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Gothic as Leaf, Gothic as Crystal: John Ruskin and Wilhelm Worringer

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Oh dear, oh dear, what a day!
Was ever anything so provoking!
just when we wanted to crystallise ourselves.¹

1. ‘Like a wild north wind’

John Ruskin and Wilhelm Worringer shared an idée fixe: the Gothic. If we read the Formprobleme der Gotik (1911) by the German art historian, comparing it with The Nature of Gothic, the approach of the two books coincides in many points. First of all, they are both discursive texts, not overtly scientific – in the tradition of rigorous artistic historiography – yet capable of exerting a deep influence far beyond the specific discipline,² combining the theoretic with the intuitive. Ruskin and Worringer strive towards an intuition of the essence of Gothic. Both extend the concept of Gothic style from an artistic category to a spiritual category (Ruskin’s ‘gothicness’,³ Worringer’s ‘secret Gothic’⁴): a definition which is irreducible to its mere historical medieval limits, and is polemically opposed to the Classic, and which is able to blow ‘like a wild north wind’,⁵ even along the more remote paths of art history. Both employ Gothic as a key to reading their own historical time – for Ruskin Victorian England, for Worringer expressionist Munich – and finally as a vehicle for the manifestation of their poetics.

Both offer a key to a reading of the Gothic, since for Ruskin and Worringer, style is essentially language – with its grammar, its phraseology, and its history – and works of art are writings. In his work
Ruskin refers to the ‘language of mature Gothic’, the ‘grammar of the flamboyant’, and the ‘grammar of silica’. Worringer maintains, treading in Alois Riegl’s wake, that the artistic representation of reality ‘consists in the translation of the objects from the external world which have to be represented in the linguistic elements of the corresponding will of form’. In discussing the origin of Gothic style (or ‘Gothic phraseology’) from proto-northern ornamentation, he asserts that ‘from the ground of this elementary archaic grammar of lines a particular language of lines develops, which is evidently characterized as a proper German idiom.

2. ‘Naturalism and style’

But the ‘truth’ of the language of art (of Gothic, as of any style) is comprehensible, both in Ruskin and in Worringer, only if reduced to those psychological premises (which Ruskin identifies as ‘mental tendencies’) which constitute a condition of possibility, a sort of spiritual a priori (not individual, but collective) allowing for cultural expressions, in primis art and religion. In Worringer, this claim extends to the formulation of an anthropological typology (primitive man, oriental man, classic man, gothic man) which has to provide the basis for his psychology of styles.

Yet if one considers the mental elements listed by Ruskin in defining gothicness – ‘savageness, changefulness, naturalism, grotesqueness, rigidity, redundancy’ – a problem is constituted above all by the term ‘naturalism’. Here the similarity between the two thinkers appears to fail. A conflict is created by the opposition of abstraction and empathy (expounded by Worringer in the homonymous text which provides the theoretic frame to Formprobleme der Gotik): abstraction in this instance corresponds to rejection of nature, whereas empathy corresponds to an identification with nature. Thus Gothic is abstract, that is, anti-naturalistic, since Gothic figuration derives from the proto-Northern line, in which ‘any attempt of direct imitation of nature is absent’. But in Ruskin’s opinion Gothic style is profoundly naturalistic, that is, it is moved by ‘the love of natural objects for their own sake’. It is necessary, then, in order to understand this radical difference, to clarify the meaning of the term ‘naturalism’, by examining the sense in which it is employed; by Ruskin positively, by Worringer negatively. Conventionally naturalism is presented as a tendency to faithful reproduction of nature in works of art.