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KUKS—THE ETHIC AND THE AESTHETIC

“The ethical does not destroy the aesthetic,
but only clads it in different form”

SÖREN KIERKEGAARD

For centuries back it has been known that there is a link between the passage of time and the improvement of man's mind. At the dawn of Modern Times in particular, there was a popular saying that truth was the daughter of time (*veritas temporis filia*). Rarely, however, has space been linked with the improvement of man, although change of place, that is, travelling, was commonly held to have an improving effect, while the school (i.e. the place where man was improved) was a synonym for the source of the knowledge that was to last us for our whole lives. Comenius was the first to formulate clearly an idea which today is at the very core of the idea of incessant learning: that man learns throughout his whole life (*tota vita schola est*). Following this concept, the term “school” began to be associated not just with a specific place, but also with the learning process—a process that goes on for much longer than the mere time spent in attending school, a process in which every instrument that can affect a man's way of thinking is of educational importance; in our own day “teaching at a distance” (by means of radio, television, correspondence courses, etc.) is especially influential. No wonder, then, that attempts were made to adapt the Church—the other institution, that, in addition to the school, was traditionally concerned with education—to this new aim. But this was by no means easy, for during the Counter-Reformation the Roman Catholic Church became more and more narrow in its orientation. Yet it was not only in the ecclesiastical schools that the new trends en-

countered opposition. The universities, too, floundered deeper and deeper in conservatism, although the "Great Century" saw the birth of many academies, many new institutions that were connected not only with the discovery of new truths, but also with the dissemination of these truths. In this period of change, nearly every opportunity was seized to saturate man's life with didactic elements at every possible moment.

At the weekends the inhabitants of Prague can view the splendid fruits of one such endeavour. This is Kuks, a palace situated 110 kilometers east of the capital. It gives us much to think about. This fascinating set of buildings owes its existence to an idea which was translated into tangible form by Count Francis Anton Šporck (Sporck), one of the nobles associated with Bohemia, who came to that country after the Battle of White Mountain (Bila Hora) in 1620. Stemming from a family of farmers in Westphalia, Sporck, son of an imperial general who had been nobilitated and given extensive lands, betrayed the nouveau riche's typical tendency to a love of grandeur. Nevertheless, while drawing a huge income from the labours of the peasants on his lands, he not only tried to match the level of the old, traditional gentry native to those parts, but likewise to put into effect some principles which are of great interest to us today. In three successive stages at the turn of the 17th century, he had built not only a residence for himself (no longer in existence), but also a church, public baths, and a hospice for the old and infirm on his estates. When he had already built up both banks of the Elbe, he turned his attention to the nearby lands of Nový Las, just beside a place called Zirce where the Jesuits, his chief antagonists, had a monastery. It was there that he built the Kuks complex. Although the hand of time has destroyed or damaged many of its buildings and sculptures, yet sufficient has remained to give us some idea of the inventiveness of Sporck, who, having completed his architectural plans by 1712, put in hand the work of embellishing the complex with many carvings and sculptures.

He engaged many people for this task, but the one that interests us most here was Mathias Bernard Braun (1684-1738), from the Tyrol, one of the most outstanding sculptors working in Bohemia at that time. It should be said right away, however, that as is generally the case, the aristocratic patron bent the will of his artists to his own ideas. Happily, owing to Sporck's wide education at Prague University, and thanks to his travels in Europe, which broadened his mind, his ideas were in harmony with those of his artists, and were in line with the best artistic trends of the day.

Let us start with the hospice, which (as was the general rule in

those days) was used as a shelter for the old and infirm. The idea itself was an old one. The inspiration that led Sporck to revive it may have come from many different sources: for he had seen the Hôtel des Invalides in Paris, he had visited a similar institution in Prague, and he had also read about the attitude of the faithful in Port-Royal towards the sick and the poor, whom they regarded as the anointed of God (after all, *Res sacra miser* was a motto going as far back as mediaeval times). The hospice building at Kuks is flanked by a number of statues, and in the hospice grounds there is a great statue representing a "Christian Knight" (*Miles christianus*). This is the very same figure that (as the personification of an idea) was the inspiration of many thinkers, an idea whose most famous advocate was Erasmus of Rotterdam: his "*philosophia Christi*" aimed at propagating a philosophy conceived as a way of life that was in line with Christian morality. Thus, according to the builder of Kuks, both philosophy and religion were tantamount to an ethical system, which thereby was a central one, regulating all interpersonal relationships.

The statues on the elevation of the hospice, in whose centre there is a church, express Sporck's ideas even more clearly. For on the one hand he instructed his artists to set up twelve figures representing the human failings, and on the other the same number of figures representing the human virtues. The rows begin with statues representing the afterlife in heaven or the afterlife in hell. There is nothing strange in it when we consider that this was a hospice, and when we remember that in both renaissance and baroque iconography the whole point of depicting death, and what happened to someone after death, as depending on the kind of life he had led, was not only to provide awesome, frightening reminder of his past, but also to change people's behaviour in this life by making them think about death.

The twenty-four figures here, whose purpose was to make the onlooker think about his deeds in this life, were meant as a sort of symbolic panorama of Man's life; they fulfilled the same function, though intensified many times over, as the various statues which, although in very much smaller numbers, stood in front of many buildings. Thus anyone looking at the front of the hospice would see on the one side the various human failings that lead inevitably to perdition, and on the other the virtues that lead a man to heaven. As a matter of fact these figures would provide food for thought not only for the hospice inmates, who no doubt would be induced to ponder on their own individual good and bad deeds, but also for every inhabitant of the distant villages—for Kuks stood on elevated ground, and could be seen from afar. Even if a person saw the figures from near at hand only

once in his lifetime, he would be able, at every subsequent moment, even when he glimpsed the building from afar, to review his own life and sum up the good and the evil he had done. Moreover, the people who thronged to the medicinal baths which the farseeing owner of Kuks had installed here were encouraged by these carvings to reflect on their own lives and the lives of their relatives. In order to encourage such reflections, and make them more profound, Sporck opened a "Philosopher's House" here. It is reported to have had a library with fifty thousand volumes. The level of books was probably high, for Sporck was in touch with the Vienna circle of Eugene of Savoia, whose librarian was in contact with Leibniz, not only a great philosopher and man of learning, but an expert bibliophile as well.

Not a trace of this library has remained. The theatre, too, has disappeared, as well as many sculptures that at one time adorned the many buildings in this popular spa. On the other hand a fair number of "Bethlehems"—stone sculptures—have survived in the nearby woods. Thus the count looked at the natural landscape around him and wondered what he could do with it; but his intentions were different from those of the people who, both now and in day gone by, look on Nature solely as a potential source of profit. For Sporck perceived both aesthetic qualities and didactic possibilities in his surroundings. The original position of the "Christian Knight" (a statute that stood facing the hateful Jesuits, who knew very well that the count was the founder of the first Masonic Lodge in Prague), was here. Not only does the woodland scenery still charms us today with its unusual beauty, but it also compells the onlooker to think about the meaning of the Biblical scenes presented there. The figures representing Hermits, Mary Magdalene, John the Baptist, and St. Hubert, in addition to the ruins of James's Well, form a panorama that is unique of its kind—a sort of biblical theatre to which one cannot remain indifferent.

This didactic idea, which at Kuks has taken an exceptionally fascinating form, may have sprung from various sources. Its most immediate inspiration may have been the growing tendency to magnify the role of the visual in education. That idea was propounded by Comenius, who argued that what we see we understand not only quicker, but better. In other words: in teaching, the association of an idea and a picture representing that same idea gives the optimum effect. In stressing the importance of method, Comenius differed fundamentally from his precursors, who had placed their hopes almost exclusively on the training of teachers. Partly because of this latter circumstance, it was not possible for the budding idea that teaching should take place through the visual (it occurred earlier, in the Utopians, such as Campanella, and

in Andreae, who wrote that "learning comes in more easily through the eyes than through the ears") to grow into a systematic programme for the reconstruction of the whole teaching system. So from this point of view Kuks may be regarded as one example (perfected by philosophy) of the many churches and palaces of those times, whose architectural embellishments (such as carvings, statuary, and "Ways of the Cross") were aimed at shaping the minds and morality of the spectators. It is important to remember, however, that the "open-air gallery" at Kuks was attached to buildings that for the most part were secular, and in this it was different from the artistic additions to sacred buildings.

Sporck may have derived inspiration, too, from the deeper layers of history. As a man of wide education and reading, he may have been acquainted with the "Tabula" by the Greek philosopher Cebes, who described man's life as a ceaseless wandering between good and evil. In Cracow, in the Royal Castle on Wawel Hill, Hans Dürer (brother of the famous Albrecht), who was court painter to Sigismund I and who died in 1538, painted a frieze showing life in Manichaeian terms, that is, as entailing the necessity of an unceasing choice between the good and the evil propensities in each of us.

In giving his sculptures this form, rather than some other one, the artist, Braun, undoubtedly did not deviate from the wishes of his patron. Above all, his work was monumental. This was in line with the taste of the period, although of course owing to considerations of cost it was not always possible to carry out the artist's intentions completely. Only rarely did it happen that the Passion Plays were acted by the required number of actors, while the oratoria of Bach were, even during his lifetime, played and sung by ensembles that were only a fraction of the size he intended. Michael Angelo dreamed of turning whole mountains into gigantic sculptures, while Braun recommended to his assistants and pupils plans so numerous and so huge in scale (they can be seen in miniature in the National Gallery in Prague) that they could not possibly have been executed by one man, no matter how industrious. At the same period as Braun, Giovanni Bernini in Italy, perhaps the greatest artist of the epoch, was also creating complex pieces, and is even said to have told spectators to participate in the scenes he presented.

Each of Braun's sculptures is metaphorical. To understand them one has to have at least a basic knowledge of history—mainly biblical. This use of allegory was by no means unusual. On the contrary—it was typical of the baroque period, and Braun could take models not only from painting and sculptures, but also from literary works as well (which were becoming more and more copiously illustrated). Some of

his ideas were taken from the copperplates which Martin Engelbrecht made in Augsburg in 1710–1715. He would also certainly be familiar with a book entitled *Iconologia* which Cesare Ripa published towards the end of the 16th century, and which in the 17th century saw many editions and translations.

The allegorical nature of baroque art was closely connected with rhetoric, for its main purpose was to persuade the Viewer that some particular type of behaviour, and none other, would bring him happiness (both in this world and the next). But persuasion is only a step from teaching; to teach someone how to behave is the same as to persuade him that our arguments are right, and that his reasoning (and hence behaviour) are wrong.

That is what induced Sporck to set up the allegorical statues at Kuks. At this juncture we must come back once more to Comenius, in order to be able to understand, even fractionally, the intellectual climate in which Sporck lived. In regarding the world as a great stage on which every generation and every individual acted out his own specific role, Comenius accepted a vision of the world which often led him to use in the titles of his works such terms as "theatrum," "amphitheatrum," and "spectaculum." In the world so conceived, the primary task of every person was to keep on improving himself. This could be attained by people teaching each other; thereby moral and mental progress were assured. Ethics, then, were pre-eminent, whereas knowledge was merely an instrument that made perfect morality possible—the key that would open the gates to the perfecting of man. Thus, as Kierkegaard was to remark later, what was ethical was what "made man what he was," and he added: "this does not change man into someone else, but fulfils his own being and makes him into what he can become and should become."

The efforts that were made to attain this aim led to the application of a wide variety of educational methods, that is, the didactic aim could be achieved by whole range of means. This is clearly stated by Comenius in *Orbis pictus*, a book which, when it first appeared in 1658, unleashed a revolution in education, and saw 248 editions in 18 languages. In this same book one may find, too, an assertion of the decisive role of the visual methods in the teaching process: *reductio intelligibilis ad sensuale*. It was by no means easy to fulfil the postulate of transforming the language of ideas into the language of signs. It called for the use of all possible means of expression. Hence those who favoured this idea, no matter whether they were inspired at first or at a second hand (that is, whether they had studied Comenius himself, or only heard of his ideas), endeavoured to attain one and the same ultimate goal by way

of diverse means of expression, Kuks, therefore, has not only statuary, but also a library, an opera house, and a theatre. It may be added that these were accessible not only to men, but to women and children as well.

Sporck was given into the care of the Jesuits when he was eight years old. He chose as his motto "Truth and Justice." His endeavours to see this motto applied in everyday life led him into conflict with the Jesuits, whom he accused of opportunism; in 1725, for instance, he wrote that Pascal in his *Provincial Letters* had rightly accused them of "*la morale accomodante*." The desire to see all denominations united in a single Christendom was one which inspired his whole life, and aroused the interest of many religious congregations that existed in Bohemia and Moravia at that period, and that adhered both in theory and in practice to the principles formulated by Comenius, who was well known there (his native country). In line with these principles, every thought and every deed were immediately subjected to rigorous assessment from the point of view of the chief aim in life—that was the reason for the moral pathos evident in these "heretics" and their supporters at every step.

How should one read the book of human life? Or rather, how should one find the right way in this "labyrinth of the world?" This is not an easy problem for anyone who treats life as incessant action. Such was the opinion of the author of the *Great Didactica*, for Comenius wrote there that "men were created not to be spectators, but to act," and indeed he regarded the transition from theory to practice as the core of his method. Moreover, in *Triertium Catholicum* he wrote that one should rate highest of all the kind of man he described as *bonus pragmaticus*, that is, the kind of man who knows how to do useful things (*utilium operum effector*). Sporck, too, was in favour of the *vita activa*, not only in one's everyday life, but also in one's philosophical attitude to one's surroundings. He was acquainted with various tracts on this subject, and his daughter Eleonora translated a book on Christian morality, understood as the art of good living (*La morale chrétienne ou l'art de bien vivre*) by a French Calvinist preacher.

But Sporck the "*utilium operum effector*" was not made all in the one mould. For life had taught him too often that sometimes man is not only the enemy of other people, but his own worst enemy, too, since either he does not realise how great are his possibilities, or else is not strong-willed enough to combat the sea of evil around him. If he were to read the works of Comenius he would see that the literary allegory of the world as a labyrinth had its allegorical counterpart in the *Centrum Securitatis*, part of which was taken up with reflections which the

author entitled: *Renuntiatio mundi*, or *výghost světu* (there were several similar ones in the Bohemian literature of the time). In this situation we see clearly why a particularly expressive piece of sculpture, a huge figure of St. Onufrius, was placed amid the woodland scenery of the "Bethlehems." The saint—as if weighed down by the cares of this world—is almost crawling along the ground, but in spite of this his face is turned upwards, as if seeking help from heaven. This figure, although little known today, was very popular in the 17th century. Onufrius, born the son of a king, was first of all a monk in one of the monasteries of Upper Egypt. A hermit who had voluntarily gone out into the wilderness to live, he died about the year A.D. 400. Sporck tried to popularize his way of life by setting up hermit's cells at Kuks and others of his estates. He also recommended solitariness in his book *De vita solitaria*, published in 1726.

Thus the conflict between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa* was obvious. In his own life Sporck came down decisively on the side of the *vita activa*, for he was indefatigable in his practical activities during his whole life, and was thereby able to attain many of his goals. But what theoretical grounds can one put forward for that choice? No doubt he did not regard this academic problem as particularly important, but surely intellectual curiosity would induce him to study the books on the subject. If he did, he no doubt learned that their authors simply advised compromise. The philosophers, the theologians, and other thinkers as well all pronounced that, just as there are two types of happiness, there are also two ways of living. One, connected with community life, is based on human activity, while the other, which is directed towards reflection on fundamental questions, calls for contemplation, which is feasible only in isolation from action; in this situation, the wise man chooses the intermediate way. The fundamental view on this problem was that philosophy presupposed skill in both thinking and acting, but in the end the problem remained an open one: on the one hand there was the danger of becoming totally absorbed in the trivia of everyday life, while on the other hand there was the danger of isolated contemplation that was of no benefit neither to society nor to the individual himself.

But Braun rescued his patron from these troubles. His allegory of Prudence is an exceedingly eloquent one. For he portrayed it as a female who (like the Roman Janus) had two faces, each facing a different direction, and who was holding a mirror. While carefully observing the present, she simultaneously gazes into the past, and the mirrored reflection of these two dimensions of life enables her to think about the future. In the language of today, she is the personification of man's

“three-dimensional” attitude to time. Looking at this personification, Sporck, the patron of the excellent sculptor, no doubt recalled the words of his highly revered Pascal, who, in a letter to Mademoiselle de Roannez, dated December 1656, wrote that “the present is the only time that is really ours,” while in his *Pensées* he declares that “the past and the present are only means to an end, and their only purpose is the future.”

Today, when “Future Shock” has been diagnosed as the sickness of our century, we already know that what will be (or rather, what we should like takes place) is attaining preponderance over what is. So in other words, by speeding up our lives we sacrifice the present to the future of which we expect so much, but which constantly recedes farther and farther away, so that it often becomes quite unattainable.

Although we are becoming increasingly aware of the error of such a situation and its catastrophic results, we are incapable of determining man’s position in terms of the three time categories. We know that man is not capable of mastering the future (that is, of shaping it as he would wish), and that at the same time he is not a creature wholly determined by his own past (that is, to some extent, he can free himself from the burden of his past), and finally we know that he is not master of the present, and so he cannot shape it freely. But it is increasingly true to say that each of us is coming to perceive that man’s fate is decided within a triangle delineated by the three categories of time, and that none of them can safely be eliminated. To live means to change in time and space. Yet even if we manage to choose more or less sensibly our place in space, the position we occupy in time is not always a sensible one.

Must this be so?

This is the question with which Braun’s figure of Prudence (like Titian’s allegory of Prudence, which he painted in the last period of his life) confronts us. And although so far nothing has succeeded in diminishing the popularity of the “marriage triangle,” it seems quite likely that the “time triangle” will soon come into the forefront as a problem of supreme importance. This is still another reason why it is worth while thinking about the time and space problems suggested by the baroque complex at Kuks.

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