

ON SURRENDER AND UNIVERSALITY

T.S. Eliot, Ortega and Sota. Moreover, Gombrich and Melnikov

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All creative work, including architecture, requires a degree of self-sacrifice, of depersonalization, if one is to achieve greater universality. So we are told by our protagonists: a poet, a philosopher and an architect.

And well might you ask: what is the connection between a poet, a philosopher and an architect? What has T.S. Eliot to do with Ortega and Gasset, and with Alejandro de la Sota?

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) was an American by birth who became a British citizen and writes poetry like the angels. Ortega (1883-1955) is a clear and transparent Heideggerian. And Sota (1913-1996) is a laconic, Bachian Spanish architect. The three could well have known one another because they are contemporaries. Had this happened, they would have been surprised to learn how much the poet, the philosopher and the architect had in common. If we were to ascribe a single adjective to each of them, one could call T.S. Eliot transparent, Ortega clear and Sota laconic.

And all three coincide in their respective genres - poetry, philosophy and architecture - in the demand for a certain sobriety of expression, a certain surrender of the individual, as a prerequisite for universality.

T.S. ELIOT

In his essays *What is a Classic?* and *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, T.S. Eliot stoutly defends the need for the extinction of personality in his work in the interest of greater universality. The first wonderful text is a speech he delivered in 1944 as the first President of the Virgil Society of London. The second text dates from 1919, and in it we find many of the arguments that had previously appeared in the former.

“When an author appears, in his love of the elaborate structure, to have lost the ability to say anything simply; when his addiction to pattern becomes such that he says things elaborately which should properly be said simply, and thus limits his range of expression, the process of complexity ceases to be quite healthy, and the writer is losing touch with the spoken language.”

Try exchanging the words author and writer with the word architect.

“There comes a time when a new simplicity, even a relative crudity, may be the only alternative.

“Now, to some extent, the sacrifice of some potentialities in order to realize others is a condition of artistic creation, as it is a condition of life in general.

“In short, without the constant application of the classical measure, we tend to become provincial.”

T.S. Eliot uses the term provincial. I don't know if in English the term provincial, has the same pejorative connotations as the word provinciano in Spanish. But the poet's idea in his search for the universal is very clear.

“A distortion of values, which confounds the contingent with the essential, the ephemeral with the permanent.

“But my concern here is only with the corrective to provincialism in literature.

“The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.

“There remains to define this process of depersonalization and its relation to the sense of tradition. It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science.”

Lying next to it on my table is a little gem: an original edition in English of *What is a classic?* edited by Faber & Faber in London in MCML, 1950. The quotations have been extracted from this edition.

ORTEGA

Ortega in his essay *En torno al Coloquio de Darmstadt de 1951*, said:

“In effect, style, has a very peculiar role in architecture, which it doesn’t have in other arts, even in the purer arts. Paradoxical though it may seem, that is how it is. In other arts style is merely a question of the artist: he decides —with all his being and with a level of decision-making that runs deeper than his will and consequently acquires an aspect of necessity rather than free will—for himself and unto himself. His style does not and cannot depend on anyone else but himself. But the same is not true of architecture. If an architect produces a project with an admirable personal style, he is not, strictly speaking, a good architect.”

In 1951 an architectural congress was held in Darmstadt which was attended by Heidegger and Ortega. And surprisingly Ortega dares to directly criticize that style of personal architecture, provincial in Eliot’s terms, with such clarity. It reminds me of the work of an extraordinary architect like Gaudí, and how his excessive personality takes from the universality that we find in maestros like Mies Van der Rohe or Le Corbusier.

And Ortega goes on to say:

“The architect finds himself in a relationship with his art, very different from the bond formed between other artists and their respective works. The reason for this is obvious: architecture is not, cannot be, must not be an exclusively individual art. It is a collective art. The genuine architect is an entire people, which provides the means of construction, its purpose and its unity. Imagine a city built by amazing, but dedicated architects, each out for himself, and his own individual style. Each one of these buildings could be magnificent and yet the overall effect would be bizarre and intolerable. In such a scenario, far too much emphasis would be given to an aspect of all art which has not been sufficiently remedied; its capricious element. Its capriciousness would manifest itself naked, cynical, indecent, intolerable. We would not be able to see the building as part of the sovereign objectivity of a great mineral body, but displaying on the contrary the impertinent profile of someone who is doing whatever he feels like.”

It would seem that Ortega's words could have been uttered today regarding much of the arbitrary, capricious architecture that we see being built.

SOTA

"One tires of seeing beauty and the grace of things (perhaps they are the same) being pursued with added embellishments, knowing the secret is not there. My unforgettable friend J. A. Coderch used to say that ultimate beauty is like a beautiful bald head (Nefertiti, for example), from which one had pulled out each and every hair, lock by lock, with the pain of ripping them out, one by one. Painfully we must tear from our works the hairs which impede us from achieving their simple, simple end."

These expressive words from the Spanish architect Alejandro de la Sota (Pontevedra 1913) close the book on his work (Pronaos Ed. Madrid 1990) and define so well the views on architecture and life itself of this true maestro, who began each day playing a Bach sonata.

Sota's architecture has that extreme elegance of the precise gesture, of the exact phrase, that so accurately touches silence. The silence of his work and his personality is gifted with the difficult capacity to fascinate. So close to poetry, to poetic breath, to hushed music.

Sota's architecture is especially encapsulated in the Gymnasium of the Maravillas School in Madrid. This superb building is impressive in its extraordinarily terse, pithy, absolute simplicity. So much so that for non-architects it goes unnoticed and may be hard for the layman to understand the beauty contained therein. For the same reasons that it is difficult for them to understand Mark Rothko's painting. This simplicity of the most logical architecture led Sota to say: "I believe that not making Architecture is a way of making it. And when asked about the Gymnasium of the Maravillas School he simply replied: it solved a problem."

A little more and we could hear Sota saying that "architecture is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion", which is what T.S. Eliot wrote about poetry.

How could we fail to recognize an identical universal breath in our three creators? As the years go by, I must acknowledge the great intellectual enjoyment produced by the interaction of these characters and these issues in one's memory. How great and profitable is the passage of time!

NOTA BENE

And, just when I thought this text had concluded, Gombrich appears. Well, it's not as if E.H.Gombrich, whose wonderful text *The Preference for the Primitive* I know for such a long time and is on my desk, has just appeared out of the blue. Simply that I periodically reread a selection of very special texts that I keep together on a shelf of favorites. I have spoken many times of the enormous intellectual enjoyment of returning over the years to one's sources.

The book opens with a quotation from Cicero that says everything:

“However, though they captivate us at first sight, (they) do not afford any lasting pleasure; whereas we are strongly attracted by rough and faded colouring in the paintings of antiquity”.

Cicero, De Oratore III.xxv.98.

And Gombrich says: “The more the artist knows how to flatter the senses, the more he will mobilize defences against this flattery” (p 27).

In the end, this preference for the primitive is a clear expression of the need for personal sacrifice in order to attain universality.

Or, as my old friend Melnikov said:

“Having become my own boss, I entreated Architecture to throw off her gown of marble, remove her make-up and reveal herself as she really is: like a goddess, naked, graceful and young. And to renounce being agreeable and compliant, as befits true Beauty.”