Preamble

Symbol, Form, and Duration

Cassirer's partial definition of art as symbolic language has dominated art studies in our century. A new history of culture anchored upon the work of art as a symbolic expression thus came into being. By these means art has been made to connect with the rest of history.

But the price has been high, for while studies of meaning received all our attention, another definition of art, as a system of formal relations, thereby suffered neglect. This other definition matters more than meaning. In the same sense speech matters more than writing, because speech precedes writing, and because writing is but a special case of speech.

The other definition of art as form remains unfashionable, although every thinking person will accept it as a truism that no meaning can be conveyed without form. Every meaning requires a support, or a vehicle, or a holder. These are the bearers of meaning, and without them no meaning would cross from me to you, or from you to me, or indeed from any part of nature to any other part.

The forms of communication are easily separable from any meaningful transmission. In linguistics the forms are speech sounds (phonemes) and grammatical units (morphemes). In music they are notes and intervals; in architecture and sculpture they are solids and voids; in painting they are tones and areas.

The structural forms can be sensed independently of meaning. We know from linguistics in particular that the structural ele-
ments undergo more or less regular evolutions in time without relation to meaning, as when certain phonetic shifts in the history of cognate languages can be explained only by a hypothesis of regular change. Thus phoneme $a$, occurring in an early stage of a language, becomes phoneme $b$ at a later stage, independently of meaning, and only under the rules governing the phonetic structure of the language. The regularity of these changes is such that the phonemic changes can even be used to measure durations between recorded but undated examples of speech.

Similar regularities probably govern the formal infrastructure of every art. Whenever symbolic clusters appear, however, we see interferences that may disrupt the regular evolution of the formal system. An interference from visual images is present in almost all art. Even architecture, which is commonly thought to lack figural intention, is guided from one utterance to the next by the images of the admired buildings of the past, both far and near in time.

The purpose of these pages is to draw attention to some of the morphological problems of duration in series and sequence. These problems arise independently of meaning and image. They are problems that have gone unworked for more than forty years, since the time when students turned away from "mere formalism" to the historical reconstruction of symbolic complexes.

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G. K.

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