

THE REVIVAL OF SYMBOLISM by Paul Laffoley

It is now over 100 years since the formative ideas of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the French Symbolists emerged. During that time most critics considered them academic and they were overshadowed by their contemporaries like the Impressionists. Even the Surrealists whose imagery often seems the most reactionary of all the Moderns refused to accept Odilon Redon as a precursor of themselves. Now, however, there seems to be occurring a re-evaluation of the so-called Romantic and Academic traditions with emphasis on these artists. There have been shows, lectures, books, etc. The recent show at the Fogg is an example. (JAN 16 - FEB 25, 1973).

In relation to the revival or acceptance again, in art, of symbolism, I would like to speculate briefly on the reasons or conditions for it as I have always felt an intuitive rapport with this period in art. Also, I would like to stimulate some feedback or discussion on the subject.

First, present acceptance can be seen, I think, in relation to a kind of historical parallelism with then, and our time. The 1840's and the 1860's, when the Pre-Raphaelites were forming, represented a time when historical analysis was being conducted on a world-wide basis, due especially to the enormous impact of the Industrial Revolution. Today many forces demand the same historical response from us. Enumerating even a few of the problems and responses of the mid-nineteenth century produces a sense of the familiar that goes beyond remembered facts from a text.

At that time Dickens and Marx presented in literary and analytical form the evils of social injustice and the growing distrust of capitalism that came with it. Abraham Lincoln dealt with the problems of civil war and concern with the civil rights of blacks. Simeon Solomon and Oscar Wilde transformed the repression homosexuals receive into a form of social weaponry against the mores of this period. While Ruskin and William Morris were theorizing about a return to the "organic society" and the concept of utopia, in America, utopian communities and social experiments were well underway. Women's rights began to surface along with great emphasis on the psychological problems between the sexes. By the end of the century sexuality became almost the total concern for minds like Freud and Munch. Today boredom seems to be our bete noire rather than sex. Also temperance movements arose, along with religious revivalism, as religion in general began to wane. These groups provided techniques of emotional release similar to what we would call psycho-drama or sensitivity training. Nostalgia for the past was rampant. By symbolism, or sympathetic magic, people felt they could participate in bygone days. Neo-Platonism manifested itself through a revival of mystical societies and the occult sciences. Madame Blavatsky and Rudolf Steiner tried to unite the popular and academic aspects of this revival in much the same way that Borges, Wittgenstein and Heidegger have done in our period.

The literary, the sentimental, the kitsch-realism of life thrived, on the one hand, on an optimistic and messianic materialism, and on the other, on despair and total distrust of science and technology. This was an era characterized by mannerism and ambiguity, where great social and psychological tensions produced both apathy and ego-mania. The hero was the ivory tower rebel who could solve the problems of the world, if he cared to, as Nietzsche had suggested. When Nietzsche was born in 1844, Wagner was 31, and it was just 4 more years to the formation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. At the formation, Rossetti was 20, Hunt 21, Stephens 20 and Millais just 19. This meant that the youthful, open and revolutionary spirit of the Brotherhood was not yet in a position to be vitiated by the eventual split between thinking and feeling that occurred nearer the end of the century and was expressed by Nietzsche in the concept of the Overman. He was the artist who served only his ego, and out of his own vision he emerges as the most powerful person in society. He creates a world mythology that controls the conceptual limits of the thinking of all.

Second, the acceptance of these artists can be considered in terms of form. The winning by Whistler of his famous case against Ruskin concerning career slander in 1878 marked the end of symbolism in art to many people. Whistler had considered Ruskin's social moralizing out of place in art, which should aspire toward the condition of music, and abstract arrangement of color and form - an art for art's sake. What Whistler had actually done was not to close off the intentions of symbolism, but by his instinctive passion for the japoniserie, he had moved closer to the camp of Manet and the Impressionists. His friendship with Rossetti was based more on curiosity than belief in symbolism. The artist who did try to find a pictorial equivalent for music, then, was the Lithuanian artist Ciurlionis who influenced Kandinsky. Also at this time the Symbolist poet Mallarme tried to relate the visual and the musical in poetry. His results were almost mathematical diagrams that seem like exercises in systems analysis. It was left to Wagner to demonstrate that a desire to mix media or create a synaesthetic does not of itself produce abstractness in art as we know it now. He showed, I think, just how symbolic music can be. Music, also, could refer to subjects beyond itself without being programmatic in a petty way. In the painting of Gustave Moreau we see the same type of powerful and mystical statement that occurs in Wagner's music.

Thus, abstractness in painting is what the Impressionists had declared it to be, the pictorial results of an object created within a universe that is potentially knowable in its entirety by physical perception. In the twentieth century the Constructivists called their works extensions of the creation of Nature, but they did not completely abandon symbolist intentions. The Impressionist painting dealt with the expression of radiant energy - the Sun - gravity - the landscape of the Earth - and life forms. The snap-shot like composition and purposefully "ignoble" subject matter demonstrated, according to the impressionists, the truth that was to be found in Nature. They felt they were expressing the continuous scientific investigation of the universe that had begun in the Renaissance. The Conceptualists of the present often speak of inheriting the aims of the Impressionists as they attempt to move art off the canvas and into the perceptible universe. This is a universe whose aspects, even man's mind, are continuous and theoretically accessible to perception.

It was against such ideas as this that Ruskin set down the guidelines for the Pre-Raphaelites and by implication for the French Symbolists, when he said: "Having learned to represent actual appearances faithfully, if you have any human faculty of your own, visionary appearances will take place to you which will be nobler and more true than any actual or material appearances; and the realization of this is the function of every fine art which is founded absolutely, therefore, in truth and consists absolutely in imagination." This was similar to what Blake had implied when he stated that the rendering of visions must be done in sharp clear forms and in vivid colors so as to make the viewer realize and face directly their existence. Blake believed as a visionary he was in contact with another universe or higher plane of existence. His art was that of a medium directed by an otherworldly guide. For the Pre-Raphaelites also, the visionary aspect Ruskin referred to meant the existence of an alternative universe to the universe of physical perception. This universe was to be entered only by way of the imagination, and its existence and contents was expressed by symbols whose ambiance and resonance of meaning go beyond simple association.

The Pre-Raphaelites meant no theory of parallel universes like one might find in science-fiction today. Neither did they mean that portion of the perceptible universe that is claimed by the occult sciences, or what we have come to term as the area of paranormal phenomena. Even at that time scientists and occult thinkers realized that a lot of what had been considered operations of the supernatural would ultimately be analyzed as part of the physical universe of perception. What really was meant was the metaphysical universe of the Platonic Forms. A universe though infinite and absolute is infused within the finite physical universe. This was the Macrocosm. Within the imagination of man was the structural equivalent of the Macrocosm which was the Microcosm. This all was stated in Tantric texts, the Vedanta, and the 7 Kaballahs. Paradoxically the attainment of the Microcosm by illumination brought with it the revelation that the Microcosm and the Macrocosm were one and that the physical universe was the illusion of change in both, related to both in a non-dualistic manner. Neo-Platonism preached dualism in so far as the fall of Being into Becoming, or physical change, was considered evil and it wished to express this condition.

In the theurgic practices of Tantra and Neo-Platonism the identification between Reality and illusion is made by the practitioner, visually, through the use of the mandala or mystic diagram. In terms of imagery these mandalas often have extreme movement in their detail combined with an obsessive repetition of highly stylized forms. The whole picture plane has a flatness about it, but the lack of any hierarchical intensities produces an overall unification of the movement and the pictorial space. At the same time there is a graphic center structured by concentric circles and squares which brings the whole to rest. In Blake's "The Last Judgement" we see the head of Christ which acts as point, or bindu, that calms the agitation of the souls.

The interpretation of some modern artists, like Jackson Pollock, often follows these ideas. This is especially true with those critics who mention Pollock's 2 years of Jungian analysis and the fact that some of his early work involved mandalic sandpaintings. In Tantra the rituals of the body are as important as the inner visualization techniques. Pollock performed both.

Rosetti attempted to achieve the mandalic structure by use of medieval frieze-like compositions and carefully constructed picture frames which he designed. These frames cause your eye to scan the entire picture surface before coming to rest at some detail near the center, such as lips. His stylized and kitsch images of women relate the idea of woman with particular women in much the same way that Warhol was to do by mechanical means in the early 1960's. Rosetti's methods were similar in intent to the present anti-painterly methods of achieving forms which are non-egoistic in intent.

The mandalic structure, whether it occurred in the art of Tantra or the Middle Ages was not exclusively interpreted as energy patterns by the Symbolists or Pre-Raphaelites, as we might do. There is also a strong figurative aspect to most mandalas which is used for magical identification with deities or higher beings. Thus the theme of the androgyne which appears extensively in the paintings of these artists is indicative of a desire to identify with an entity of absolute wholeness. To claim that the theme of the androgyne points totally to the social elevation of the homosexual or women, is I think, incorrect. In the tradition of symbolology the images of the homosexual and the female virgin have always had the meaning of wholeness. It is, therefore, the Neo-Platonic intentions of these artists that we now respond to in terms of form.

The third area of acceptance might be the moral in Ruskin's sense. Ruskin made reference to the visionary impulse for two reasons. First, he wanted art to have a historically continuous social responsibility which he expressed at the time by the absolute concept of the "organic society" or utopia. Second he wanted artists to have the art for art's sake freedom which does not bind them to any type of orthodoxy, whether it is religious, political or scientific. In other words he wanted freedom for the artist to pursue truth in his own way without repression, but not without moral responsibility. This was the point of misunderstanding for Whistler, and it is still a dilemma today.

The Pre-Raphaelites and the Symbolists felt by adopting the eternal principles of the visionary universe, that they had solved the dilemma. By this means they could oppose or produce an alternative to the most powerful orthodoxy one faces in culture. This is the existence of a single prevailing sensibility or definition of reality of a particular era. The structure of any sensibility except the visionary, regardless of its content, is a set of non-reversible events in the flow of time, which are linked together to form an extension in history by an interlocking formology which appears to have a life and teleology of its own. Unless at least two time sensibilities exist at any one time orthodoxy and repression will result, or as the Pre-Raphaelites thought, one time sensibility and the visionary sensibility will also prevent repression.

Socrates felt he was opposing the relativism of his time by pursuing truth as the absolute form of the Good in a mystical and non-egoistic manner. By seeking the absolute he considered that he was also providing the greatest social aim, insuring the existence of justice. His theories of art like his theory of justice are based on an aristocratic mysticism which often makes them seem somewhat antithetical to a world like ours, conditioned by the democracy inherent in science and abstract art.

Today many thinkers like Theodore Roszak are postulating a return to a world with a single conception of reality that would subsume, if possible, the visionary sensibility. This conception of reality would be in the form of a new religion that combines science with an amalgamation of Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism. The subsuming of the visionary sensibility may not be possible if history means anything. Socrates was accused of corrupting the young, the Alchemists were considered heretics to the Christian Church, and Tantric practices and theories were never fully integrated into either Buddhism or Hinduism. At least let us hope with the Pre-Raphaelites that it is not possible.

DEAR KIERAN,

I FORGOT TO GIVE YOU A COPY OF THIS. I WROTE IT FOR THE MARCH 1, 1973 ISSUE OF THE BOSTON VISUAL ARTISTS UNION NEWSLETTER. AS A QUICK SURVEY OF THE SYMBOLISTS I THINK IT WORKS. I THINK THIS IS NOW I WILL START TO EXPAND MY THOUGHTS FOR THE BOOK. NOW DOES IT SOUND TO YOU? IT STARTED OUT AS REVIEW OF THE SHOW AT THE FOGG.

PAUL