THE 'COLORED WORDS' OF ART

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Every artist is familiar with the fact that materials differ in plasticity as media for the expression of that particular system of esthetic ideals with which he is concerned. The wood-carver finds his hand bound by a wood of long, loose fiber, which may make it quite impossible for him to produce a given effect in his work. Line-engraving, dry-point, etching, stippling and wash-drawing have each its special field of application in pictorial reproduction. Black-and-white serves one artistic purpose, color another. The crayon and the pen give different interpretations of the same scene. Bronze and marble have such distinctive uses and canons that their employment might almost be made the basis of a differentiation in the arts. Imposed painting cannot be substituted at will for encaustic; nor is the choice ever an arbitrary one between mosaic and fret-work, relief and fresco, in architectural decoration.

A refractory material may render freedom of expression unattainable, as a narrowing tradition limits the artist's vision of the elements of beauty or cramps his conception of the means by which an ideal may legitimately be expressed. The life of the artist is a twofold striving,—first, in its endeavor toward a richer and more harmonious system of beauty, and second, toward a more plastic and expressive system of materials. The history of art also presents this dual evolution toward a fuller and more consistent conception of the scope of art itself, and at the same time toward a more highly developed and controllable material basis.

In this process the ideal element is not invariably the historical antecedent and the material its consequent. The two processes advance by alternate strides. Art waits upon the discovery of new materials and mechanical inventions,

as well as upon the appearance of creative minds and the ideal combinations to which they give birth. The existing system of materials limits the artist's expression in all forms of esthetic reconstruction, even though it be also true that at any given time unsuspected possibilities may exist in the accessible materials, to be developed by some transcendent genius. Thus the bases of the true arch, the pinnacle, the flying-buttress and the stone pendant were all latent in those very materials which the primitive builder employed for the production of his elementary effects, without any suspicion of their plastic scope. Color, mass and line made possible the indication of form as opposed to its delineation, the suggestion of motion as well as of stability, the production of an illusion of reality through the management of schemes and keys, the suffusion of neutral spaces with color and of shadows with luminosity by the massing of adjacent pigments. From the beginning, therefore, these were possibilities of the medium which cave-man and barbaric colorist employed in producing their hard lines and crude, primary effects. Nevertheless in each field of artistic expression a logical as well as practical limit exists. The medium presents an obstacle to free expression which is at last insurmountable, and determines the possibilities of ideal representation through the materials in question.

But the difference which exists among the general media of esthetic expression is not simply a question of degree of plasticity, nor even one of kind,—if by kind be meant the variety of physical materials upon which the several arts depend. Beneath these again lies a fundamental distinction, involving the nature of the ideal purposes by which the human mind is guided in its several activities, and the systems of materials, in the most general sense of the term, which it has created for the realization of these specific ideals.

It is a distinction of the second type which most commonly underlies our classification of the arts. On the basis of differences in the quality of the materials which constitute their vehicles the system of fine arts is divisible into three groups, the plastic, the literary, and the musical. The plastic arts

include all those which depend for their expression upon material substances, to be moulded into specific forms in accordance with ideal principles of selection. Their embodiments are spatial rearrangements presented to one or several senses, but chiefly to sight. This group of arts has three main subdivisions,—architecture, sculpture and painting, of which the first two belong together and the last stands by itself, not only in that the latter appeals to sight alone while the former appeal to both sight and touch, but also in that the former depend upon the same materials and constitute logically but a single art.

The literary arts include all those which depend for their expression upon verbal concepts. They are embodied in syntheses of abstract elements, the products of a logical analysis of experience, which are recombined with a view to the development of a system of ideal meanings. This group of arts includes two sub-types,—the lyric and the dramatic, which alike find their vehicle in a system of intellectual forms. The lyric is the expression of an individual and unitary attitude of the will; the drama is the expression of an interacting system of such attitudes.

The literary arts reach their highest effectiveness in poetry, but their purest form is found in prose. For this there are two reasons: the individual will-attitude is less subject to analysis than the relations of a system of connected wills, and it is therefore in greater need than the latter of reinforcement; at the same time its expression is more easily supplemented by the use of other media than the purely literary in the attainment of its characteristic effects. It thus follows that in the lyric there is less dependence upon intellectual forms than in the drama, whether the latter be cast in prose or metre. The primary vehicle, on the other hand, is supported, in the lyric more than in the drama, by what has been called the musical quality of the medium,—‘colored words,’ melody and sonorousness of the utterance; formal elements, such as rhythm, rhyme, verse form; and so on. In the prose forms of literary art there is much greater, though not complete, reliance upon the process of intellectual analysis of

experience and its representation through a system of logical concepts.

The musical arts comprise all those forms which include within their means of expression the compounding of pure, qualitatively varied sound. They present two great groups, vocal and instrumental music. Of these, the former attains the highest effectiveness in its impression upon the listener, while the latter possesses the purer form. In instrumental music the medium is homogeneous. Variations in sound, qualitative and intensive, and their combinations, simultaneous and successive, constitute the materials of the art, without admixture of other elements. In vocal music this whole series of factors is made use of, but there is also added the substance of the most appealing form of literary art, in the system of meanings which characterizes the song, and in the elements of rhyme, metrical form and so forth, which are carried over from poetry. The intensity of the effect is thus increased, while the medium ceases to be pure.

Of these three groups of arts the musical alone approaches the possession of a pure artistic medium. In the plastic and literary forms alike the materials upon which expression rests have had an origin foreign to the purposes of art and therefore imperfectly adapted to its ends. The materials upon which the plastic arts depend represent the system of utility, while those upon which the literary arts rest represent the system of knowledge. Man works out his practical purposes through a transformation of the material substances of the world. He has invented combinations serviceable to himself and reshaped the world's materials in such a way as to embody these ideal forms. The product of this activity is represented both in the system of manufactured objects in the mechanical arts, and in the whole series of modifications in the earth's surface which man has introduced in the course of his history.

This series of products expresses human aspirations and values in an indirect way only. They do not represent emotion and appreciation in their immediacy, but the relations among material things which man uses. Each finds its

meaning in some feature of use or control, of security or utilitarian advantage,—in a word, in the modification of this system of plastic materials which its invention makes possible. From its very nature this system of material objects is unfitted to express with freedom the activity of creative art; for it can never be stripped completely of its original associations, and through the new forms imparted to it in the course of esthetic reconstruction its native shapes peep forth,—as the personal idiosyncrasies of a poor actor break through the mask of his characterization and confuse its lines. Plastic art is compelled to express itself through a system of fixed, inert objects primarily conceived and determined by a utilitarian motive. Except, perhaps, in the case of ideal painting, this original purpose in the service of which the materials were first developed and shaped, has not been displaced and can scarcely be said to have been subordinated to that of the plastic artist. The object is a dwelling-place, a tomb, a seat, a garment, a utensil. The artist may mould the lines and color the surfaces of these objects, but he must not destroy their essential structural features or dissipate their function in thus treating column, or architrave, or lintel. Plastic art thus appears as a corollary to the primary thesis, the force of which must not be impaired in securing its effects. In the disposition of lines, masses and specific forms we are in the habit of recognizing this limitation, and our pure esthetic judgment is modified by saying, in effect: "How beautiful a natural object or a thing of use may be made!"

The freedom of movement in plastic art is thus necessarily impeded and limited by the character of its medium. When the artist seeks to transcend this limitation and to use his materials freely in the production of a purely esthetic impression, he finds his effort fruitless; for his art loses its significance in proportion as it relinquishes hold upon the specific forms of natural objects and human inventions. The limitation cannot be overcome because it is intrinsic to the medium itself. In becoming purely decorative plastic art lapses into mere convention, and in becoming singly impressionistic it is in danger of losing all universal appeal.

In short, the materials on which this group of arts is dependent do not afford an adequate means of approach to that analysis of human emotion and valuation which is essential to perfection in an esthetic medium. It is true that in the field of art universally the process in which esthetic judgment and appreciation consist is necessarily replaced by an objective product of some specific type, which fulfils the artistic purpose only to the degree in which it is capable of becoming the starting-point and support of a like activity in the beholder. But in the plastic arts, to a much greater degree than in the literary or musical, the product of expression is inarticulate. Its effect is thus rendered uncertain both in direction and in occurrence itself; for the absence of an esthetic content specifically defined will confuse the mind of the recipient and provoke it to find refuge in the only stable and obvious features which are presented, namely the descriptive and historical aspects of the forms and objects which are introduced.

In the literary arts the vehicle consists in the general system of verbal concepts which has been devised in the process of analyzing and describing the field of experience. These concepts constitute a realm of intellectual forms which represent the world's objectivity,—that is, which have been devised for the purpose of describing phenomena. It is the very purpose of this system of concepts to abstract from the attitude of the individual self for whom the objects of experience immediately exist, and to construe them in terms of their impersonal and objective relations.

Language, in which the products of this activity are embodied, is a system of descriptive concepts the very nature of which renders it inadequate as a vehicle for artistic expression. In this it resembles the medium in which the plastic arts work. Its defect, however, does not root in inarticulateness or the lack of a means of analysis, but in the character of the guiding conceptions which underlie its activities. Language represents a process in which the world is conceived as a problem for the understanding, and a logical reconstruction of its phenomena is undertaken. Within the

esthetic consciousness this logical reconstruction has no essential place, as the system of utilitarian and natural forms has no place in the appreciation of plastic art. The synthesis of materials, in both cases alike, is determined by a principle independent of the logical or descriptive point of view. The object of esthetic appreciation, like all objects of valuation, is unapproachable by the historic method. The fullest description of a beautiful object leaves its esthetic worth still untouched.

The system of verbal concepts which language represents, devised as it is for the purpose of communication and record, finds its function in description, the ideal development of which appears in the system of sciences and their theoretical aims. These represent the reduction of the content of experience in terms of objective phenomena and impersonal law. They have their roots in the logical conceptions of classification and explanation, and are embodied in a system of general terms and causal laws. Valuation and judgments of worth find no place in the purview of science, from which every personal attitude and canon of interpretation is rigorously excluded.

To fulfil the artist's purpose this system of concepts must be turned in a new direction and put to a novel use, a process which involves a revolution in the methods according to which language is employed. The artist who expresses human emotion and appreciation in literary forms is thus, like the plastic artist, dealing with an adventitious material, and is compelled to seek the realization of his purpose by a series of secondary modifications in virtue of which the difficulties imposed by his refractive medium are either obviated or transcended.

Each element employed in literary art, it may be said, each word and intellectual form, carries the mind of the reader in the wrong direction and primitively tends to arouse a form of reaction the dominance of which means a necessary inhibition of the esthetic attitude. To accomplish his aim the literary artist must therefore give a new value to every term which he employs, and make the verbal con-

cepts stand for a system of attitudes of the will instead of a system of impersonal objects. He must shake the terms of human speech free from their specific logical contents and attach to them a series of emotional reactions.

To this end the verbal craftsman has many devices. It is the pressure of this demand which leads to the differentiation of the terminologies of prose and poetry, or, more properly, of descriptive and appreciative writing. A new significance can be more readily attached to novel terms than to familiar; since the latter tend too directly and inevitably to arouse the logical-descriptive content customarily associated with them. The analysis of those peculiarly poetic words which have prose analogues does not reveal a new descriptive content, nor should it be expected to do so. These terms are not logically differentiable, because it is not a new distinction of meaning which is aimed at in the substitution, but the suggestion of a wholly different attitude on the part of the subject to whom the utterance is addressed.

There is a system of words which, in this true sense of the term, are purely poetic, the use of which is to arouse and maintain, to clarify and direct the attitude of esthetic interpretation in the recipient. It is essential to the artist's purpose that the habitual reaction of the mind to verbal concepts shall be broken up, as the initial step in his procedure. In the attainment of this end it must therefore be acknowledged that any device, consonant with the canons of his own art, is legitimate, whatever the judgment which may be passed upon its employment by the logical apprehension. Through a misunderstanding of the aim of poetry common sense may thus condemn as affectation what is an indispensable part of the method of art.

There are many ways of approaching this problem. The use of unusual or poetic words, already mentioned, is one method of attaining this end; the employment of words in unusual senses is another, which has the same effect of loosening the term's habitual connections in the web of logical thought and rendering the mind more plastic to the esthetic suggestion which it is designed to convey. One of

the most effective of such devices is the translation of terms to new orders of sense or imagination.

These artifices stimulate the mind, and at the same time baffle its efforts to give a specific content of meaning to the utterance. Mental expectancy is vivified while its logical procedure is inhibited, the consequence of which is that it is rendered more receptive of the pure qualitative effect of the stimulus. The musical values of the elements and their synthetic forms are detached and intensified, while the words themselves take on a certain absolute and mystical value which is, in itself, a positive esthetic quantity.

This mode of treatment is directed to the larger relations of the literary artist's materials as well as to its elements. It is exemplified in the use of metaphor, whereby the predisposition of the mind is at once justified and rendered incapable of definite reaction. The simile is felt but not understood; it is apprehended as harmonious with the expectations of the mind, but its specific application cannot be clearly represented in the imagination. This double effect upon the mind, of stimulation and arrest, is more violent in the usage, common in poetry, of transferring terms from their original sense-fields to other and disparate systems of phenomena, of uniting the concepts of discontinuous fields, and of joining formally contradictory concepts in a single context.

All this must of course be limited by the constitution of the recipient's mind. The procedure is instrumental; its aim is to arouse an attitude different from that of logical conception but still positive and specific in character. If it succeed only in inhibiting the original cognitive reaction without substituting an alternative activity, or in disappointing it while the effort to interpret the expression in terms of the logical understanding persists, the artist simply fails in his endeavor. The mind of the recipient must not be arrested by the fact of apparent contradiction or ineptitude in such a way as to occupy itself with the logical relations of the figure which has been employed. The artist cannot permit an essential contradiction to be formulated in the

consciousness to which his appeal is made, but only a contradiction of such degree that the mind is stimulated and rendered at the same time plastic to the impression which he seeks to convey. Fundamental harmony with the subject's predispositions at large is the basis upon which the artist's success depends. To provoke that attitude of acceptance is, indeed, not in itself sufficient; but within the system of relations which it represents the artist's specific activity must confine itself, since to abolish this sense of harmony arouses an attitude of will which is incompatible with esthetic appreciation.

The whole system of formal values which differentiates poetry from prose has the same general significance in the mechanism of expression. The musical quality of the sentence itself, rhythm in the succession of words or syllables, rhyme and other elements of metric structure,—all these have the effect of detaching the form and quality of the utterance from its meaning, of reducing the significance of the thought from its position of preëminence, and of giving a positive, if not paramount, value to the formal and qualitative aspects of the expression. The mind, instead of passing directly to the content of meaning, is arrested by the utterance, to which a positive and substantial value is thereby given. In this case the process of logical conception is not first aroused and then baffled, as it is, for example, by a mis-used term or by looseness of construction in prose—but the direction of the mind's activity is turned away altogether from the attempt to reconstruct continuously a logically significant utterance and centered upon another and specifically esthetic object.

The repetition of the stimulus is another form which this procedure of the literary artist takes. The recurrence of qualitative resemblance in the constituent sounds of a verse, the use of alliteration, the employment of a refrain, the repetition of even a single word in continuous iteration, have all this esthetic effect. To render any common word unfamiliar, to empty it of its ordinary content of meaning, it is necessary only to repeat it in isolation; and the poet takes frequent advantage of this fact in the production of his artistic effects.

The terms of human speech, as they ordinarily appear in context, have a value which is solely transitive; to dwell upon the word is to transform its meaning, if not to deprive it of all content. In the employment of language by the literary artist, in such cases as have been cited, there is substituted for this function of the word in originating a system of significant, or logical, associates a value which resides in the fact that this system of associates is cut off, and the word itself becomes the material center of the mind's attitude. It takes on a resident and absolute value, or at least one which is symbolical and latent. It is felt as the potential center of a system of meanings, no one of which is developed or defined. To create this nimbus of luminous but undefined suggestion is a large part of the poet's aim in his use of words.

All this machinery—which is much more extensive than has here been indicated—has been created by the literary artist in his purely preliminary function of overcoming the habitual reactions of the mind to the system of materials which he employs, since, as has been stated, the occurrence of this original reaction of logical apprehension inhibits the attitude which the poet seeks to call forth. Throughout his field the literary artist is confronted by this initial difficulty, which is due to the fact that he expresses himself through a system of verbal concepts primarily designed to serve a radically different purpose from that which he has in view.

Within the field of music the same composite material appears wherever the pure sound qualities are mediated, as in song, by a system of verbal forms which at the same time possess meaning. In singing, however, this duality is less important than in poetry, and is in large part negligible; since the modifications of utterance which musical notation introduces practically destroy the meaning which the poem is intended to convey. Even when sung in one's own language one does not seek primarily to follow the words of a song, but attends instead to the musical variations of expression; and one is scarcely incommoded by the fact that songs are often sung in a foreign tongue and cannot, in the logical sense of the term, be understood at all.

The musical arts, however, attain to a pure, or homogeneous, medium only in the case of instrumental compositions, from which the whole verbal basis has finally been eliminated, so that no logical meaning, in the strict sense, attaches to the succession of symbols employed. The vehicle, in instrumental music, is the compounding of pure sound itself, uncomplicated by conceptual content and unconditioned by a material objective basis. Art here makes its nearest approach to the achievement of a pure esthetic medium in attaining its purpose by the direct expression of human emotion freed from the presence of any other factor.