the esthetic structure, indeed the nature itself, of the work. The author of the *Iliad* also uses as a pretext a minor episode of the Trojan war: Achilles' anger, which is at the origin of the creation of an entire universe, rigorously coherent, manifestly unreal, but also incontestably true. Nor is there anything real in Myron's *Discobolus*, a figure illustrating the "canon" of the proportions of the human body, ameliorated by this master of antique sculpture, and whose attitude synthesizes the successive attitudes of the athlete. Its condensed truth appears through the harmony disengaged by the esthetic form, an illustration of "*kairos*", that moment *par excellence* before which nothing is yet and after which nothing is more, this minimality and optimality that resumes eternity on the one hand and on the other the permanence of the essence within what is to come. It is the same with all these organic syntheses that submit disparate natural data to one esthetic principle. On this subject we may also mention the series of four paintings by Arcimboldo representing figures of satyrs, illustrating the four seasons realized from reproductions, disparate and isolat-

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ed, of the vegetal attributes of each but regrouped and structured according to a unique and unitary conception that testifies to a restructuration of reality according to a truth that is detached from the form imposed by its composition. We find these traits again in the syntheses of Hieronymus Bosch, such as the triptych entitled *The Garden of Delights*, now in the Prado, in which the monstrous skirts the quasi-angelic and in which an eternal truth is masterfully affirmed. There is an equivalence between these works that spring from poetry and the plastic arts and those that are the products of musical creation. In the orchestral passage known as *Forest Murmurs*, in Wagner's *Siegfried*, the composer succeeds in presenting a fictional truth but one that is more true for the consciousness than the natural reality it reflects, because he chose the order of its elements and successive restructurations eliminating, according to a purifying "kairic" method, all sound that was extraneous to those belonging, through their particular nature, to the essence itself of his subject. These "murmurs" reveal themselves to be truer than those normally heard in nature, because they are more purified and more in conformity with the creative intentions of a musical consciousness. Identical observations could be made apropos of contemporary "concrete" music whose origin goes back perhaps to the realism of Richard Strauss (witness that "love scene" from the *Domestic Symphony*, so successful because of its fidelity to nature as well as to the experiences of almost all listeners and in which individual and universal are blended in an exemplary truth), music of which Plato had already given a descriptive foretaste by sketching not only the rude imitations of thunder and roaring but also the subtle ones of rustling provoked by water striking the oars, etc. (*Republic*, III, 396a-397b).

More recent are the artistic realizations of the Cubists and Surrealists, such as the compositions by Eric Satie. Denounced at the beginning of the century as products of distortion and a mentality close to the sophistic, today they are rehabilitated as expressing valid and authentic truths.

5. ART, THE PROMOTION OF THE TRUE

From both an ontological and epistemological point of view, any

work of art is situated at the intersection of the respective axes of truth and rectitude, in the sense that it determines a precise region of established reality, a region that it erects in exemplary and supreme reality through the purification, condensation and restructuration it undergoes so as to clarify it in its way by conferring an adequation to an intentional model imposed at the level of its “*kairic*” activity. Probably, art would like to be imitation or copy but cannot be without being deprived of the power in virtue of which it renders its creations existentially authentic and without falling to the level of imposture (*trompe-l’oeil* painting, for example). Uniformly textured, sensory reality lends itself to a restructuration on the artistic plane in terms of a solid nucleus determined by the artist, who confers the value of a “*kairos*” on it. By so doing, art *evaluates* reality at the same time as it ameliorates it. Thanks to this evaluating, each art becomes the creation of a truth that is at once particular from the viewpoint of its conception and universal from the viewpoint of its promotion, a truth that is properly its own but also that of all consciences able to participate in its presence. From this comes its adequation to the intentions of the creative conscience and also its justification.

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