



Crosses, exes and other contradictions

Antoni Tàpies

Oppositions are useful.

The most beautiful harmony is born of opposites.

Everything proceeds from discord.

The world is both multiple and one.

Heraclitus

Although images of the cross and of crossings, of opposite lines and planes, of the intersections of contrary forces, might appear to be a peculiarly artistic topic, in many cultures they are considered to be a fundamental symbolic representation of the world. These are images that summarise deep universal philosophical problems of great complexity, analyses of being, visions of the ultimate reality... And in them are involved concepts that belong just as much to the field of science as to mystical wisdom, just as much to ethics (and even politics) as to aesthetics, just as much to far-off peoples as to our own traditions.

Such a representation of the world was already valued five thousand years ago. But with the coming of new theories of dialectics (whether in the evolution of thought, of history or of nature itself), the modern

understanding of the imaginative processes of depth psychology, and, perhaps most particularly, the spread of recent data from physics and cosmology that are now seen to be close to many beliefs in the field of spirituality, it is not strange that many thinkers and artists today are giving these questions new credence.

Concretely, in the art of the twentieth century we need only think of the leading role that has been played by the image of the cross in trends as important as Cubism and abstract art, in Mondrian, in the Russian Suprematists, in Malevich or Lissitzky... or in the Dada and Surrealist movements... or in the painting of Paul Klee and in many of Joan Miró's signs... or in the work of Pollock, Hartley, Franz Kline, certain Minimalists... or in the more recent work of Beuys, Rainer, Kounellis... not to mention all those artists who have depicted the Christian cross, such as Matisse, Rouault, Manessier... I myself for half a century have persisted in making crosses and crossings an essential part of my work, and I have even adopted the cross as the first letter of my name and almost as an emblem of my work. Some scholars of symbolism would quickly add that a distinction must be drawn between crossings and crucifixions, intending in this way to better distinguish the general symbol from its more particular use in Christianity. But the evocative power and the psychic impact produced by the crucifix may still be a universal symbol that goes far beyond Christianity. In fact, the story of Jesus, born of a virgin, has many mythological parallels, and the rite of his death on the cross, his burial and resurrection bear a great resemblance to the death and resurrection of such fertility gods of the ancient world as Attis and Osiris, or to all the earth's fertility rites. One need not give much credence to symbolist theorising to understand that the contemplation of a naked man, nailed to a cross, dying, his sex exposed, transports us to the most mysterious limits of the human condition: love and death, Eros and Thanatos, and that not even the crucifix can be the exclusive property of Christians.

It would be a mistake for anyone to interpret this as a negative critique of Christianity. On the contrary, we could consider it a merit of the Christians to have known how to make use of that piercing universal image that stirs so many things in our unconscious. And I will come back to this question later on.

Numerous sources refer to the specific symbol of the cross, with all the variations and analogies it contains. An entire library devoted to this symbol could be gathered, and it would bring together books that run the gamut from studies of ancient cults – primitive shamanism, the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Persian traditions – to the most modern treatises on symbology, including the entire repertoire of Christianity itself or the old manuals of magic and alchemy. Abundant images offered up by art history bear witness to it as well.

This interest in the cross is the consequence of the great variety of meanings, often partial and apparently different, that it has been given: crosses (as exes) appear as the coordinates of space, as an image of the unknown, as the symbol of mystery, as the boundary of a territory, as a mark of sacred places, objects, persons or fragments of the body, as a stimulus to mystical sentiment, as a remembrance of death, and, more concretely, the death of Christ, as the expression of a paradoxical concept, as a mathematical sign, as the erasure of

another image, as a manifestation of disagreement, as a sign of negation. Mention must also be made of the symbols that can be derived from certain arrangements of crosses, in fabrics, in nets...

Still, it is the metaphysical interpretation of this symbol that brings us closest to the model of the world that it represents and from which all these other partial approximations I have mentioned can be deduced and organised. It merits some elaboration. According to René Guenon, one of the great historians and interpreters of the topic, the sign of the cross represents very clearly the perfect communion of the totality of the states of being, and this is why all the traditional doctrines have adopted it as a symbol of Universal Man. Perhaps, then, the time has come to begin to address the cross itself (the representative sign) rather than what it represents, that is to say, the knowledge or world view that gave rise to it. In essence, the cross is meant to be a veritable structure of the universe. In this sense, we must speak less of a symbol than of a description of a very widespread 'human reality'. Mircea Eliade called this a 'mythical geography', and he explained that this view of reality began to appear in the those cultures that believed in the conception of the three cosmic regions – heaven, earth, hell – whose centre lies at their point of intersection. And at this centre, even in the most ancient periods, those of the Vedas, of the Near and Middle East..., the symbol of the 'cosmic tree' appears, whose roots plunge into hell and whose branches touch the sky, forming a cross upon the plane of the earth. This image is even thought to be the origin of the Christian idea that, by analogy with that tree, also places the cross at the centre of the world, along with a set of other symbols derived from it: the symbol of communication between heaven and earth, of the ladder, of the ascension, of the return to paradise...

Antoni Tàpies, "Creus, ics i altres contradiccions" (Crosses, exes and other contradictions"), *L'art i els seus llocs* (Madrid: Ediciones Siruela, 1999).

Obra: Antoni Tàpies, *Creu de paper de diari* (Newsprint Cross), 1946-1947.