DIALECTIC OF THE SIGN AND THE SYMBOL IN ARCHITECTURE – RETURN TO THE PAST?

Nowadays we face a kind of crisis of symbol. The language of symbols seems to be dying out. In draft was tried to appear rule of symbolism of sacred arts and her possibilities as special kind of theology of artistic word in providing her with everlasting living in architecture.

Keywords: architecture, symbol, sign, dialectic, temple, theology, art

What makes some forms of architecture stay in history for a longer time, durably related to culture, whereas others just pass by, get exhausted and sink into oblivion? What makes forms grow deeply into certain regions of the world or remain mere signs of history in other places?

Is it a matter of fashion, style and the temporally limited strength of the reception of esthetical values? Or rather the increasing ability to perceive the values and orders of a category higher than esthetical? What do our long-lasting attachment to some forms and indifference to others consist in?

Tradition and Innovation

Memory determines the separateness of man in the world of nature to a large extent. Its significance in the progress of civilization is fundamental. Culture constantly refers to the created and developed world of ideas and images. It is the memory of this world: conscious and preserved in the form of various works of art. The category of tradition is bound with memory. Culture, always related to what is remembered from the past, created tradition – a collection of ideas, symbols, convictions, experiences and images forming the legible big picture in every cross-section of culture and each annual ring of history. However, tradition – historical by nature, created by collecting diachronic achievements in people’s consciousness – is understood beyond time. It was a collection of the values of this history. These days, however, the significance of tradition is diverse in various cultures depending on their attitude to two concepts of the ultimate realization of man’s existential objectives.

One concept assumes that man attained his perfection in the past and he grows away from it through evolution. His perfect place was Paradise. It can be regained by respecting tradition which is a clarification of culture, its core, whereas its main domain is art. Not without a reason art is treated as an expression of a longing for Paradise, the irresistible willingness to return to it.

The other concept treats the primal state of man as fallen, barbarian, a state which can be abandoned owing to the progress of civilization. Thanks to scientific and technical innovations, it will lead man to perfection. It is ruled by the idea of continuous
progress derived from the potentially unlimited possibilities of his mind.

Our civilization in Europe is founded on the latter type. It produces a deeply rooted conviction about the necessity of constant innovation and changeability which condition progress. Art itself is understood in this way. New and different things are highly valued in creative activity, while constant innovation has paradoxically become tradition.

This evident stratification of culture into archaic and modern, traditional and computerized, is directly translated into the manner of depicting the meaning of human life in the Universe. The idea of progress and the eternal initiation of the direct thought constantly accelerated by the question What’s next? is the domain of discursive, empirical and scientific disciplines, while the idea of perpetual return is the field of idealistic, especially artistic disciplines. The former makes a monologic form of cognition. The intellect examines an object and comments on it. The latter, requiring interpretation, is a form of dialogic cognition. The former may be represented by the category of a sign; the latter – by the category of a symbol.

Let us introduce some important terminological specifications here.

A sign is restrained to an indication of a fact – it directly renders reality, informs, advises, teaches. It includes the elementary contents free from the presence of something different from it. It is characteristic of information, mathematical and chemical signs and patterns. There are not any relations of presence between the designator and the designated.

A symbol expresses and embodies a higher, elusive reality. In the Greek language, [symbolon] assumed the combination of two halves: a symbol and what is symbolized. Thus, it includes the presence of what it symbolizes, expresses and communicates. It involves the contemplative abilities of the mind and imagination for interpreting the meaning of the symbolized – not directly achievable but genuine – reality.

When we evoke the existence of some forms of the architecture of traditional cultures, we often notice their motionless being over the span of hundreds of years. They seem to have special values, to be something more than forms, to be beside themselves, to touch a different, higher reality. They are symbols.

It is evident in the architecture of the places of worship.

Symbols
In his nature, man, as homo religiosus, is also homo symbolicus. He constantly tries to surpass himself, to find something bigger than him, something unknown and inconceivable. He expects salvation so he searches for something that goes beyond this life. His life is symbolical by nature.

We can easily prove that the manner of expressing things by means of symbols is a permanent feature of man. The language of symbols is the only way in which he can get to reality, elusive in a direct encounter, in his lifetime.

A symbol is a category related to the meaning of being. It exists realistically and originates from the very beginning of the world. The world was composed so that it can prove its Creator. It bears His stamp – on the whole, on his creations and on individual relations between them. The Creator can be discovered through creation. As Athanasius Alexandrinus says, Creation, like the layout and harmony of words in a book, points at the Lord and the Creator and talks loudly about him [1], while Joannis Damasceni adds, We can see images unclearly indicating strokes of Divinity in creation [2]. Its symbolical nature encompases everything because God’s seal is impressed on everything, especially on man who, as Pentateuch I says, was created in His own image and likeness.

We do not even need to justify the existence of symbols. (...) Their (symbols’) only truth is their exis-
tence [3], says M. Eliade and he is right. It is enough
that they really are, that they exist realistically, while
the basis of their existence is the fact that they form
the common language of art and religion, help them to
express themselves. They do it in an indirect manner.
Using matter, along the direct way of their expression,
they go beyond themselves and enter the world which
otherwise would be impossible. Participating in the
celestial world, in its material configuration [4], they
manifest the presence of this world.

It used to be applied indirectly in the art of all
cultures. It was particularly compensated in sacral
architecture, in a temple which is a symbol in itself
and includes other symbols. We are more closely
related to Christian temples so let us pay attention
to the essences of the forms they carry from the past
into the future. They constitute their being in history.
They make the basis for their long-lasting existence
and duration beyond time.

The Temple

A temple is a symbol because it manifests the
presence of God. According to Joannis Damasceni,
it is one enormous icon of this presence. It is a model
of the cosmos, the maximization of man’s imitative
operations carried out in the image and likeness of
God’s creation.

A temple is the House where God stays and the
Gate to Heavens (Genesis 28:17). It is Paradise and
the Kingdom of God – the Heavenly Kingdom on earth,
Heavenly Jerusalem. It is a picture of the Holy Trinity,
Christ and the Church in its pursuit of salvation. It is
a symbol of God-given man and the cosmos.

The naos of a temple is the transformed and divine
cosmos, a new earth, heaven on earth. The top is the
visible sky, while the bottom – what is on earth and
Paradise itself. It is New Jerusalem and the earthly
Church as the People of God. It is Noah’s Ark as
a ship going east, a tent, a mountain. The sanctuary
is the second heaven, heaven’s heavens, Paradise
lost, the Kingdom of God. It is the Divine nature of
Christ, the Church triumphant, the human soul. The
apse is the Mother of Jesus, The Indestructible Wall,
The Invincible Wall, a grotto. The pulpit is Prayer,
a stone from the grave, a mountain, a boat and the
Throne of God. The narthex is a world non-renewed,
earth immersed in sin, Hades.

The walls are the People of God. The poles are
saint prophets, the apostles, martyrs, ascetics and
stylites. The arch is the rainbow, the Holy Spirit,
Christ. The stairs are the holy mountain, the cosmic
mountain, Jacob’s Ladder, the cross. The ciborium
is the second heaven. The synthronon is the throne
of God. The dome is the vault of heavens, heaven’s
heavens, the Head of the Church and the Universe,
Christ Pantocrator … etc.[5].

Once everything in a temple was a symbol. But
– we might ask – cannot we have temples without
these symbols?

The history of the life of the Church and its art
proves that a symbol was a necessary category.
It appeared, developed and enriched again and again.
Sometimes it became impoverished or sank into
oblivion. It lived latent and then returned. Its changes
were caused by extraordinary circumstances. In the
end, it was expected to attain what it symbolized.
Its significance was not restrained to displaying or
replacing the symbolized reality. It came true when
this reality transformed and consecrated everything
within its range. M. Eliade wisely said, Symbolism is
an extension of hierophany (…) the process of hiero-
phanization still persists owing to symbols. [6] The
principal function of a symbol is its result. It was not
an equivalent, a replacement or a representative of
this reality. It was a prolonged activity, still renewed,
consecrating.

The forms of the architecture of a temple were
always the carriers of defined theological and cosmo-
logical contents. They did not live out of habit. Their evolution in history did not proceed in a static manner as usual presence. It was dynamic, it followed the line of the constant complementation of their meaning.

Résumé
Man was given a life with symbols. In the domain of the sacred, his life is realized mainly by holy symbols.

We know from the history of art that all the escapes from symbols always came to a bad end. They made them last for a short time and sink into oblivion. Today, their division or stratification to the levels of pure notions modelled after information signs deprives them of what is actually the most important principle of their existence – a mystery. J. Baldock hits the nail on the head, If we tried to create a perceptible reality of notions, we would inevitably change symbols into signs [7].

It seems that today’s world of art is more frequently separated from transcendence. Accentuating the form as the designating aspect of a symbol, perceptual realism and sensualism eliminate its essence and meaning as its designated side. It changes a symbol into a sign. Cognitive imagination stops working. Since naturalism is too active, art ceases to express another world. It cannot be an expression of transcendence anymore.

The victory of semiology in art, analytical rationalism and the reign of information communication are all the effects of the triumph of a sign over a symbol. Contemporary art, being through with the old canons, searches for a liberal life. Does it not fall into the constraints of its own powerlessness? Does it not stop being a carrier of mysteries because of its increasingly subjective character?

In today’s world of art, we are dealing with a certain crisis of symbols, with a certain aversion to them. The pressure of the pragmatism of a sign brutally annuls imagination. A symbol is lost and finally eliminated. The beauty of estheticism holds an advantage over the realism of being and its transformation. The mystery of a message is superseded by esthetical narration – the expression of a form without any contents (P. Evdokimov).

The art of architecture, especially its sacral variety, ought to remain symbolic if it wants to be permanent and eternal. Its entire value consists in participating in the life of The Other. So, if it is expected to be the authentic source of man’s metaphysical experience, not a mere speculation of his mind or a naturalistic representation of things, if it is supposed to be vital and everlasting, it should find a way of regaining consonance with the old symbols. For, as Gregorius Nyssenus said, mute art can talk. [8] Since time immemorial, it has been doing it through symbols.

ENDNOTES

[8] G. Nyssenus, Patrologia Graeca, XL VI, 737 D.