

Summary

REFLECTIONS OF THE IDEAS OF THE THEOSOPHICAL PHILOSOPHY OF ART IN THE PAINTINGS OF STABRAUSKAS AND ČIURLIONIS

The ideas of the main creators of the theosophical philosophy of art (Blavatsky, Steiner, Schuré, Besant, and Leadbeater) reflected the growing influence of the modern esotericism typical of the early 20th century. This influence was directly related to a rejection of the materialistic reality typical of artistic consciousness and to an unconditional exaltation of mysterious spiritual first principles. As the most typical features of this period, we may indicate growing tendencies toward occultism and an intensified belief that beyond the layer of outward appearance in the world around us there exists a deeper, mysterious, spiritual reality that can be reached through mystical intuition, contemplation, meditation, or revelation. The interaction of occultism and the theosophical philosophy of art with artistic practice clearly emerged in the colorful and contradictory Neoromantic, primarily Symbolist movement that was influenced by Romantic mysticism, Orientalism, and the problems of the interaction of the arts and in the Modernism that was forming in this movement.

Every artist influenced by theosophy, anthroposophy, and other occult ideas had a specific style that was related to his childhood environment, experiences, creative potential, and national artistic traditions which were all integrated by a characteristic attitude that flowed from various esoteric teachings. This was primarily special attention to various spiritual aspects of artistic creation and of the psychology of the creative process. Many of the artists and composers inspired by the ideas of esotericism shared the quest, typical of their epoch and the Neoromantic artistic tradition, for links between *pictorial* and *musical* expression as well as special attention to the phenomenon of synesthesia. One more characteristic feature that connected these artists was an attraction to puzzling subjects enciphered in various signs and symbols and to metaphorical meanings in order to stress the importance of spiritual, nonmaterial values, and related to this attraction was a tendency in creative expression toward the dematerialization of the objects they depicted and toward the abstraction of artistic forms.

Of the figures involved in the rebirth of Lithuanian art during the early 20th century, Stabrauskas (Stabrowski, 1869-1929) received the most widespread international recognition. During his youth, while studying at the Saint Petersburg Academy of Arts, he developed an interest in theosophy, parapsychology, mediumistic practices, and Orientalism, and this inclination remained relevant when this artist was on his later creative path. This attraction to esoteric doctrines continued to grow during journeys to Near Eastern countries and while he was studying at the Académie Julian in Paris.

He was convinced that the spread of theosophical and, later, anthroposophical ideas would impel materialistic Western culture toward a desired dominance of spiritual values and would help

artists master subtler forms of artistic expression that would capture spiritual phenomena invisible to the naked eye. Stabrauskas regarded his paintings, enriched with mysterious theosophical symbols and metaphors, as the most accessible way of spreading the idea of a new, exalted, spiritual art in the world. Because of these esoteric ideas, his creative style indeed underwent fundamental changes that were primarily connected with the growing importance of metaphysical and spiritual aspects flowing from theosophical and anthroposophical doctrines and with a growing tendency toward a symbolical, metaphorical style of self-expression.

In this painter's early pictures inspired by the ideas of esotericism we discern means of artistic expression that are typical of Symbolism, Impressionism, *Art Nouveau*, and Secession and that are intertwined with mysterious and ephemeral theosophical images. In his later creative work, Stabrauskas devoted most of his attention to lyrical landscapes, figure compositions, historical motifs, nature scenes, and the Romanticized cult of feminine beauty, and he created many mysterious and refined artistic images influenced by esotericism. He was connected to Čiurlionis and the national art of Lithuania through a Romantic, emotional tie to the cultural tradition of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and an attraction to the nature-worshipping motifs of Lithuanian myths and legends.

Alongside historical pictures, landscapes, and figure compositions, Stabrauskas also created images of women infused with the spirit of esotericism and flights of fantasy. Delving into the world of theosophical and occult ideas determined an ever-clearer separation of two different tendencies in esoteric painting. The first was the *unrealistic*, which was dominated by tendencies to dematerialize artistic images that were often created with a mystical tinge and to dissolve them in the ether, and the second, opposed to it, was the *naturalistic*, which preserved traces of the formerly dominant realistic style that was already ever more clearly directed toward realizing as suggestively as possible the new goals of esoteric painting.

The first beginnings of a "nonmaterial" visionary artistic style can already be sensed during his early period in his poetic pictorial interpretation of the fairytale heroine *Snieguolė* (Snow White, 1891). In visionary symbolical compositions, Stabrauskas gradually creates his own distinctive artistic style, one that is influenced by theosophical and occult ideas and in which attention is mainly focused on highlighting not the physical, but the spiritual aspects of man. The most typical works employing this esoteric aesthetic and plastic approach are bright pictures in an exalted poetic style and in clear bluish tones, usually symbolizing the dominance of spiritual values, for example, *Magiško krištolo karalienė* (The Queen of the Magic Crystal, 1909/10), the series of three pictures *Vizijos I-III* (Visions I-III, 1910), and other canvases.

The first picture with these warm harmonious tones, *Magiško krištolo karalienė*, is still dominated by the unrealistic atmosphere of old folktales typical of this painter's early works, for example, *Snieguolė*, but individual parts of its pictorial system, especially the round, halolike forms surrounding the queen's face and the movement of her hand beside the crystal, are already connected with tendencies toward esotericism. This influence is even more obvious in the series of three pictures *Vizijos I-III*, in which a fantastic dream world is depicted as if it had burst forth

from the everyday reality around us into another dreamy space of esoteric, ephemeral images, one that is illuminated by the rays of a bright sun and in which different laws apply.

The clearest examples of his second gloomy, naturalistic, psychologically oppressive, almost morbid direction are *Spiritualistinis moters portretas (Mediumė)*, (A Spiritualistic Portrait of a Woman [A Medium], 1900) and the pictures *Sielos skundas* (A Soul's Complaint, 1914) and *Pabaisy guodimas* (Consoling Monsters, around 1920). Reflecting different aspects of how theosophy influenced this artist's worldview, each of them is marked by similarities and differences. All of them are connected by what typifies the work of many esoteric artists – an emphasis on the symbolism of color and the disappearance of the boundaries between reality and the fantasy worlds created by imagination.

Although Stabrauskas' most talented pupil, Čiurlionis, never officially belonged to any theosophical society, theosophy, occultism, parapsychology, mediumistic practice, and spiritism as well as other ideas of esotericism, according to much reliable testimony, truly interested him and induced him to take part in esoteric gatherings held by the Stabrauskas family, so-called strawberry tea parties, which were connected with the spread of these tendencies and at which he became infected with these ideas. While studying in Warsaw and later, Čiurlionis was indeed interested in various mediumistic practices, hypnosis, telepathy, spiritist séances, life after death, and reincarnation. Čiurlionis' own letters, reliable contemporary testimony, and the symbols and metaphors employed in his works of fine art show that he was *undoubtedly influenced by various theosophical and parapsychological ideas that had acquired tremendous popularity during his lifetime*.

In Čiurlionis' work there is a powerful unfolding of a universal worldview typical of theosophical doctrines through quests for unity in the many shared metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic principles that connect the great religious and intellectual traditions, for spiritual kinship and brotherhood. Hence arose his special attention to the primordial, archaic ideals of harmony and beauty that blossomed in various civilizations, in their cultures, religions, and art. His worldview was also greatly influenced not only by Lithuanian folk culture and folklore and the traditions of the old Eastern civilizations but also by the mature esoteric ideas spread by the followers of theosophy Stabrauskas, Miciński, and Flammarion. This fact determined his unconditional elevation of spiritual values in regard to material existence. Čiurlionis understood this as a precondition necessary for knowing the world and inseparable from purposeful human spiritual development.

Čiurlionis drew the basic features of his symbolical, theosophical, and mythopoetic language from different sources of inspiration: 1) Christianity, the folklore of still vibrant archaic pagan Lithuanian culture, and the folk songs, myths, and legends of Dzūkija; 2) the mythological, religious, and philosophical traditions of Eastern peoples; and 3) Camille Flammarion's books and illustrations, which propagated various visions of cosmic and extraterrestrial worlds. No less important an influence on his symbolism came from: 4) the "strawberry tea parties" that the Stabrauskas family organized and that spread esoteric ideas; and 5) *the various occult and parapsychological ideas absorbed* from the intellectual circle in Bronislava Volmanienė's salon. Finally, we should not forget: 6) his immediate predecessors, the representatives of symbolist art – Böcklin, Klinger, Beardsley, Stabrauskas, and others. In comparison to them, however, the

vocabulary of symbols and visual iconography that thrived in Čiurlionis' pictures stood out for their archaic Lithuanian quality and musicality. This vocabulary of symbols was connected by mythical thinking, in which the life of a specific person was only a brief flash in the complex metamorphoses of life processes.

Čiurlionis' rich mythopoetic symbols can be classified according to their typological features and relationship to surrounding reality: the *metaphysical* ones are connected with the basic forms of *existence*; the *cosmic* ones encompass the wide world of heavenly bodies; and the *archetypal* ones come from the deepest layers of the collective unconscious, from layers that are older than the times of the Indo-European proto-nation. Another important part of Čiurlionis' vocabulary of symbols comes from the world of *flora* and *fauna*: flowers, trees, sacred grass snakes, birds, etc. Aside from these life forms, there were also abstract *geometric* signs and symbols. Finally, too, there were *color* and *sound* symbols that echoed theosophical texts.

Of all the early paintings of Čiurlionis' period of literary psychological symbolism perhaps the clearest example of an illustration of theosophical ideas is *Regėjimas* (Vision, 1904/5), which was created during a time of intense association with Stabrauskas and whose *iconography meticulously composed of basic visual motifs and symbols clearly shows that theosophical teachings were known to this artist*. The motif in this picture – a cross in the shape of the letter T with a snake and a sun – had been widely known since Helena Blavatsky's times as the symbol of the International Theosophical Society.

Another picture created at this time and connected with no less clear theosophical symbols and motifs is *Mintis* (Thought, 1904/5). In this painting in greenish brown tones, on a large scale, in an abstract metaphysical cosmic space, one unusual for Čiurlionis and stripped of natural features, the generalized figure of a hunched man is depicted. When we look at it more closely, we notice two elements in the picture's visual system that illustrate theosophical ideas: streams of light flowing from the eyes and the light aura of a halo surrounding the head. According to the followers of theosophical doctrine, it is precisely *thought* that, reflecting the spiritual activity of a personality, emanates from the center of the main source of spiritual energy, the head, in the form of rays of different intensities and colors.

Theosophists were convinced, moreover, that energetic thoughts create various visual and sonic forms that, as they spread, employ the greater part of a psychic body's matter and attract to the source of these thoughts much of the *astral* material to which theosophists gave significance. Above the human body, especially the head, this material forms an important suprasensory astral part that is seen and perceived only with a deeper, spiritual, clairvoyant gaze. In theosophical literature, this special part that envelops the human body with an outer ethereal mantle is metaphorically called an "aura." It is, as it were, a colored, round, bright, subtle, ethereal cloudlet above a specific human head and can be seen in the visual system of the picture *Mintis*.

In Čiurlionis' early pictures, we also see another motif typical of theosophical doctrines, one that we first saw in *Ramybė* (Serenity, 1903/4): two sources of light emanating, as it were, from symbolical eyes. Later, this motif also appears in another picture, in soft greenish tones,

by Čiurlionis – *Amžinybė* (Eternity, 1906?/7), in which in a starry space of flowing forms there emerges a mysterious face, adorned with a crown and from whose eyes two similar winding streams of light emanate. Here, there also emerges another characteristic feature of the pictures Čiurlionis painted under the influence of theosophy, one especially typical of the ones dealing with cosmic themes: this is a sense of conveying an illusion of boundless, gigantic spaces or, in other words, of immense spatial depth.

Čiurlionis' transition to a qualitatively new stage in his evolution as a painter emerged in 1907, when in his pictorial fugues and sonatas, after rejecting the many insignificant details typical of his early pictures, he formed a conception of musical sonatalike painting influenced by theosophy. The first *Saulės sonata* (Sonata of the Sun, 1907) that Čiurlionis created was enriched with various theosophical symbols that emphasize both the creative and the destructive power of the sun's energy. Here, we see many suns shining with rays of different sizes, a bird bearing knowledge, tall towers and gates rising to the sky, bridges connecting different worlds, flowers blooming. However, in Čiurlionis' work we see not only the brightness of the yellow sun, exalted by theosophists and symbolizing light, warmth, high intellect, and immortality, but also the black sun painted in *Juodosios saulės pasaka* (The Tale of the Black Sun, 1908/9), which was not only an alchemical symbol but also, in various esoteric doctrines, symbolized secret desires, negative phenomena, dissociation, renunciation, night, and the world of darkness associated with death.

In terms of its greenish-yellow tones, one of Čiurlionis' most mature sonatas, which in the clarity of their style are reminiscent of the works of East Asian masters, the third painting in this series, *Žalčio sonata* (Sonata of the Serpent, 1908), enchants us with its inner tranquility and harmony. In comparison to earlier sonatas, it is more laconic in its symbolic language and means of artistic expression and is not overloaded with insignificant details. Dominant here is one of the most important figures in Eastern and Lithuanian mythology and folklore – the serpent, which symbolizes the path to knowledge, flexibility, vitality, and wisdom. In this picture, alongside the serpent, we see other symbols: mountains, bodies of water, the walls and towers of fortresses, flying birds, creatures reminiscent of butterflies, stars, the moon, and a crown.

For Čiurlionis, who was interested in the mythology of the world snake (serpent) of the old Mesopotamian civilizations and of the Indians, this symbolic image was most certainly directly related to the archaic, ancient Lithuanian serpent cult, which was still alive in the villages of Dzūkija. Here, this serpent was regarded with reverence not only as a being that stood out for its amazing vitality and guarded the good fortune and wellbeing of the family hearth but also as the ruler of the Universe who looked after the harmony of the World. In *Žalčio sonata*, enriched with receptive symbols, we see the visual unfolding of these different mythical links.

One of Čiurlionis' most mature series, with its air of surprising harmony and simplicity of color, is the fifth in three parts – *Jūros sonata* (Sonata of the Sea, 1908). For him, the sea and great expanses of water in general symbolized the metaphysical boundlessness of dreams, the sea of life, existence, and the creative process. The first picture in this series, *Allegro*, has an air of dynamism and inner drama; the second, *Andante* – one of tranquility; and the third, *Finale*,

is filled with threatening intimations. Here, even in comparison to the laconic *Žalčio sonata*, we see fewer symbols, but they are meticulously thought out and bring together a unified system of artistic images. Alongside the various states of the dominant seascape, in the first picture of this series there emerges the silhouette of a bird flying swiftly above the waves; in the second, there appear on the surface of the water two eyelike, faintly shining sources of light; and at the bottom, held up by a mysterious hand of fate, a ship is slowly sinking. Its direction is clear – toward other ships and cities that have sunk in history. And in the third, *Finale*, which paraphrases the motifs in Hokusai's picture *The Wave*, we see sailboats, tossed about by gigantic waves, that symbolize man's dramatic life. We encounter many theosophical symbols in Čiurlionis' sixth work, *Žvaigždžių sonata* (Sonata of the Stars, 1909), and in his seventh and last one, *Piramidžių sonata* (Sonata of the Pyramids, 1909).

In comparison to these pleasant sonatas and fugues with their subtle colors, there stand out – with a different, usually more contrasting gamut of dramatic, darker colors and often also with a language of menacing artistic symbols and metaphors – Čiurlionis' so-called metaphysical pictures, created during 1908-1909 and closely related to his sonata period: *Angelas. Preliudas* (Angel. Prelude, 1908/9), *Juodosios saulės pasaka* (1908/9?), *Demonas* (The Demon, 1909), *Tvirtovė* (Fortress, 1909), *Auka* (Offering, 1909), *Aukuras* (The Altar, 1909), *Rojus* (Paradise, 1909), *Rex* (1909), etc. Distinguishing between the two dominant tendencies in Čiurlionis' work – late sonata painting and metaphysical painting – is fairly arbitrary because these works are connected by similar images, symbols, metaphors, and motifs, but what differs in the latter ones are often emphatically irrational, puzzling subjects, gloomier moods, and emphatically static compositional decisions.

Čiurlionis' metaphysical paintings are crowned by *Rex*, which is shot through with large-scale puzzling theosophical symbols and which the artist himself valued as a programmatic work that reflects a summation of his world vision. In this picture, we encounter theosophical symbols that we know well from his earlier works, especially those with a cosmic theme. In the field of activity of various elements of the Universe, alongside a cluster of stars, the Milky Way, comets, the Sun, the Moon, and the Earth, on an altar of burning light, at the center of the picture, there rise the orb of the Earth as if encircled by caring hands and a magnificent figure of the ruler of the Universe sitting on a royal throne.

When discussing Čiurlionis' attraction to esotericism, we also need to remember his attention to numerology and cryptography, which acquired special popularity at the turn of the century, i.e. to various forms of mysterious and enciphered script that are connected with mystical symbols and that attest to his seeking, playful, and creative mind. As shown by the various signs and symbols that emerge in Čiurlionis' pictorial and musical works, sketches, and notebooks, he believed that numbers are characterized by mystical qualities that influence human life and creativity.

When we penetrate into the deepest sources of inspiration that nurtured Čiurlionis' world of symbols and metaphors and influenced his creative style, we often get the impression that far more important for this artist was *the process itself of creative quest and discovery than the result.*

In this way, we can also most assuredly explain another important feature of Čiurlionis' *innovativeness and incredibly rapid creative evolution* – one that is most clearly seen in the development of symbolical language in his fine art. In six years, after starting with epigonic early paintings created under the influence of literary psychological symbolism, he was able to unfold – unbelievably rapidly, innovatively – in the fields of Poetic Surrealism, Abstractionism, Metaphysical Painting, *Art Deco*, *Jugend*, and other styles.