A THEODORE ROSZAK PROFILE

by Belle Krasne

THEODORE ROSZAK

Verily, Verily, I say unto you: Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.

NEW TESTAMENT, *John xii:24-25.*

The romance, the extravagance, the savagery of Theodore Roszak's welded metal sculpture is not reflected in his face. The face could belong to a subway-rider, to a man returning home after a hard day at the factory, to a husband discussing the price of eggs with his wife. One might describe it as an obstinate face, and that would be getting closer to the kinship between the man and his work, for the man is determined, determined to assert his will over resistance in his imagination, his work, his life. "Dedication," he explains earnestly, "is part of success in this field." Putting it another way: "Man is crushed by his own institutions, and yet he always affirms his position. He always picks himself up and starts over again. It's a painful process—but man always goes back to man and to forms which survive because they have the will."

Describing man's fate, Roszak is also describing his own work—the consequence of obstinacy, the result of certain forms surviving because they, or the artist, have the will. His creative process begins somewhere in his subconscious, images accumulating there to be evoked by words, sounds, sights, chance incidents which strike responsive chords and bring to fruition the dormant ideas. Catalysts are fortuitously encountered. A wild passage from Melville's "Enchanted Isle" evoked "the wonder and beauty of devastation" and inspired the violent and predatory *Sea Quarry*. An elemental corner of Cape Ann's coast suggested a series of fantastically tortured drawings called *The Furies of Folly Cove.*

The mention of Cape Ann galvanizes the associative mechanism: "There is where the great American tragedy unfolds. It was the source of inspiration for so many Americans—Melville, Longfellow, Hawthorne. One finds all kinds of treacherous phenomena — and the landscape is an index to the kind of people that live there. Well, I'm looking around and I see a place called Folly Cove. . . ." The chord is struck. What follows is what Roszak calls a "process of invocation." In the process, he traverses a long, arduous road, not a super highway, but a path along which he picks his intuitive way at a grub's pace, a spiraling path, its end being higher than, yet turned back on, its beginning. That this should be so is inevitable. "It is important to have a mental picture of a thing before you do it," Roszak explains. With equal justification he might announce that it is important to complete a thing before you start it, for the crystallized sculpture is preceded by hundred of sketches, larger drawings, full-size working drawings, and sectional "blueprints" scrupulously marked off to exact measurement. The end is inherent in every stage of the development.

The unorthodoxy of his methods has occurred to Roszak. "Many people criticize my approach saying that it's cut and dried, that everything is already stated before the actual work is begun." Yet he feels, on the contrary, that his approach is "finally and ultimately intuitive." The drawings—the hundreds of meticulous drawings, imaginative manifestations of superb draftsmanship — constitute a "visual purge." "It isn't so much that I want to translate the thing on paper to the sculpture, but I find a greater degree of discrimination in drawing. Drawing is a cutting out, a sorting out, process. The sculpture is not a slavish imitation. By virtue of its selectivity, it will improve on the drawings." Thus, what might be an inhibiting process is for him a means of release, of transcendence. "My problem is being free — getting the maximum spontaneity. In order to work objectively, one must attain the ultimate in freedom. One works to complete exhaustion. If one's psychic mechanism is shallow, exhaustion comes sooner. If one's psychic mechanism is deep and fertile, then one spends one's life exhausting oneself."

Obstinately one works to exhaustion, one works to transcend the "inertia" of the material, for "it is the opposition to inertia that causes the form in the material to take shape." Transcendence is achieved in two stages: first "one works out the formal problem as far as drawing permits"; then "one concentrates all one's energies in the thing that will ultimately express the final experience." A process of "dematerializing," so that creating the work of art is no longer a question of techniques, so that the work of art itself is a significant form and not just a mass of material.

In terms of materials and techniques, the 20th-century artist has found that his world has virtually no horizon. The possibilities open to him are dizzying. But Roszak does not ally himself with the more vertiginous of his contemporaries. Though the surfaces of his own sculptures are seductively fretted, burnished, crusted or color-studded, though he works with the tools of modern industry, he wages a private war against exploitation of material for its own sake. He speaks contemptuously of "the overwhelming respect today for material accomplishment." He cautions against the material "running away with the artist."

This, then, is the present orientation, the latest in a chain of orientations and reorientations which began in 1907 in the Polish city of Posen. It was there that Roszak was born, and less than two years later he was on his way to Chicago with his family. In Chicago he grew up, one of three children of a pastry chef and an accomplished fashion designer, parents who made his life a "struggle of a sympathetic kind." He

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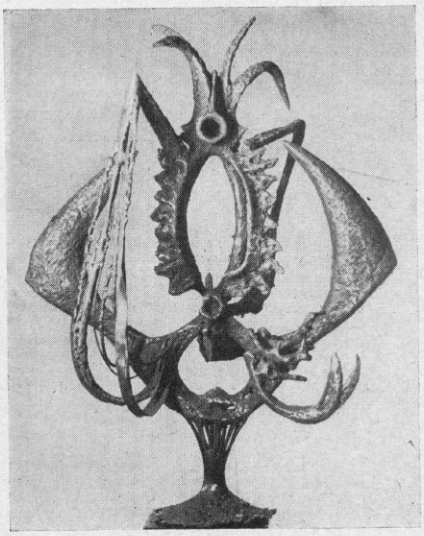
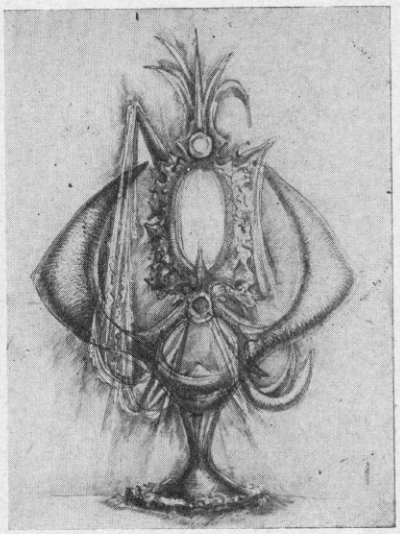
ROSZAK: *Invocation*



ROSZAK: *Drawing for Invocation*



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was to be a painter, and by doing odd jobs he worked his way through six years at the Chicago Art Institute School, meanwhile spending a year in New York, studying painting with Charles Hawthorne at the National Academy and studying philosophy and aspects of formal logic at Columbia—"that was my first introduction to the literate world." Hawthorne "had a kind of honesty" but he was "not a very good teacher," and later, when mentor and disciple met in Chicago, where the former was visiting classes, the amiability in their relationship was replaced by hostility. "It was a complete misunderstanding on both our parts."

An "Ordinary Human Being"

Between 1929 and 1931, a traveling fellowship took Roszak to Europe, where he continued to work under the illusion that he was going to be a painter. On his return he went to the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation for the summer and for a $200 "special gimmick" which enabled him to get married and settle on Staten Island. Resident New Yorkers today, Roszak, his wife Florence, and their five-year-old daughter, Sara-Jane, live on St. Luke's Place in circumstances which are normal—so normal that a prominent museum director who once visited them remarked: "This sort of thing should be publicized." In this respect, as in others, Roszak lives like an "ordinary human being." Because his work progresses slowly (his last show at Pierre Matisse's was his first in 10 years), he supplements his income by teaching—currently at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville. And summers find the family at Pigeon Cove, Maine, where Roszak reads and draws, the job of welding sculpture being temporarily suspended since suitcases can't accommodate materials and equipment.

Before his Staten Island days, he was working in a moody semi-abstract idiom, fusing elements of cubism and surrealism into a mysteriously romantic kind of painting. But on Staten Island he started to work three-dimensionally, making abstract forms in plaster of Paris. These forms suggested metal, and the intimation led Roszak into a study of tools and materials.

Reaching a major junction in his life, Roszak embarked upon his constructivist phase. It was a phase in which he found himself in sympathy with the conditions of existence. Looking at the world with acceptance and confidence, he could say: "Here are all these possibilities. Why break your neck?" It was "a dream," a dream that he could contribute to a controlled environment, that "society would hold out its hand, welcoming the artist to join it and take his appointed place.*

There were moments of apparent integration, of confidence. But 1939 brought the awakening. "It is not enough to have this dream. It is also necessary to live in a society which supports this sort of dream, and society is simply not up to it."

The disenchantment, of course, was gradual. It began with the consciousness of a disparity between the "exacting requirements of constructivist sculpture" and "the imposed limits of practical design," design which suffers from "the constant gearing of quality to the dubious standards of the consumer." The final break was prompted not just by this "schizoid alliance," but by an awareness of constructivism's incompleteness, its missing values, its "denial of a large area of human experience." He had reached a conclusion: "A credo that is centrally guided by a set of contemporary values largely motivated by the power principle must finally give way to an imbalance in the development of the human personality. . . .

"If the constructivist sculptor chooses to pay homage to a technological deity, he does so at the risk of compromising the fullness of his vision and at the peril of surrendering man's spirit to a brittle and fragmentary existence. . . .

"When World War II came to an end, I already knew that the constructivist gears had shifted, and from my point of view the whole structure took off—in reverse—leaving devastation in its wake. . . .

"The work that I am now doing constitutes an almost complete reversal of ideas and feelings from my earlier work. Instead of looking at densely populated man-made cities, it now begins by contemplating the clearing. Instead of sharp and confident edges, its lines and shapes are now gnarled and knotted, even hesitant. Instead of serving up slick chromium, its surfaces are scorched and coarsely pitted."*

Finding a Means to an End

Roszak found the grotesquely contorted form accidentally. To enlarge one of his pristine constructions, he had to weld parts together. In the process, he saw possibilities for other effects—not just for joining discrete parts but for fabricating altogether new forms. The experience had a practical value during the war. "I was fit to go into any phase of industry." But creating works of art is not like building aircraft wings at Brewster. Esthetically the welding method is a means to an end, a formal justification. "I think this whole welding thing is overdone."

From affirmation through disillusionment to affirmation, Roszak's development has been cyclical. The pristine, antiseptic world of the constructivists behind him, the war years behind him, too, he faced a new world, confident again, but confident now that art must be more closely linked to the human personality, that the artist, in looking for moral values, for an absolute, must look to his own work. He was sure that "one must strive to break through the variety of change (which can take place in any period and generally does) and try to arrive at a significant value—basic and indestructible—for the widest range of human sensibility." A positive attitude, an optimistic attitude, and yet the forms that express it are grim—images of talons and claws, of desiccated birds of prey, of unleashed furies riding like scavengers across a nightmare world.

"The forms that I find necessary to assert are meant to be blunt reminders of primordial strife and struggle, reminiscent of those brute forces that not only produced life, but in turn threaten to destroy it. I feel that, if necessary, one must be ready to summon one's total being with an all-consuming rage against those forces that are blind to the primacy of life-giving values. Perhaps, by this sheer dedication, one may yet merge force with grace."*

Blunt reminders of primordial strife and struggle, forms which survive because they have the will. The theme is recurrent: a theme of "perpetual regeneration," of life implicit in, and interwoven with, death as yang is interwoven with yin. One looks at *Invocation II,* a coalescence of life and death symbols, phallic tokens of fertility and propagation couched in thorny reminders of destruction. One studies the exotic arched form of *Firebird,* a spirit struggling to wrench itself free of its own scarred material body. And one remembers the Biblical corn of wheat which must die to bring forth fruit, or the mythical phoenix symbolizing beauty and grace resurrected from the ashes of destruction.

The Baroque Symbol

Affinities are usually explicable. Roszak is lavish in his praise of Bernini and Rubens. Bernini "had a flamboyance and exuberance of life and energy that we can learn from today." Rubens—"painting began and ended with him; he was a phenomenon never to be duplicated, a great genius flourishing at the right moment." Roszak affirming his own baroque taste. Affirming it further, he posits the Baroque Symbol, though in defining this concept he is historically unorthodox. His baroque is a fusion—not the alpha, nor the omega, but the alpha-omega. His baroque has an early phase, "when the budding is most closely related to the sharp Gothic thrust, the herald of its appearance." And it has a late phase, "as the ripe fruit, ready to fall, disintegrate and deposit its seed again."

Declaring himself for the early phase, the inception, the "moment closest to the gothic stab," he nevertheless sees that it is only part of a process, a "Dionysian drama" that is cyclical and regenerative, expressing itself simultaneously as "sharp and undulating, assertive and pulsating, defiant and hopeful." For him, this Dionysian drama is epitomized in the Baroque Symbol, a symbol which "unveils the preeminence of man's spiritual needs, revealing a psychic life of organic growth that itself has the power of regeneration and transcendence."

The cycle continues endlessly. The seed dies to bring forth fruit. And certain forms survive because they have the will—a *Skylark,* a Daedalus image, a bird-man spiraling upward to transcend its own inhumanity, or a *Spectre of Kitty Hawk,* a grim symbol of man's persistent struggle to soar, of man's determination to thrust his exultant way out of demoralizing wreckage.

* From "The New Sculpture," a speech delivered at the Museum of Modern Art sculpture symposium, February 10, 1952. (Quotations not from this source are from conversations with the artist.)

* Ibid.

* Ibid.