PLASTIC ARTS AND LITERATURE

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Summary

Plastic arts and literature are associated in all cultures, but the value of this association varies significantly according to the prevalent system of writing. In the civilizations of the alphabet, painting and writing are considered to be two distinct arts. In the civilizations of the ideogram, as is the case with Asia, these two arts are thought to have a common origin. This discrepancy stems from the very nature of writing and the circumstances of its history. The ideographic system attests to the cross-fertilization of visual and oral communications, from which writing evolved. The purpose of this chapter is to show how this disequilibrium can explain the relationship between literature and painting in Western civilization. It also aims to show how it was not only possible for the West to embrace the world of China and Japan, but also that this process actually began in the nineteenth century.

1. Introduction

All cultures have considered literature and the plastic arts to be two different, but mutually complementary, art forms. Horace's 'Ut pictura poesis', in his *Ars poetica*, is echoed in the famous adage of the eleventh-century Chinese poet and painter, Su Dongpo: 'There is a poem in every painting, and a painting in every poem'. These two formulations are not exactly the same. Horace's dictum, disputed by Western theorists from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, is based on a comparison and pre-supposes that the two art forms were originally distinct and separate. By contrast, Su Dongpo's definition is based on the idea of the continuity of these art forms, which it is the duty of the creative artist to explore—an idea subsequently endorsed by several generations of

highly literate Chinese painters. This divergence is doubtless due to variations in cultural and artistic sensitivity, as well as to historical ideological differences. However, it does prompt the introduction of a pre-determining third term into the equation: the writing system adopted by the society in question. The Chinese writing system is based on the *ideogram* and that of the Greco-Latin world on the *alphabet*: that is the essence of the difference between Horace and Su Dongpo. Writing is, in fact, the first and principal product of the two media, which the plastic arts and literature seek to highlight: visual communication, in one case, and verbal communication, in the other. This is the area in which their capacity for mutual association has primarily been displayed. The relationship between the arts must necessarily reflect the cross-fertilization between writing and the circumstances of its production. We must therefore analyze these circumstances, if we are to understand, in any given society, what inter-art relationships can produce that is unique and new, depending on the writing system in place.

2. The Iconic Origins of Writing

The oral civilizations closest to us—those of the Dogons or of the Aborigines, for example—can give us some insight into the socio-cultural origins of literature and the plastic arts. What structures the group there is verbal communication. It governs internal exchanges and transmits, from one generation to the next, the 'legendary' or 'mythical' account of the history and genesis of that civilization. It is further characterized by the primacy accorded to the source of transmission of the message, the *speaker*, in the process of communication. The image is what enables this group to have access to an invisible world, over which its language holds no sway, but which it firmly believes to be a dominant influence. Social communication, in this context, is transgressive and is supposed to operate between two heterogeneous universes: the universe of men and the universe of the gods. The *receiver* of the message is in pole position, either because he scrutinizes the image in order to discover its meaning (like soothsayers interpreting a starry sky), or because it falls to him, as a creator or a spectator, to determine its aesthetic value. This *revelatory* function, characteristic of the image in prehistoric times, is still present in the role of plastic art as perceived by contemporary society, where writing plays such an important part. 'Art does not reproduce the visible', wrote Paul Klee in 1921, 'it makes visible'.

The most frequent form of association between verbal and visual communications in oral societies still persists in contexts where writing plays a part and comes in the shape of popular entertainment or a teaching tool. A speaker—a cleric or a storyteller—clarifies his public utterances by pointing to particular figures on a panel of images alongside him. These figures, while retaining the impetus drawn from their original spatial context, are assimilated into the logic of a discourse which heightens their meaning and narrative force, while, at the same time, strengthening the power of the word with the support of a 'striking image' which makes it all the more memorable. In this way, the listener-spectator has recourse to two parallel sources of information, each enriching the other.

In a sense, writing simply extended this practice. However, it did so by giving it a new dimension, revolutionizing its guiding principle, while making its terms more closely

interdependent. Where the framework and structures had originally been those of the image alone, language moved in and shared this common support. This was a process, not of merging, but of *cross-fertilization*, in which the image played the principal role, partly because of its innate capacity to cross borders, but partly also because of the hybrid nature of its own structure. The image is a rare combination of two heterogeneous levels of expression: the actual *space* of the support itself and the *figures* entered on to it. It was only after realizing that the wall of a cave or a cliff contained a divinatory potential, comparable to that of the canopy of heaven that mankind developed the requisite skills to use this surface graphically. The first carved or painted figures were symbolic, figurative or abstract, as witness most Paleolithic frescoes, thus highlighting their fundamental heterogeneity and the dominance of the spatial component in their overall iconic configuration. It was not so much the individual features of the figures themselves that mattered, but rather their juxtaposition. Together they could create meaning. In other words, the *intervals* between the individual figures, while separating them one from the other, also united them in an overall semantic whole. The intervals, emanating directly from the support of the image, provoke questions, suggest syntax and arouse in the spectator the awareness of an enigma, the solution of which seems imminent, but is perpetually elusive.

Benefiting from both cross-fertilization and the ability to move across borders, the image was well placed to face verbal language, as though such an encounter involved a foreign body of another kind—a sort of supplementary being—, which in no way infringed on its own inherent principles. This move, however, meant that the image had to swap its earlier enigmatic function for a normative *system of visual signs*, which alone could ensure the transfer of linguistic signs. This mutation took place in Mesopotamia and in China, through divination. *Reading*, conceived as the technique of deciphering and interpreting messages from beyond, inscribed on a sheep's liver in Mesopotamia or a tortoise shell in China, was supplanted by the subjective exercise of *contemplation*.

3. From the Ideogram to the Alphabet

The role of the image in the genesis of writing was such that the two became inseparable, not just physically and graphically, but also in terms of the content of the written message. Ideographical reading does not involve proceeding from one step to the next: the spatial context of the sign is intimately involved in its linguistic functioning. This is why the ideogram, in any civilization, has no fixed value. It can be interpreted as a *logogram*—referring to the word which it designates, as a *phonogram*—homophonous with another word, or as a *determinative*—an unpronounced sign which gives visual direction to its neighboring term. It is for the reader to decide which value to select, in function of the immediate context of the sign, as well as that of the overall document, its material substance, its format and its page layout: all of these elements are vital clues in the understanding of the text.

The alphabet invented in Greece in the eighth century BCE is the last avatar of writing. At the same time, it also marks a fundamental break in its evolution. Once a '*letter*'—a vowel or a consonant—became a distinctive element of language, the written sign suddenly lost the functional flexibility conferred upon it by its iconic origins, a feature

still present in the preceding Semitic alphabets. Was this a step forward or backward? There is no clear-cut answer. What is certain, however, is that this revolution brought about an unexpected situation in social—and therefore inter-arts—exchanges, whereby the image, in its relationship with writing, now regained the independence which had marked its position in oral societies, whereas writing was obliged to reinvent visual norms of readability if it was to survive. It would be wrong to think of the alphabet as the product of geometers, bent on making the written space conform to the laws of linguistic reason. The primary goal was to take the Phoenician alphabet, a writing system semantically based on consonants, which had evolved in Semitic languages at a time when there were none of these new constraints, and adapt it to an Indo-European type of language. There was never any sense of substituting one writing system for another, as shown by the way in which the letters of the Greek alphabet reproduced the graphic forms of the letters in the Phoenician one.

4. Figures of the Alphabet

The Greeks found themselves in the paradoxical situation of being *discoverers-cum-inheritors*, iconoclasts in spite of themselves. They were acutely aware of the divergence between earlier writing systems—exemplified on their doorstep by Egyptian hieroglyphics—and the new one which they had invented, without really intending to. They had to pay particular attention to the modalities of visual communication, the more so since they needed to draw new inspiration from this source. The first consequence would be the invention of completely new plastic forms. The art of illusion, known as *trompe-l'œil*, is probably the most emblematic pictorial form of what might be called 'alphabetical art', both in its inherent composition and in the subsequent interpretations and commentaries which it inspired, from Classical antiquity to the present time.

What was new in *trompe-l'œil* was this: the support and the figures in the image were coordinated in such a way that the figures became detached, to the point of eclipsing the support, and gave the viewer the illusion of having exchanged the world of appearances for the world of reality. *Trompe-l'œil* may have been inspired by the alphabetical system or may have been the product of two parallel cultural developments, as was the case in the eighteenth century, for example, when writing and architecture both conformed to a rationalization of form emanating from the same principles. In any case, *trompe-l'œil* led to a *distinctive* concept of visual perception, comparable to the way in which the alphabet makes a distinction between letter and support, or between vowel and consonant. It is also noteworthy that the birth of this pictorial form coincided with the emergence of the notion of *mimesis*, or *imitation*, in the fifth century BCE, the very time when the alphabet started to be widely used in Greece. The term 'mimesis' was taken by Plato from Xenophon to castigate an art form which he maintained misled people into thinking that the imitation of things could lead to the 'real', whereas it only gave the illusion of reality. The word, the *logos*, alone had the power and the authority to fulfill this mission. This is confirmed by the allegory at the start of Book VII of *The Republic*. For Plato, the wall of a cave is no longer the divinatory screen where the civilizations of the ideogram once found inspiration. It is the site of misleading shadows, the product of human artifice, reminiscent of the silhouettes in the legend of Dibutade, who sought to remember her lover by tracing his profile on a wall—a legend long considered by the Western world as the origin of painting.

If *trompe-l'œil* began the opposition between support and figure, the Platonic concept of *mimesis* grafted onto it a second one, equally related to the civilization of the alphabet, namely the opposition between *image* and *discourse*. To discourse, belonged the world of Truth and Ideas; to the image, that of illusions and matter. One of the consequences of this theory was that painters were downgraded and considered merely technicians, a fall in status which has dogged them throughout the history of Western art and against which they have battled constantly. It is true that the magic of *trompe-l'œil* also led, somewhat later, to the opposite outcome, whereby, perhaps as compensation, legendary biographies and mythical accounts were composed with the intention of forging the image of the painter as a demiurge—'Deus pictor', 'Deus artifex'—capable of breathing life into works of art. One of the best-known examples, among the many anecdotes recounted by Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia*, is that of the painter Zeuxis, who painted grapes with such wondrous accuracy that birds flew down to peck at them.

There was, however, a sequel to this story, not so well known to writers at any rate, but often a source of inspiration for painters. Zeuxis had presented his painting in a contest to determine whether he or his contemporary, Parrhasius, was the greater artist. Parrhasius, for his entry, had painted a curtain, thus mimicking the support without putting any figure on it. This, however, was so perfectly done that, when Zeuxis saw it, he asked for the curtain to be pulled aside, so as to reveal his own painting behind it. Having understood his error, Zeuxis was forced to concede defeat, saying that the 'painter' in him had been deceived by the work of Parrhasius, whereas he had only managed to fool the birds.

Thus began in Greece a conception of painting, which would dominate the history of Western art and mould decisively its relationship with literature for nearly two thousand years. This implied a separation on grounds of principle between the two art forms—a separation so fundamental and so complex that misunderstandings were inevitably going to follow. Indeed, both levels of the image were at stake in the ensuing disagreements. Those interested in literature opted for the figures and the representation of objects, the ideal model of which was given to them by *trompe-l'œil*, the direct product of the imaginary world of the alphabetical civilization. In the eyes of the painters, such artifacts were merely a display of technical prowess or parodic bravado. What, for them, was important in their art was the means of handling the material surface of images and the intervals between them, in an assembly of lines, forms and colors. These preoccupations meant little to a public, comfortable in and formed by the world of writing, but for whom, paradoxically, by virtue of the dominance of writing, speech and discourse were more important than anything else.

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