

Bronze

Luiza Pasca

III.

Apology of the Expressive Ugly

In a century of speed, when all people complain that they *do not have time*, what can be the meaning and purpose of Art? Nobody seems to be able to go to an art exhibition or to read a book, simply because they do not have *time*. For some people, educated or non-educated, Art presupposes a suspension of time (even if they are not conscious of this effect); when one looks at a painting or reads literature, then one gets access to an unconscious, unseen part of oneself – a new “time”, perhaps the real one, the interior duration, in Bergson’s terms, where everything is considered as intuition, intensity of feeling – and manages to forget, even for a short period of time, that the outside world, with the problems it involves, exists. For other people, art is a mere waste of time, in the sense that it does not involve a practical result or a pragmatic activity. They consider that everything that is devoid of a pragmatic core is pointless and invaluable. Can it be so? Can Art really *mean* nothing?

For anyone who considers the human being as the most evolved of all animals and denies the existence of a spirit or soul, the answer seems obvious. Although the problematic of what defines a human being is very complicated, one thing is quite clear: humans have created culture, and culture involves Art, thus Art must have a meaning, even if only for that undefined and ineffable thing that resides in us and we like to call spirit.

Art seems to transcend reality; the meaning of the concept of art itself becomes hard to be caught in words. Art is generally regarded in close connection with the main categories of aesthetics: the Beautiful and the Ugly, and a usual definition of art would include a reference to one of these: art as a form of spiritual manifestation, an expression of beauty. The debate about a definition of art is not over, but in this essay shall try to follow a new perspective over art and shed a new light over the problem: Art itself should not be defined as subservient to one aesthetic category or another; art transcends these categories and adumbrates itself as superior to these, encompassing both. Art may be regarded as beyond good and evil (to use Nietzschean terms), as beyond beautiful and ugly, but closely related to meaning – a form of significance. The value of art does not reside in the aesthetic distinction between Beautiful and Ugly, but in the meaning it encompasses. Of course, then comes the question, what does *meaning* mean? Are there grades of meaning, which may become criteria to assess a work of art? These questions do not make the real subject of this paper, although we shall encounter some points of view regarding these problems as well. Categorical answers cannot be given, only subjective ones, because art has a personal meaning for each and every one of us, and thus subjectivity becomes an obstacle in giving a certain answer. We shall consider, generally, that meaning implies both manifestations of the intellect (is the work of art capable to invite us to meditate?) and affects, strong emotional impressions that are provoked by the mere looking at of a work of art – relevant for the interior dynamism of the intuition (in Bergsonian meaning) and also stimuli for the intellect.

#### 1. Art in connection with Truth and Knowledge

Art becomes the center of a problematic, in relation with knowledge: can art offer real knowledge? Can this be its real function? Plato and Nietzsche offer two antagonistic points of view over

knowledge and thus over truth, which may lead us to conclude over (at least one of the) functions of art.

The simplest idea that most of us have if art is that it presupposes Beauty. From Plato's point of view, Beauty is an immutable, eternal and self-consistent Idea, Form, situated beyond the visible world; he considered that Beauty is of the same value with Truth, two forms that immediately follow and "obey" the supreme Idea, that of Good. But for Plato, beauty in art is simply a pointless, a vacuous imitation of the Idea of Beauty. He places Art at the second level of imitation. First, there is the world of the immutable Forms, which our own, so-called "real" world imitates. But Art imitates our world, so it only shows us the copies of copies. Through art, people do not free their souls from this world (supreme goal in Plato's view); on the contrary, they only deepen themselves into falsity, fakeness, strengthening the bounds of the soul to matter.

For Nietzsche, the truths of human beings are only illusions, metaphors of which people have forgotten to be such. He explains that at the dawn of humanity the ancestors have created these truths in order to be able to survive (especially in a spiritual way), and this is perfectly comprehensible, if we imagine the first of our ancestors paralyzed with fear and wonder regarding the world that they knew so little about and that seemed to overwhelm them. Nietzsche further states that all truths are relative and that there is no such thing as an absolute, general truth (thus totally opposing Plato's view). People make their own truths, depending on their needs and on the strength with which the will of power manifests through them. The real creator of values and truths is the *Ueberschensch*, whom weaker people must turn to.

To draw an immediate conclusion, it seems that if all concepts and values are relative, it results that there is no absolute Beauty and no absolute Ugliness, to which we may turn for comparisons. Where does art find its essence then?

Also, Nietzsche seems to be giving an explanation of the beginning of mythical and religious beliefs. As the history of religions tells us, myths were of the highest importance in the life of the primitive human – they were explanatory tales about the gods and the activities people were obliged to do in order to have a safe, regulated life and be in harmony with the nature and the whole universe. Thus the people did not complain about anything, if the gods had left it be so. Their myths brought them consolation and serenity. Myths are the base of religious doctrines and furthermore, for the first cultural manifestations. Could myths be placed at the base the first literary manifestations? Considering the hindu ancient writings or even the works of Homer and Hesiod, which contained the cosmogony myths, it can be asserted that myths played a big role in the development of culture and implicitly, in that of art.

Thus could have art taken further the role of the myths, that of ensuring spiritual survival? In other terms: What is the role or function of art for the human being? Following the next points of view, we shall arrive to our conclusion.

## 2. Homo symbolicum

Paul Ricoeur seems to think that meaning, significance, describes our deepest nature: we are conscious beings, capable of giving meaning to things, and to translate and perpetuate this meaning through expression. Expression may take various forms, as we can distinguish various forms of art, but the form that has the ability to easily encompass and transmit meaning is the image. Even a literary work of art transmits its meanings to us through images, through *symbols*; this type of communication is very complex, and presupposes a multi-level organized meaning. On one hand,

the author of a work of art wishes to encompass a certain meaning into a certain image, but the viewer or reader may not interpret that particular image in that certain way, because an interpretation always presupposes making reference to one's particular view over life, to one's particular nature. On the other hand, a work of art may be the result of "inspiration", this meaning that the artist does not consciously give significance to his artistic images, and that they are the result of some subliminal mechanisms, or of a divine consciousness that uses the artist as an instrument and the creation of the artist as a mundane expression (this was widely believed in Antiquity, if we are to think of the Muses or daimonions which inspired the ancient poets and musicians).

Therefore, these main considerations conduct only to relativism and perspectivism, which lead back to Nietzsche and to his point of view from above.

### 3. The Dasein and the Light of Art

As suggested by the point of view expressed above, the concept of meaning can also be regarded in connection with Aristotle's concept of *telos*, to which Heidegger gave an interesting and original interpretation in his theory about the Being and the Dasein. The Dasein is defined as that specific form of manifestation of the Being, which is capable of making inquiries about the Being itself. The Dasein is able to identify, to recognize the different purposes, meanings of all other forms of manifestation of the Being.

Heidegger regards art as a form of *aletheia*, where the earth, the world, the human and the divine meet, where the two poles, two constituents of all things dual nature of all things fuses and is perceived as unity; this doesn't mean that the two antithetic components of unity lose their shape, but that the tragic, eternal conflict between them becomes visible (in the sense that it can be clearly perceived) into this "open space", non-ensconced anymore. Heidegger regards the Greek *aletheia* as defining a state of non-ensconcing, where the true being of things comes to the surface and can be "seen", perceived consciously. *Aletheia* has often been translated as "truth", but truth becomes for Heidegger a state, a *context* where the being of things becomes "visible". Thus for Heidegger Art offers the ideal "place" where the Being of things (represented in paintings or suggested by words - but he had in mind mostly paintings) emerges and allows the Dasein to actually be the Dasein - to become aware of the true significance of all mundane things.

Thus art becomes the cure for alienation. The estranged person may become itself again through art, regaining all the lost significances of things and of itself.

### Conclusion: Art as a form of survival through *meaning*

A work of art seems not to admit a single interpretation, we are free to give our own interpretation, depending on the way we see things. It is true that we can see things differently at different times, but perhaps that is the genius of art: it encloses stimulates not only our emotional faculties, but also our intellect, helping us to see the same thing from many perspectives. All relativism may be for the best: if the world we see is in flux (*ta panta rhei*, as Heraclitus wisely asserted), how can we get knowledge of things, if they do not have an immutable essence to which we could have direct access to? Perhaps a solution is trying to see things from all perspectives, and since we cannot reach that "all", we could take knowledge of as many perspectives as we can, to as many sides of that thing as we can. Therefore, ugliness may be just another perspective over a thing or a situation, as beauty also. Why should the works of art reproduce only beautiful things? Should we despise and refuse to take into account an ugly work of art as a form of art, just because it represents things in a

another light?

Art may be a helpful “tool”, to adopt a pragmatic view, in one’s process of constructing his life. The meanings revealed through art can be very useful and help us perform a *metanoia*, a change of mentality and perspective in our own advantage.

Apart from this, when the rapid flow of time seems to give birth to illness among the people, Art may be considered one of the last forms of spiritual survival. In a world of nihilism, where the man is “condemned to be free”, free to interpret and give meaning, meaning relevant for his own condition, art is a subtle form of communication and may help us in remembering what the world and our specific way of being are all about: giving sense and cultivating our spirit. Art may still encompass all lost meaning and may reveal the old values that modeled our cultural being and that may be contained in what C.G. Jung’s calls collective unconsciousness; through writing, these meanings unconsciously receive expression; through a symbolic lecture, old, forgotten meanings can be brought forth again and re-interiorized, under a new light, but nonetheless most useful for us.

In the end, perhaps art should not be regarded only as a form of expression of the beautiful, but just as a form of expression.