

© IRINA E. BELIAKOVA, DAVID COCKSEY

david.cocksey@free.fr, i21081976@mail.ru

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BEAUTY AND BEYOND: N.K. ROERICH'S SHAMBHALA

SUMMARY. This article is devoted to the notion of beauty in N.K. Roerich's 1930 work Shambhala. It examines the text's implicit and explicit lexicalization of the term, identifying the multiple contexts which confer upon it atypical complexity and an absolute dimension. This aspect, developed through poetic prose, inscribes the text within the literary Sublime and at the same time highlights the hypnotic potential of literary expression. It is concluded that Roerich uses language to suggest heightened consciousness.

KEY WORDS. Roerich, beauty, the Sublime, prose, poetics, hypnosis.

*Everything has its beauty, but not everyone sees it**

One of the particularities of the prose of Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947) is that, like his painting, its ambition is at once aesthetic and didactic. The spiritual manifesto of religious syncretism enunciated in works such as *Heart of Asia* (1929) or *Shambhala* [1] (1930) is also a literary composite, since within the broad framework of the travel account cohabit multiple discursive types, narrative forms and literary influences. Insofar as he presents "art as a way to approach a higher reality" [2], Roerich may be considered part of the Symbolist movement; but just as J.-K. Huysmans' "spiritual naturalism [3]" revisits crypts, cathedrals and cemeteries [4], Roerich's writing integrates techniques and topoï associated with the Gothic and Romanticism. At the heart of an original literary Sublime, the notion of beauty gives rise moreover to a theological aesthetic [5] in which the emotions produced by art are designed "to connect 'our earthly existence with a Supreme'" [6]. Rather like the blacksmith in the parable "Hidden treasures" [1], Roerich expounds elliptically key elements of his thought such as the paradisiacal Shambhala and the notion of beauty, but it is apparent that the latter is presented less as a purely aesthetic value than as a spirit, which, one may postulate, his writings attempt to textualize**. The present article

* Confucius.

** In considering here the link between literature and spirituality, we will not connect spirit with religiousness. Indeed, it could be connected with *any* religion, and even with secularism: G. Hartman observes that "the quality of attention [...] aroused is not inevitably the outcome of a religious exercise: it can involve acts of attention described by Nicolas de Malebranche as 'the natural prayer of the soul'" [7], or what Buddhists would call "mindfulness", "giving full attention to moment-to-moment sensory and cognitive experience, bare of judgment, decision making, commentary, and other conceptual reactivity".

will explore the notion and expression of beauty in *Shambhala*, then consider its evocative power with regard to the literary Sublime and hypnotism.

I. Beauty defined

Perception of beauty is a two-part cognitive event [8] involving the object (in our case, the text) and the beholder (thus, the reader). In the process of this cognitive act, the reader perceives the concept of beauty through the words, images and values evoked and instilled in his mind by the text. This concept is verbalized in the text with the help of the relevant lexical-semantic field and is composed of three structural elements: factual, figurative and axiological [9]. The factual component is the denotative meaning of the word 'beauty', while the figurative component of the concept comprises the imagery of beauty created in the text by the author for the sake of its better understanding by the reader. The axiological component embraces the values of the concept within the mental sphere of the author expressed in the text. Definition of the axiological component is possible through the textual and contextual analysis of the text under study.

A lexicometrical analysis* shows the most common nouns in *Shambhala* to be "people" (230 instances), "lama" (172), "life" (125), "time" (122), "man" (106), "Shambhala" (103), "Tibet" (87), "mountains" (86), "earth" (86) and "beauty" (78). On the simplest level, it could be said that "people", "man" and "lama" indicate the human dimension of Roerich's thought, while "Tibet", "mountains" and "earth" locate it geographically, "life", "time", "Shambhala" and "beauty" developing an abstract element central to the whole. The frequency of the adjectives "great" (311 instances), "old" (158), "new" (104), "long" (102), "high" (99), ["other (98),] "ancient" (97), "sacred" (86) and "beautiful" (79) indicate, aside from epideictic amplification, the importance of space, time and less tangible abstractions.

The 160 cumulative instances of "beauty", "beautiful" or "beautifully" constitute together the most prevalent abstraction of the text, with a lexical frequency sometimes bordering on redundancy ("Thus shall we bring beauty to the people: Simply, beautifully, fearlessly!"). This redundancy is however eluded through an idiosyncratic use of the word, which charges it beyond its standard lexicalized usage. From a semasiological point of view, *Shambhala* develops, often conjointly, upon a number of the semes inherent to the sememe "beauty". It is through this variation that Roerich is able to take the sememe to the limit of its semantic stability: in the previously quoted example, the acceptability of the expression "[to] bring [something] beautifully" owes less to attested usage than to the context of the work as a whole. Roerich uses "beauty" alternatively, often simultaneously, in the aesthetic and moral senses, the two evoking by superposition and/or metonymy a perfection suggestive of the divine. This suggestion is enhanced through the allegory of beauty ("beauty the conqueror"), which, more than a passive object of observation, is designated as an active force ("beauty was aglow and by the light of its wondrous power evoked united understanding").

The factual component in Roerich's conception of beauty can be resumed as energy, a unifying spirit of creation. The beautiful is found in nature and in human activity, experiences, thoughts and dreams. This inner sense of beauty, potentially accessible to everyone, is the uniting force of humanity. In *Shambhala*, this concept

* Using http://writewords.org.uk/word__count.asp

is multiply verbalized. The lexical field of beauty found in the text thus consists of several interdependent metonymical microgroups:

- The place, spirit or state Shambhala
- Light
- Images
- Grandeur
- Time
- Memory/prophecy
- Charm
- Nature
- Sound
- Aroma
- Force
- Mystery-Treasure
- A glorious path
- Knowledge
- Deeds

These microgroups will now be illustrated through representative examples, which will permit by the same occasion to explore the figurative component of the discourse and its poetic dimension.

In designating Shambhala as “the **mighty heavenly** domain”, Roerich establishes through the definite article its uniqueness and supposed familiarity. The two successive adjectival intensifiers create a gradation between power/implicit extraordinariness and the divine or cosmic superlative. While assonance highlights the complementarity of the two adjectives, the three syllables of the second, which shares with “beautiful” the semantic component of felicity [10], give it prominence within the segment.

Shambhala manifests itself through “many **wondrous** signs” (the superlative here contains a similar connotation of amazement to those previously quoted), which in themselves are endowed with beauty. Among these are light, as a metonymy for knowledge and good: “Certainly as in every country, in Tibet live two consciousnesses — one **illuminated**, evolving; the other, **dark**, prejudiced, **hostile to light**.” Amplification is a key element in this construction: Roerich opposes two personified collective consciousnesses, drawing a universal conclusion from one attested local example. Greater scope is thus given to the metonymy, which, repeated to conclude the sentence, encircles darkness. Both light and dark give rise here to concise expositio. Elsewhere, the aesthetic aspect of light is emphasized: “**Like a diamond glows the light** on the Tower of Shambhala”. In this instance, a double hyperbaton accentuates through anteposition the comparison suggesting purity/opulence and the associated verb of action. In addition to light, other visual stimuli are also significant: “The **red** door, **aglow** with the **gold** of ornament, slowly opens. In the twilight of Dukhang, the **gigantic image** of Maitreya **majestically** rises into the height.” The hypotyposis^{*} here enables Roerich to evoke the painting in terms of grandeur rather than precision: the painting itself is not described, rather the visual context which precedes it and subsequently the perception of its superlative verticality. In addition to the microgroup of grandeur visible above, this passage contains that of time, associated here not with degradation but embellishment: “Through the **velvety patina** of time, one begins to discern upon the walls the delicate silhouettes of images [...]. Time has **enriched** the colors and **mellowed** the sparks of gold”. Roerich dwells less on the present than on the “**high** traditions

* “A representation of things so fully expressed in words that it seems to be seen rather than heard” (Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, IX, 2, 40).

of the past”, associated with “**beautiful** reminiscences” and with “**prophecies**” (like memories, verbal expressions of cognitive rather than sensory data) of the “**blessed** future”. The immateriality of beauty in fact renders it atemporal: “Although all the relics are removed and scattered, the **charm** of these constructions **remain[s]**”.

Perception in *Shambhala* is associated not only with art and artefacts, but also with nature: “The hill-people feel beauty. They feel a sincere pride in possessing these **unrepeatable snowy peaks** — the **world giants, the clouds, the mist of the monsoon.**” Roerich creates through this exopolitio an almost immaterial verticality: although the allegorical and totalizing “world giants” makes the mountains appear imposing, this impression is immediately counterbalanced by the meteorological elements which, by metonymy, become part of the “snowy peaks”, and whose relative immobility is in accordance with the purity suggested by the colour white. The mountain is thus evoked less for its massiveness than as a stepping stone towards the skies.

Roerich exploits other senses in addition to sight; in the example “**Sound** in the great desert. **Rings out** the conch shell. Do you **hear** it?”, the audible phenomenon is emphasized by the brusqueness of a short nominal sentence followed by a striking hyperbaton, and by the implicit opposition with the silence of the desert, which, through its dimension, suggests the measure of the otherwise undelimited sound. The same apparent autonomy is visible in the olfactory domain: “lest those who do not know the Great Truth should desecrate [a sacred image], the **fragrant signs** floated together and faded on, out into space.” Here, the morphological and phonetic similarities between “**fragrant**”, “**floated**” and “**faded**” tend to combine the three semantically disparate words, the fricative consonant imitating the movement of air evoked. Sensory perceptions frequently intermingle, as illustrated also by the sentence “the protecting **force** from Shambhala follows you in this **Radiant** form of Matter.” Referring to the “fragrant signs”, the adjective creates a synesthesia through the suggestion of light or heat, as well as being synonymous with beauty.

Such apparent contradiction is coherent with the idea of an enigmatic treasure: “The great keepers of **mysteries** are watching closely all those to whom they have entrusted their work and given high missions. [...] And the entrusted **treasure** shall be **guarded.**” The absence of a definite article before “mysteries” (synonymous here with “treasure”) gives an imprecise but totalizing aspect to the noun, while the passive voice in the second sentence implies an unspecified and therefore mysterious agent. Only in spiritual contexts is mystery a source of joy:

The population of Sikkim may **rejoice** — **beholding how** the treasures of Kinchenjunga are guarded! They may be **proud** — never yet has the rocky summit of this White Mountain been conquered! Only **exalted** keepers of the Mysteries, high Devas, know the **path** to its summit.

The exclamative sentences, the second of which is potentially in free indirect speech, enable the narrative to echo and thus convey the emotion described. “Path”, used both literally and figuratively, is present elsewhere as a “**road of glory**”; “**of**” **here may function either as a descriptive genitive or a preposition**

* “Glorious: marked by great beauty or splendour” (Merriam Webster dictionary).

of destination, thus “glory” potentially designates the progression in itself as much as its result, the “knowledge of experience”. “[B]eautiful deed[s]” complete the human component of beauty in *Shambhala*.

Rhetorically, the notion of beauty thus gives rise to an extended expositio throughout the text. In a paradox similar to that of the Holy Trinity in Christian thought, beauty for Roerich is thus an indication of Shambhala, a means to reach this place or state, the sacred spirit or holy energy embedded there, and at the same time Shambhala itself. It is perceptible — and thus rendered — through the sensory images of light, sound and, fragrance; through emotions such as joy, exaltation or charm; through notions such as glory, grandeur and majesty; and through metaphors such as a guarded treasure, a force or a path. Beauty is found in nature, memories, art, vestiges of the past and portents of the future and human deeds. Beauty is both absolute, and merely a medium to be used to reach Shambhala; in axiological terms, to acquire moral principles of behaviour.

II. Beyond beauty

Roerich's superlative evocation of beauty raises the question of his place within the heritage of the literary Sublime, all the more so as beauty and the Sublime are traditionally opposed. This question would lend itself to a more ample exploration than can be undertaken at present, but it is instructive to situate Roerich's thought with regard to that of the principal exponents of the term. Impressions produced by the author's experience of the grandeur of nature are frequently evoked in *Shambhala*, but unlike the first modern writers associated with the Sublime (J. Dennis*, J. Addison**), Roerich derives from this grandeur a feeling of awe *without* horror; furthermore, contrary to E. Burke*** and A. Schopenhauer****, Roerich considers beauty rather than ugliness as producing the strongest conceivable impressions. While for I. Kant [12] the “boundaries” of “form” prevent beauty from attaining the dimensions of the Sublime, Roerich associates (infinite) greatness with beauty. Roerich thus attributes to beauty the same degree of force which earlier writers saw in the Sublime, but this force is exclusively benevolent; imperfection is present in *Shambhala* only to confirm the suggestion of perfection, and not as the principal means of suggestion postulated by Hegel [13]. Whereas the Gothic novel made extensive use of the Burkian notion of the Sublime to entertain through the impression

* “Transporting Pleasures followed the sight of the Alpes, and what unusual Transports think you were those, that were mingled with Horrors, and sometimes almost with despair?” Cited in [11]

** “The Alps [...] fill the Mind with an agreeable kind of Horror, and form one of the most irregular mis-shapen Scenes in the World” (*Remarks on Several Parts of Italy etc. in the years 1701, 1702, 1703*, London, J. Tonson, 1703/1718, p. 350. Available on Google books, accessed 25.10.11.)

*** “[... S]ublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small: beauty should be smooth and polished; the great, rugged and negligent; beauty should shun the right line, yet deviate from it insensibly; the great in many cases loves the right line, and when it deviates it often makes a strong deviation: beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy: beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even massive. They are indeed ideas of a very different nature, one being founded on pain, the other on pleasure [...]”. (*On the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 1757/1909, ch. 27. Available on Wikisource, accessed 25.10.11.)

**** Cf. *The World as Will and Representation*, 1844, III, § 39-41. Available on Wikisource.

of terror, and Romanticism to cultivate “morose delectation [14]”, Roerich’s recourse to strong impressions is better enlightened by referring to a treaty by a 1st or 3rd century Greek author known as Longinus, for whom the Sublime, found in rhetoric rather than nature, was a form of higher consciousness involving the “uplift[ing of the] soul [15]”:

Longinus explains that this “beyond” is comprehended in terms of metaphor, or in terms of what is absent from the empirical world. Our sense of the sublime is an illusion, which draws the reader to new heights, to the realization that there is something more to human life than the mundane, the ordinary. [...] The sublime is that which defeats every effort of sense and imagination to picture it. [...] It remains only for the art of the metaphorical language of poetry to give the suggestion of the sublime [16].

Furthermore, Longinus defends the idea of revelation through evocation rather than demonstration:

The effect of elevated language upon an audience is not persuasion but transport. At every time and in every way imposing speech, with the spell it throws over us, prevails over that which aims at persuasion and gratification. Our persuasions we can usually control, but the influences of the sublime bring power and irresistible might to bear, and reign supreme over every hearer [15].

Thus, the Sublime can be said to lie as much in the telling as in what is told. Coupled with Roerich’s assertion of the autonomy of beauty, this permits us to suggest that the text *Shambhala* is, in Roerich’s logic, as much a “sign of Shambhala” as those it describes.

According to G. Hartman, even secular texts can be viewed as a “potential hiding-place of the spirit [7]”: “there is a link between text and spirit when textual incidents, in the form of fragments or citations, are like a voice falling into us, taking hold of us [7]”, he affirms, adding that, like Saint Augustine, “many have claimed that something read [...] has made a radical difference and set them on a new course with spiritual implications [7]”. As R. Viladeseau states, “Christianity has always had an ‘aesthetic’ theology: an understanding of faith that is reflective, but whose reflection is embodied in artistic modes of thinking and communicating [17].” The reconciliation of the objectivity of science with the subjectivity of spirituality remains a delicate task, which J. Ladrière formulates as follows:

Linguistic analysis alone is incapable of accounting for the content and veritable scope of spiritual writing; it can however contribute to situating such writing with regard to its particular means of signification [18].

Having addressed Roerich’s notion of beauty and the literary Sublime which it constitutes, it remains for us briefly to postulate how this discourse may operate upon the reader. To this end, we will suggest that when Roerich exclaims “How many unconscious hypnotists are at work over all the earth sending their thoughts out along the streams of space [1]!”, he is perhaps among them.

Hypnotism was first recognized as a science in 1892 [19], and as early as 1919, J.E. Downey postulated the possibility of literary hypnosis:

Literature makes use of various hypnotic devices. It does so with a twofold result. It induces a rest-state, one of relaxation, with a lowered personal threshold, a condition which is often its own excuse for being; and it uses this state of reverie to impress upon the unduly suggestible subject lovely visions and wise reflections [20].

In hypnotism, the hypnotist begins by gaining the subject's confidence by making progressively less verifiable statements; for example,

"As you sit in that chair, **you can feel** the warmth of your hand on your arm **and you can feel** the notebook on your legs. **If you listen, you can even hear** your own heart beating **and you don't really know...** exactly... what you're going to learn in the next three days **but you can realize** that there are a whole lot of new ideas **and** experiences **and understandings** that could be useful [21]."

Let us compare the above with a paragraph from *Shambhala*:

When you see the mineral colorings of mountains, when you study huge geysers, full of various mineral salts, **when you see** all types of hot springs, **you understand** the teeming character of this part of the world, which still untouched, has witnessed so many cosmic cataclysms. **This** is the place. **This** is the unique site of a many sided scientific research. **Here you sense** a festival of **knowledge** and beauty.

In both instances, the tense used is the present; the speaker implicates the listener with personal pronouns; preposed subordinate clauses prepare the way for the affirmation which follows; allusions to sensory data, real or imaginary, precede the mention of logic, of the comprehension of something which is in fact not explained. In the case of Roerich, the shifters "here" and "this" create the illusion of identity between the space enounced and the space of enunciation, while the multiplication of subordinate clauses creates a similar fluidity to that produced by the connectors in the preceding example. The communication situations are very different, but the rhetorical strategies remarkably similar.

Conclusion

Although popular wisdom states that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder", the analysis of *Shambhala* suggests, on the contrary, that its perception, however personal, can in fact be communicated. A key notion within the work, beauty is explicitly and implicitly lexicalized throughout, the multiplicity of contexts conferring upon it unusual complexity and even an absolute dimension. As such, and through richly poetic prose, it takes the proportions of the literary Sublime, suggesting to the reader a heightened form of consciousness and highlighting the hypnotic potential of literary expression.

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