LITERATURE AND DESIGN: A DIALOGUE

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Chairs and stories are rather unlikely objects of comparison. Chairs, after all, must accommodate the human form—and woe to the chair that doesn't, or to the person whose form defies the chair. Stories, on the other hand, are free of practical demands and burdens; they need only stretch and unseat the mind and imagination. Yet the juxtaposition of these odd partners, the one so functional and the other comparatively free, reveals several common dimensions of two generally dissociated pursuits, literature and industrial design. Both disciplines are concerned with parts working together for a particular end purpose, or design; both are forms of communication and depend upon a kind of dialogue with man; both enter, for better or worse, the realm of aesthetics. There are limitations, of course, to such a comparison: the serious and often definitive considerations of cost, materials, and specific mechanical functions in industrial design have little if any relevance to literature. Nevertheless, both disciplines are directed toward a human-oriented end through a purposeful series of relationships involving aesthetic and structural judgments converging in a desired goal, be it an office chair or a novel, an aircraft's instrument panel or a poem. The yoking of the two pursuits, while opening a new perspective on useful objects and providing concrete visualizations of design principles operative in literature, suggests the universality of aesthetic and structural qualities and the artificiality of a divorce between the useful and the beautiful.

Industrial design is an unfortunate, cryptic term that describes a creative activity concerned with form-function concepts merging and accommodating the human needs of aesthetics, engineering, and marketing.[1] Only in the past forty or fifty years has design been recognized as a profession, while literature acquired a kind of professional status long ago, and has long been the object of scholarly investigation. Traditionally, literature has been defined in relation to three elements outside of itself: the creator, the audience, and the world imitated in the work. Thus its beauty (or in design terms, its suitability—rather

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[1]A newcomer to the hallowed halls of academia, it includes the fields of packaging, exhibit design, design product development and environmental designs. The obscurity of industrial design exists despite the tendency of man, in historical perspective, to design purposefully and attractively, be it a crudely-shaped stone tool or a sophisticated and finely-constructed computer. Master Kampen, *Design and Planning* (New York: Hastings House, 1965).

than goodness or badness) has been identified by reference to the intent of the mind which created it, the response of the audience receiving it, and the recreation of the world it imitates. With the advent of the New Criticism, however, a fourth classification has been emphasized. Literature is confronted on its own terms, so to speak; the relative beauty of a work is identified by reference to the fusion of parts within the whole.[2] Industrial design, like literature, is evaluated in terms of the same four criteria. The intent of the designer is relevant: the idea of a chair as a solution to a seating problem must be effected if the design is to succeed. The audience must be considered: likes and dislikes, and the expectations of what a chair in fact is and does are germane. The world imitated, or environmental factors, must be taken into account: the number of positions the human body can comfortably assume is a determining factor in design.[3] And the artifact itself must have a certain integrity: parts must blend and function in a harmonious totality. Stated in the vocabulary of industrial design, an artifact is always related to the materials of which it is made and the area in which it is contained, the environment in which it appears and functions. In literary terms, a work is related to the language from which it is constructed and the culture in which it thrives.

The creative process itself is the first term of comparison between literature and industrial design. Thomas Wolfe, leaning against and writing atop his refrigerator, is involved in the same process as a designer hunched over his drawingboard. Both writer and designer, either in advance or in the act of creation, make conscious and unconscious decisions on three questions: what is the purpose or total thrust of the object or work? how can the purpose best be achieved? and toward what audience is it directed? The design of an artifact or a literary work is the concrete embodiment of the answers to these. In the design itself, the creator effects his concrete goal of ordering disorder, of thoughtfully synthesizing the relations of audience, purpose, and materials in an appropriate structure. If he has designed or written well, he has also reached his abstract goal and his ultimate concern, man. For in both literature and industrial design a fundamental interraction, a dialogue between people and creators, takes place. Like it or not, artifacts and poems evoke a human response;

[2]Here literature and design diverge to some extent, for design is always more or less dependent on factors quite outside the design product itself. Litrature is dependent on one "given," language, but is otherwise relatively independent. For discussions of aesthetics and the art of literature as *distinct* from the useful arts, see H. G. Duffield, *Problems in Criticism of the Arts* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1968).

[3]Consequently, the parameters of industrial design are more limited than those of literature; the body has less flexibility than the mind and imagination.

admit it or not, designers and writers are shaped by their knowledge of and participation in a given cultural environment.[4] Even if a poem or an item is defined in psychological terms as the outpouring of the creator's psychoses, the ultimate end remains constant: man as creator or receiver, but man nonetheless.

Perhaps more important, though infrequently articulated, are the similarities between literature and industrial design in the structural realm merging with aesthetics. A meeting ground is discovered in the utilization of materials, in structural principles, and in aesthetic potential when an individual artifact is juxtaposed with an isolated literary work. Literature and industrial design share the same theoretical considerations with respect to the "givens" of both disciplines, their mediums and materials. Language, the medium of literature, has a certain potential based on the number of its syntactic and stylistic variables, just as the metals or plastics used in design have a given potential which determines, to some degree, the final form of the product. The possibilities of any language are limited by the language itself; the power of English is not qualitatively the same as that of French, any more than the potential of wood equals that of plastic. For example, the title of Robbe-Grillet's *Jalousie* is translated into the English "jealousy." But the French word *jalousie* carries a dual meaning: the emotion of jealousy, and a venetian blind—through which the narrator so appropriately peers at his wife. Unfortunately, this second meaning is lost in translation and thus a clever nuance is lost to the English reader. In this instance, then, the potential of French is greater than that of English; *jalousie* offers possibilities to Robbe-Grillet which the English word "jealousy" does not. In an industrial design, the plastics available to the American designer allow forms and shapes which could never be effected prior to the advent of plastics. And many of the great innovations in furniture, in the designs of Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen of the 1950's and in the current organic forms emanating from Italy, are made possible by the potential of modern materials. Both designers and writers must first understand and then utilize their given mediums as fully and effectively as possible, perhaps discovering unrecognized potential in the creative act itself.

In the *ABC of Reading*, Ezra Pound writes that literature is language charged with meaning to the highest degree. A writer strives to use language with absolute efficiency, economy, and flexibility. He

[4]This is not to say that either writers or designers are puppets of the public. Writing and designing for a selective audience is writing for an audience nonetheless, and "the public be damned" may as often as not be a wishful fabrication. By virtue of tradition, writers and designers are aware of expectations and address them either in a positive or a purposefully negative way.

therefore draws on the potential of language as developed in the course of its history and usage (connotation and symbols) as related to its signative value (denotation); and as present through various combinations and juxtapositions (figurative language). The designer utilizes various materials in like fashiion. He draws on the connotative, denotative, and complementary possibilities of his medium. In a lounge chair of leather and wood designed by Charles Eames, for example, the wood conveys a concept of strength, moldability, warmth, and richness, all strengthened through juxtaposition with the softness and elegance of leather, a mark of quality in the Western mind. And the Eames lounge chair is recognized as an outstanding, virtually classical design.

The utilization of the potential of a medium is related to the now unpopular but nonetheless important concept of decorum, by which writers and designers are partially guided. Decorum sometimes suggests stuffiness, especially to the student of literature, but the decorous is simply that which is appropriate in a given context.[5] Thus a wood and leather Eames chair is decorous in a fine home, and somehow indecorous—a violation or malapropism—in the context of a pasteboard shack. The great literary work, like any good design achievement, is decorous, utilizing a vocabulary appropriate to the total context of the work. Thus educated characters speak and act differently than fools, and elegant chairs appear in appropriate environments.

Designers and writers are concerned with the relationship of parts to parts and parts to the whole in a well-designed product or literary work. Suitability, or beauty, is dependent upon the unified totality.[6] Both a poem and a chair, or a novel and an automobile, must create a single dominant impression in order to identify themselves. The unity or focus of a literary work may often be a predominant theme in which all else—subject, images, characters, syle—cooperates. The theme of "The Artist of the Beautiful," for example, treats the relationship be-

[5]Here we meet head on, however, with a distinction between literature and industrial design. Literature is decorous only in terms of itself. Though some words of a four-letter variety may be considered indecorous by society, they may be quite decorous in the context of a given work. Or as Oscar Wilde expressed it in his preface to *Picture of Dorian Gray,* there is no such thing as moral and immoral art; there is only good and bad art. The confusion of two distinct realms of decorum, the social and the artistic, underpins censorship of literature. In design, however, decorum spreads beyond the artifact itself into a broad context. A building is related not only to its own interior, but also to its surroundings, and must be appropriate to the landscape and the other buildings bordering it; a TV set must be harmonious in its own parts and in the room in which it sits.

[6]Many literary critics, however, would dispute the modern insistence on unity as a norm of beauty. See, for example, Eugene Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance* (New York: Oxford, 1971). Our discussion assumes unity as a norm for purposes of comparison of literature and design, while being fully aware of the qualifications of that norm that may be necessary in the criticism of literature.

tween the artist, the natural world, and society. The reader is able to abstract this theme from the interractions of an artist and a blacksmith because Hawthorne's tale is unified: all parts serve the whole. Total confusion on the part of a sophisticated and studious reader, confronted with a given work, may indicate a failure in unity. Design products, too, must contain a unity which simultaneously gives them an identity. Consider, again, the Eames lounge chair, in which the "theme" of two arms, a base, a seat, and a back is "chair." But if fifty people examine these elements and are unable to identify the totality as "chair," then unity may have been violated; the parts fail to contribute, somehow, to the whole.

Although unity is perhaps a creator's first concern, it is not his sole consideration. In the tailoring of parts, one to another, lies the possibility of suitability and beauty. As Walter Gropius observed a few years ago, it is quite possible that two buildings are both functional and practical, while one is ugly and the other beautiful. Once unity is captured, any literary work or design product is potentially beaautiful; it becomes in fact beautiful with the engineering of its parts to that unity. It is not the "what"—existence as chair or story, the material or medium, the impression or theme—that determines artfulness and desirability, but rather the "how" whereby the "what" is achieved. Somewhat paradoxically, the "how" must consist in a harmonious variety composing the unified "what." In "The Artist of the Beautiful," Hawthorne presents the thematic conflict through variety as the problems of the artist and society are repeated and amplified in the details of watches and forges, contrasting settings, butterflies and babies. Each of these relationships is a variant form of the overriding theme. Hawthorne could, of course, simply repeat the theme again and again and claim unity for his work. But without variety, it would be very short on beauty and suitability. In the design of the Eames lounge chair, the same principle is operative. A base, seat, and arms are insufficient even if unified in object "chair." The base must harmonize with the arms while varying from them in order to identify itself as a base, and both must harmonize with the seat and back but obviously differ as well. The quality of the total package will depend on these relationship, on the worn but true presence of variety and harmony.

Breaking variety and harmony into their components, the good designer is concerned further with the classical concepts of contrast, balance, and restraint. Legs and arms must be identifiable, contrasting with one another. They must be balanced: except in unusual cases dictated by purpose rather than appearance (highchairs and bar stools,

for example), extremely long legs will not accompany highly abbreviated backs and one long arm will not appear with a short one. Restraint appears in the absence of excess: the well-designed chair will not include a corner which juts out of nowhere and does nothing, unless it contributes substantially to the appearance or some other facet of the object, just as the well-designed automobile does not include unnecessary areas of chrome or flamboyant succeps of sheet metal finns rising out of its fenders and creating totally unnecessary wind friction. The same principles are, of course, incorporated in literary design, where the fat is cut off language (no chrome), and the contrasting and harmonizing elements from which theme emerges balance one another in a design which imposes restraint on the totality. Classical concepts, that is to say, are still operative in both literature and design. Contemporary art may appear to be in reaction against these classical norms, but even the reaction includes, tacitly and in the negative, the traditional elements associated with beauty. Thus in a design product as in a novel there may be an ordered disorder. Consider the interior of the control panel of the IBM Ram AC accounting machine, or in office design, the office landscape concepts which are ordered in accordance with the demands of function and communication rather than style. The seemingly chaotic result is in fact highly purposeful. Or consider Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury,* which orders itself according to a seemingly disordered, yet highly significant and purposeful non-chronological time.[7]

A synonym for order, or the way in which parts are organized within the whole, is structure, an obvious concern of both literature and industrial design. Structure in the products of both disciplines may be either formal or informal: geometric or organic, classic or romantic. Though opposites, both are valid approaches to organization. Geometric-formal-classic arrangement is more synthetic and linear, with greater emphasis on the individuality of parts and a more highly contrived form relationship. Organic-informal-romantic organization, on the other hand, is built on a more natural, close-knit part-to-whole and whole-to-part relationship akin to "systems design" which is directed toward the dovetailing of separate areas. In architecture, the most obvious and well-known examples of these two distinct types of form organization are the organic constructions of Frank Lloyd Wright and the rigid geometry of Mies Vander Rohe. In literature,

[7]Design parameters are more restricted in this area than in literature, and again, the relationship of design to elements outside of itself is responsible. The floors of LeCorbusier's domitory at the Cite Universitaire in Paris could not be verticle and remain functional, while the floors described in a literary work may be vertical and still quite functional: indicators of a character's mental or physical state.

one need only compare any neo-classical drama, say that of Racine or Corneille, with the romantic creations of Victor Hugo. But the coherence and unity of both products, literary or industrial, are dependent upon a structure which restrains and contains various parts and yet is sufficiently flexible to permit and even encourage variety.

Structure, or the manner in which things fit, join, and meet, provides a standard of judgment in literature and industrial design. Generally, simplicity is a recognized goal in the economy and organization of visual and verbal form. While simplicity means the avoidance of clutter, it is a purely relative term dependent for definition upon the totality of the work described. *The Sound and the Fury* is certainly not a simple work, but neither is it cluttered. Rather, its complexity is appropriate to Faulkner's total verbal structure. A more decorative design, such as a ceramic sculpture, can be justified in terms of some particular end. The paramount norm in the creation and judgment of both product designs and literary works resides in the objects themselves, in the totality in which all parts function. The most successful design in both disciplines seems to be that which is just complex enough to communicate and organize the ideas and images contained, but simple and sparse enough to eliminate unnecessary. excessive flab, be it verbal or material.

The mention of norms leads to the question of audience and value judgments, an area one rather hates to approach in the wake of "art for art's sake" and the New Criticism. Yet an intimate reciprocal relationship exists between literature and audience, industrial design and consumer, on at least three counts.[8] First of all, the given culture provides the available forms which the writer or designer either accepts or rejects. Doyle did not write his detective stories in isolation, but in the company of Poe, the Corvette is not an orphan, but the child of Henry Ford and the carriages of the seventeenth century.[9] Conversely, a literary work or an artifact may be shaped in reaction against given forms. Victor Hugo's "Hernani" is a negative, though ultimately fruitful and positive, response to preconceived French notions of drama; the compact car embodies a reaction against the cumbersomeness and expense of the finned monsters of the late fifties. Secondly, the given culture lends richness to the individual elements of a work or artifact. Thus a writer relies on the connotative power of language—

[8]Audience raises a chicken-or-egg issue: does a creator respond to cultural demands or does he create them? We posit a circular relationship between audience and artifact, assuming that writers and designers simultaneously respond to and create taste.

[9]Most significant, meaningful, lasting design is evolutionary in its development. Even the computer has only slowly evolved through a series of significant, but only occasional, breakthroughs. For discussion of the relationship between literature and tradition, see T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *The Sacred Wood* (London: Metheun and Co., 1920).

a power derived from the culture. Hawthorne participates in the western literary and philosophical tradition when he selects a butterfly both to be and to symbolize a work of art in "The Artist of the Beautiful." Because the butterfly has served again and again as a symbol of the soul, or psyche, it richly and efficiently captures the notion of the work of art as an emanation of its creator. In somewhat similar fashion, a designer capitalizes on the connotations, or the recognizable images, offered by his culture. The Rolls-Royce and a small, uncommon foreign car such as a Mini-Cooper are polar cases expressing individuality and identity, wealth or independence. (The Volkswagen once occupied this position but has reached the point of saturation.) Thirdly, culture and audience provide the norm against which a work or an artifact is judged as new, revolutionary, or shocking. Designers and writers are, for the most part, mavericks of sorts; they are often more progressive in their concepts than the average individual. But it is only in relation to audience expectations and cultural baggage that the revolutionary and new are identifiable as such, or the reactionary and used can be seen as hackneyed attempts. Thus the "new novel" is revolutionary only in terms of the traditional novel, and the famous (or infamous) banana trees section of Robbe-Gillet's *Jalousie* has caused a stir because it is extraordinary. Contemporary free-form Italian plastic furniture is startling only by comparison with traditional designs, and the proposed Volkswagen incorporating the motor in the middle of the vehicle surprises us only because of our preconceptions and expectations.

Genuine innovation, however, should not be confused with the so-called "zap, pow, giggle" school of design. The primary intent of such a school would seem to be visibility, sensation, drama, and publicity intended to dazzle or shock. One is tempted to place ultra-contemporary products and works, such as "mod" clothing, supergraphics, and "naked" theater of the Calcutta variety in the "zap, pow, giggle" category. But it must be remembered that Joyce's *Ulysses* was at one time banned, Impressionism was thought stuff and nonsense, and Victorian heaviness and suffocation were attractive to nineteenth-century taste. The history of taste is not the history of aesthetics and does not determine longevity; rather, only time makes the ultimate discriminations. As John Ciardi has said, the *Iliad* may have fewer readers per generation than has *The Valley of the Dolls* in ours; yet only in the course of time will the total readership and popularity of Jacqueline Susann's work be subject to comparison with Homer's "best seller." However, judgments can be made on the intent, purpose, and thought process of a particular writer, designer, or movement. There

are different levels of design and of literature, with principles and performance varying on each level and ranging from the faddishness or momentary effectiveness of such items as mod clothes and hoola hoops through styling, a superficial application of extraneous form or overconcern for the "merchandising" of visual appeal. The eclectic forms of Spanish and Mediterranean furniture are now having their day, as is *Jaws;* only time can give them their centuries. But for better or worse, as creative reaction to or debilitating compromise with audience demands, culture influences both design and literature.

Environment plays yet another role in both disciplines: it defines the parameters, or limits and possibilities, of both products and literary works. The independent evolution of materials, methods of construction, language, and syntax in the world at large influences design and literature. Stream-of-consciousness, fed by its predecessor, the interior monologue, was perhaps an advance in literary technique equal to the use of concrete in architecture. And these, of course, were dependent on materials available in the environment and only indirectly related to literature and design. Thus new psychological insights nourished the development of the stream-of-consciousness technique; new material such as steel encouraged the development of skyscrapers. In reverse snowball fashion, the very developments made possible by innovations create reactions against themselves: the psychologizing tendency of the novel, expanded by stream-of-consciousness, catalyzed the *Nouveau roman,* its polar opposite; and the proliferation of plastic products has encouraged a nostalgic and sometimes reactionary preference for the use of natural rather than synthetic materials in some quarters.[10] In stylistic matters, too, literature and design meet in their environment. Compare, for example, the soft, streamlined forms of many products of twenty years ago with the crisp, hard-edge forms of today's products, be they toasters or automobiles. Or consider the concrete diction and crisp syntax of any of Hemingway's novels or short stories in relation to the abstractions and rhetorical flourishes of Emerson's prose. Not only do such differences provide an index to the temper of the times; that temper is simultaneously creating and accepting this prose or that artifact. Literature and industrial design, then, meet on the field of audience, culture, and the reciprocal influence on each on the other.

The question of audience raises that of psychology. Both of the arts here considered are attempts at adaptation, efforts to "optimize"

[10]Plastic products, for example, are not *ipso facto* ugly, but have come to connote the distasteful insofar as manufacturers, in view of consumers who dissociate the beautiful and the useful, have frequently utilized this synthetic in an unsuitable manner or merely in a substitute function.

a concept, to fit it, as it were, into the continuous stream of creative progress in each field. It may be that the success of a work or a product depends on the fulfillment of individual expectations. One sits in a chair and expects a certain amount of comfort, reliability, cost and maintenance; these are combined abstractly into a certain kind of "bundle" or grouping of satisfactions which the total design should fulfill. The total reaction, psychological and physical, of the consumer to the product is an element in the designer's considerations as well as in the consumer's decision to buy or forego a particular item. Likewise in literature: as Albert Camus points out in the *Myth of Sisyphus* and Kenneth Burke in *The Philosophy of Literary Form,* the actor and writer, viewer and reader anticipate and desire the fulfillment of certain expectations. A novel or a drama permits the creator, the actor, and the audience to enter into new lives and experiences. The ugliness or beauty of characters, psychological pleasure and pain, and the cost of the ticket or the book are factors which impinge on response to the work itself. People identify with artifacts and literature, and this identification operates on the level of stimulus and response simultaneously, in both disciplines.

A marriage of literature and industrial design takes place when one utilizes the other to its own profit, financial or spiritual. In our technological age, this relationship is quite intimate. Thanks to technology, in which industrial design participates, the paperback revolution is upon us and thriving, delivering literary works to the mass public at an unprecedented rate, and at prices within the reach of almost any interested consumer. And thanks again to technology, the complexion of the inner world of literature is evolving in conjunction with chages in the literary milieu. Writers are progressively more concerned with the objects and artifacts which people their creations and express the modern temper. The "new novel" strips objects of their human associations and examines them in their own integrity, while industrial designers utilize the human insights captured in literature, studied in psychology, and concretized in product design. Industrial design alters the appearance of the world, which affects literature, which in turn influences the world.

The parallels between literature and industrial design are of more than intellectual interest; they offer possibilities within the realm of the practical as well. In addition to elucidating the concrete design of literature and the abstract qualities of artifacts, the juxtaposition of these two arts suggests that beauty and suitability can and should be the province of all human pursuits. Especially in this age of mass production, when we are swamped if not partially suffocated by the

multiplicity of our own creations, it is important that industrial products be thoughtfully formed by designers who are aware of the artistic dimension of their functional pursuits. It is equally important that aestheticians and students of literature associate rather than divorce design efforts from artistic aims, and recognize that a division of the two is unnecessary and artificial. Literature and its design are of the stuff of this world, just as industrial design is of the stuff of aesthetics. Each can clarify the content and goals of the other, rescuing literary study from the void of the ivory tower, and industrial design from that of merchandising and pure profit motives. Among the many abstract advantages, pleasures, and enrichments which accrue to him through literature, a student locates a very practical value in its study in light of design, finding therein similar norms and concepts of structure which can serve him in his daily life. Thus those components that are suitable and pleasing—an enrichment of human life, an extension of the human dimension—in literature are rediscovered in design products, emphasizing the feasibility of expanding the experience of beauty.

This assumes, of course, that the question of beauty is relevant in modern life in spite of the challenge to such an assumption that is implicit in the decline of enrollments in liberal and fine arts studies in many universities, and in the current emphasis on the practical and on "job training." Attention to aesthetics and the arts, both the fine arts and the useful, is important to the quality of life. A few years ago, students were calling for and rioting over values or their absence, and were withdrawing from the mainstream of American life in order to live as "beautiful people." They were implying that our mode of life and beauty have somehow become dissociated. Students of literature and design, confronted with different styles and works, still ask, "So what's beautiful about this?" They are seeking some description of aesthetic norms and expressing man's continual urge to discriminate and select intelligently from among a multiplicity of "products," literary or functional.[11]

The yoking of literature and industrial design, and the abstraction of their common elements, contributes a kind of functional value to the study of literature, and an abstract and aesthetic value to the realm of industrial design. Consequently, both disciplines are elucidated and enriched, as are their practitioners and creations. Any ma-

[11]For discussion of the importance of the arts in the formation of the human being, and hence in the quality of human life and environment, see Irwin Edman, *Arts and the Man* (New Yoork: W. W. Norton, 1928), especially Chapter II, "Art and Civilization"; and Curt J. Ducasse, *Art, the Critics, and You* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), especially Chapter VI, "What Art Can Do For You."

terial or any subject is potentially artistic, offering itself to designers and writers for aesthetic use. But chaos and ugliness are continual threats, as modern civilization testifies. When the practitioner of industrial design moves to the level of great literature and assumes beauty as his province; and when the student of literature moves to the level of the functional and practical and demands the same standards in design as in a novel, the comparison of these two disciplines will have indeed been fruitful, both spiritually and practically. Western man, in other words, can combine the Hebraic and the Hellenic, person and reason, and tailor his environmet to both his practical ad aesthetic needs.