HISTORY IN THE LIBERAL ARTS: A THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

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One cannot maximize teaching results from any discipline, say history, until a methodological appraisal has been made as to what one may reasonably expect of it as a body of knowledge. Neither may its proper place in the curriculum be determined without a consideration of what we may demand of both art and science. Until clarification results, the position of history in the curriculum will continue to be ambiguous.

The author assumes that painting is a typical art form and that physics is a typical science; our specific task is to compare painting, history, and physics as kinds of knowledge with reference to the following aspects: 1) purpose of the discipline 2) nature and significance of the aesthetic component 3) kind of knowledge yielded and 4) characteristics of the communication system.

One crucial question will be what, if anything, the artist may properly do in conceptualizing and creating a work of art which is denied the scientist by the essential structure, purpose, and method of his discipline. Suppose, for example, it is perceived that the painter is allowed certain liberties in communicating his ideas which are not admissible to the physicist. Then one ought to obtain a better understanding of the position of history vis-a-vis art and science by seeing whether these liberties are customarily extended to the historian, or denied to him, by the methodologist.

Since the rebirth in the Renaissance of non-religious art, artists have sought a justification for it; romantic painters in nineteenth century France offered the attractive ideology of art for art's sake. This theory insists that art, as the pursuit of the aesthetic experience through the creation of beauty of form and color, must be an end in itself, regardless of meaning and expression, and not merely a means to some other end. Whistler's celebrated painting of an Arrangement in Grey and Black affords an excellent example of a conflict between an artist who felt art should be independent of meaning and a public which insisted that art be related to experience. Whistler intended to experiment with color combinations, being indifferent to subject matter, whereas the public valued the work only for its association with the idea of mother. Had he painted an old grey mare outside a village blacksmith shop, Whistler might have been equally satisfied with his artistry, but not so the sentimental public.[1] There is an obvious danger that the latter

may put a greater value on a mediocre painting of an object symbolizing love than a superb painting unattached to any such emotive symbol. To declare that art has a terminal and not an instrumental value is not to endorse the extreme position that all art is useless. What is primary is the recognition that an object of art need not be instrumental in order to qualify as an excellent work of art, and, furthermore, that stress on the instrumental character of art may be a potential threat to the existence of art itself.

On the contrary, Western science is valued on pragmatic grounds, for it aspires to a secular control of the forces of nature. Of course, there are scholars like P. W. Bridgman who contends that the "pure" scientist is one who is impelled through sheer curiosity to understand phenomena without regard for their practical aspects. However, even he concedes that the greatest single gift of science to the public is the concept that the world is "understandable."[2] Robert J. Oppenheimer is convincing when he argues that science "means a common power, a power to achieve that which could not be achieved without knowledge." One of the most compelling reasons for supporting "pure" scientific research is the realization that without it technological advance, upon which we are all dependent, would grind to a halt.[3] Therefore, we value science not as an end in itself, but because it is necessary and useful in obtaining certain other desired outcomes.

Unlike art, history's principal value lies in the message itself rather than in the mode of conveyance. The value of history lies in the fact that it supplies society a crucial element that it lacks, that of memory. Although history, as group memory of a meaningful past, is not as immediately available as personal memory, it is in some cases more reliable. All current social problems have their roots in history, and an intelligent approach to their solution demands a consideration of historical evolution. Knowledge of historical phenomena, says Morton White, affords "an additional perspective from which we view things; a perspective that yields important information for purposes of prediction and control." This is particularly true when historians give "dynamic generalizations" about recurring phenomena, say the tendency of the descendants of parvenus to become aristocratic.[4] Like empirical science, therefore, history has instrumental values. When methodologists contemplate the discipline of history, they think of man's ability to learn from past experience. Time spent on the study of history is justified because it is a means to this end.

One is almost immediately aware of the importance of the aesthetic component when studying the philosophy of art. This occurs because the primary task of art is "to treat the ineffable beauty . . . of the aesthetically immediate." Thus, anything apprehendable, say the blueness of Joan Miro's Lasso, must be seen to be known. The richness of its color may not even be fully intuited by the observer over long periods of time. In this sense the blueness is ineffable and hence mystical.[5]

Apparently the aesthetic feeling cannot come if the work of art strikes so familiar a chord as to divert attention from the art object itself. The caveat against personal identification with the subject of a painting, say that of a doctor brooding at the bedside of a sick child, is a justification of abstract art. This art affirms the principle: "Life as such is felt as the disturber of the aesthetic enjoyment."[6] The aesthetic feeling comes only to those who, amid suitable conditions, have surrendered to the art object and are absorbed in it.

Above all, there is no impulse to do anything practical when one experiences the aesthetic feeling. The Indian Sahitya Darpana describes the impulse in purely religious terms. "It is," concludes Morris Weitz, "a kind of Platonic realm of emotional universals, the very contemplation of which is good for its own sake."[7] The aesthetician, as aesthetician, is indifferent to matters of sensed space and historical time. He does not care whether the particular object was wrought by hand in the Ming dynasty or machine tooled in Pittsburgh the day before. Neither does he care to pry into the state of mind of its maker. All of these questions introduce intellectual problems which demand answers before the object itself may be appreciated in an historical or sociological sense. They thus divert attention from the thing-in-itself which yields the aesthetic component.[8]

In physical science there appears a serious gap between problem solving, which is most valued, and the aesthetic component. When an artist contemplates a Grecian urn, he is concerned with the level of immediate perception, that is, line, form, color, etc. But, concludes F. S. C. Northrop, for contemporary science the real "is not even such that it can be grasped by the imagination, to say nothing about it being sensed; only formally by the intellect can it be known."[9] Regardless of its aesthetic properties, for example, the mechanistic theory fails to account for the mysterious deviation of the electron from its trajectory. Consequently, it is useless to science.[10] Even if we grant the contention of Ashley Montagu that the aesthetic component permeates mathematical and laboratory situations,[11] we are still confronted with the primacy of the scientific demand of functionalism. Beauty without utility will solve no problems concerning the nature and behavior of physical reality.

History deals with the past, or an essential part of time which is discovered intellectually. Historical documents are the result of certain intellectual concepts on the part of the recorder of the event. The historian's sensory impressions of an old document with peculiar markings on it are on the level of perception, but this experience has only limited interest. When the researcher makes the necessary transition from sensory impressions to the assumption that the document was the product of a specific personality in a designated space-time span, he has thereby passed to the field of scientific constructs. Since the labors of an historian begin at this point, it is

evident he must adopt a problem-solving attitude which diverts attention from the possible aesthetic properties of the thing-in-itself.

Since the original observer has already translated the event into an intellectual concept, and the event itself is unobservable to the historian, he must deal with scientific postulates.[12] Confronted with the testimony of the witness, the writer of the document, and unable to put searching questions to him directly, the historian must begin by asking himself whether the witness was able as well as willing to tell the truth. While an examination of the document itself is imperative in determining answers to these pertinent questions, the historical document is meaningless if apprehended in isolation. Likewise, historical fact is meaningless if unrelated to other facts and to deductive thought necessary to give meaning to congeries of facts.

The kind of knowledge yielded by the arts generally concerns the inner man. Symbolism in art represents an effort to formulate a meaningful language whereby man can make public his private world, revealing his emotions, values, and insights into truth. Beyond this is the belief of idealists in art that this inner world is the real world. According to Benedetto Croce, in order to know reality, we may penetrate, by a process of sympathy and intuition, "to the real nature of the object, thus discovering for the first time the strangeness and multiplicity of its qualities."[13] Jacques Maritain quite properly calls this process the exact opposite from the abstraction of scientific truth.[14] This insistence that the artist can penetrate the plane of the commonplace event to discover the world of true reality has been voiced by many prominent Western contemporary artists.

This artistic conviction of its knowledge of inner reality cannot be dismissed as symptomatic of a uniquely disordered period in art history because Oriental artists have traditionally maintained the same philosophy. When a Chinese artist singles out a bird or a flower, he tries to achieve self-identification with his subject "so that, being it, he can create it."[15] Japanese art is characterized by the leap of faith "that the essential truth could be better caught by an artist when he pierced through, or even neglected, externals."[16] Historically this tendency is uppermost in Indian art. Even the figures in the erotic temple art are not meant to function biologically. One perceives mathematical relations rather than social interaction.[17]

Science is content to waive ontological reality. It confines itself to an attempt to understand process, a dynamic and changing kind of physical reality. It can describe and classify things, explain their interrelationships, and formulate laws on the basis of their behavior. It can break things down into their component parts, but it will not attempt to say what either the thing or its elements "really are." Neither is it concerned with problems of free will and ultimate reality.[18]

Of course science deals not only with unseen elements but with unobservable ones; but, as in the case of the alpha article and the electron in the famous cloud chamber experiment of C. T. R. Wilson in 1911, these unobservables are "latently observable." Henry Margenau explains similar phenemena. It is true, says he, that we cannot see the individual electrons, nor can we tell which one of the two holes the electron passed through. But if, on this account, we should deny the existence and the mass of an electron we should be ignoring a valuable aspect of our experience, namely "that there was after all an observable pattern on the screen." The primary problem for science is to reduce the system to order.[19]

History can neither legitimately be used to explain the "real nature" of man, nor what it was "really like" to have been any individual in history. Historians, as well as methodologists, are aware of the difference between the brute event and written records by fallible observers. If it were possible for the historian to say what it was "really like" to have been Martin Luther at the Diet or Worms, it would mean that, beginning with admittedly imperfect documents, the researcher could not only somehow detail the event exactly as it happened, but probe the soul of Luther until that monk yielded all his secrets. As soon as one asks how this can be done, it is obvious that the method is not acceptable by scientific canons. Sidney Hook concludes that what the researcher "offers as evidence of the historical subject's state of mind does not differ in kind from the evidence that he offers for the physical behavior of the historical subject."[20]

Accepting the postulate that, within recorded history, human nature has not changed,[21] the job for the historian is to discover why the behavior of men and peoples have differed so widely in space and time.[22] In such a dispassionate study, the historians may assist other social scientists in the common goal of a science of man.

Consequently, the historian of Luther at Worms appears as a behavioral scientist, for he describes, explains, and analyzes the way he spoke and acted there. Whatever the individual variations, the historian, fortified by a working hypothesis, attempts to discover the myriads of facts clustered around this single event, to select those deemed most pertinent, and to relate them in a meaningful order. To be effective, the hypothesis must be impartially weighed against alternate hypotheses by some criterion or rough measuring device independent of it. This is the historian's equivalent for the controlled experiment.[23]

Despite growing communication difficulties between scientist and layman, science is not to blame for this unfortunate condition. According to Albert Einstein, science seeks to set forth the fewest conceptual terms of clarity in order to explain coherently the orderly workings of nature. Euclidian geometry and mathematics afford an excellent illustration of the demand for simplicity. As long as classical physics could combine these and Newtonian concepts of physical reality to explain the behavior of macroscop-

ic phenomena, the reasonably informed layman could comprehend science. But the system fell because of an inability to account for the stubborn demands of empirical fact. Twentieth century atomic research revealed a world which was incomprehensible as long as one adhered to the concepts of classical physics. Quantum physics was formulated out of the basic necessity of science "to make the chaotic diversity of our sense-experience correspond to a logically uniform system of thought." If the new physics is esoteric, this is because its theory must explain the unorthodox character of the various particles inside the atom. Science, however, continues its search for a simple and unifying theoretical basis for all the sciences.[24]

Art is rooted in the artist's imagination. It is in this sense that one properly speaks of the artist creating experience while the scientist seeks to understand it. The fact that art does deal in scientific truth and historical fact does not eliminate the distinction to be made between imaginative or intuitive truth, and scientific or demonstrated truth. Literature is not necessarily good literature because it borrows from both science and history, and it may evoke beauty, truth, and goodness without an appeal to either.[25]

As a communication system, art involves the presentation by the artist of a new way of looking at a portion of the universe. It is successful when the observer understands its import, or its truth.[26] However, one may not demand that such communication be simple and direct. The arts may exalt mystical elements of human experience to the point that the mode of communication becomes mystical.[27]

As long as the narrative form is used in historical writing, one cannot avoid literary elements of grammar, imagery, and style. Nevertheless, in conceptual and methodological aspects history, as a form of communication, is similar to empirical science. Instead of seeking to emote, history seeks to describe, classify, analyze, and understand. Proposition II of Bulletin 54 of the Social Science Research Council sanctions the historical drive toward the unique.[28] History is secular, humanistic, and skeptical, rejecting arbitrary mystery. While imagination has an important role to play in attempting an approximation of past actuality, it must serve the greater claims of fact, truth, and clarity.[29]

Although history cannot be verified by means of measurement, the same difficulty belongs to the historical aspects of other empirical sciences. Franz Boas observes that, while there must have been a time when the mind of man was not superior to that of the higher apes of today, all extant men have much the same mentality. Obviously, scientists cannot "measure" the intelligence of some contemporary "man" who, while sub-human in mental capacity, is thought to be repeating the same evolutionary process as our remote ancestors underwent.[30]

History, however, is not deprived of the possibility of empirical verification. One accepts Vilfredo Pareto's hypothesis concerning the influence

on prices of a sudden influx of money because of an opportunity to study the same data and arrive at the same conclusions.[31] His hypothesis also enables prediction.

Although both the artist and the historian are confronted with the physical impossibility of reporting events in nature exactly as they happened, there are fundamental differences in the way each is permitted to report phenomena. One may reject Pablo Picasso's dictum: "Nature and art, being two different things, cannot be the same thing. Through art we express our conception of what nature is not."[32] But it is more difficult to deny the contention of Benedetto Croce who believes that, rather than the artist imitating nature, what one has is a situation in which nature obeys the artistic imagination.[33]

Even when nature served as a model for art, and when artists were most affected by scientific aspirations, artists consciously used the license to distort sensory impressions. Both Renaissance art[34] and that of the nineteenth century Impressionist school[35] are replete with such examples which are at the same time independent of the difficulties of drawing three-dimensional figures on a two-dimensional canvas.

It is twentieth century art which, by virtue of its predominant tendency to abstraction, has established a great chasm between painting and history. The art one calls abstract, geometric, non-figurative, or expressionistic is characterized by the rejection of nature, or the common sense impressions yielded by such objects as the human anatomy, still life, and landscape. The chief values of abstract art are based upon an appreciation of line and color, and the realization that these two combine to produce an aesthetic value in form and design.[36] Primacy is given not to the outer reality of things, but to the artist's emotional reactions to experience. Such indifference to the ordinary sense world produces sharp artistic deviations in matters precious to the historian, that is, human personality, subject matter, sensed space, and historical time. Leger aptly sums up the victory of modern art: "In painting, the strongest restraint has been that of subject-matter upon composition. . . . The impressionist freed color--we have carried their attempt forward and freed form and design. Subject-matter being at last done for, we were free."[37]

It is now apparent that history may be considered as an empirical science because it shares with it these crucial characteristics:

1) There is an assumption of an orderly world, independent of man's thought processes, which can be explained through natural cause and effect.

2) It is uninterested in ontological reality, being preoccupied with physical and historical reality.

3) Its attitude is skeptical and undogmatic.

4) Excepting such postulates and attitudes, empirical science begins with sense data. As sense data, the historical document is less satisfactory than the flash of light for the physicist because it is a human being's idea of

the event itself. Yet, if we ask a physicist to explain Galileo's experiments with falling bodies, we perceive that his knowledge is historical knowledge.

5) Theory is needed to organize and give meaning to sense experience, but all such constructs must square with that of experience. For history, the theory of elites must account for the shifting class structure within Russia in the present century.

6) Empirical science may deal with unseen and unobservable elements, but they must be "latently observable." The historian customarily deals with unobservables, say the battle of Gettysburg, but it is "latently observable" in so far as there are documentary accounts, artifacts connected with it, and the existence of the battleground. And for a long time afterwards, there were survivors of the battle. All theory is tied to the level of perception.

7) Ideally, communication is as simple and direct as possible while at the same time adequately explaining the relation between event and theory, theory and event.

8) Empirical science is valued in so far as it yields an orderly and coherent account of the sense world and enables man to come to terms with it. This is generally interpreted by Western man as control over nature, or over self.

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Footnotes:

[1] Robert Goldwater and Marco Treves (editors), Artists on Art from the XIV to the XX Century (New York, 1945), 347.

[2] Reflections of a Physicist (New York, 1950), 81-82.

[3] Science and the Common Understanding (New York,1954), 24-25, 96-97.

[4] "The Attack on the Historical Method," The Journal of Philosophy, xlii (1945), 323.

[5] F. S. C. Northrop, The Logic of the Sciences and the Humanities (New York, 1947), 169-177.

[6] "Abstraction and Empathy," in Melvin Rader (editor), A Modern Book of Aesthetics, An Anthology (New York, 1952), 458-459.

[7] Philosophy of the Arts (Cambridge, 1950), 201.

[8] Roger Fry, Vision and Design (New York, 1947), 33; Clive Bell, Art (London, 1949), 167.

[9] Logic of the Sciences and the Humanities, 184. See also Henry Margenau, "The Competence and Limitations of Scientific Method," Journal of Operations Research Society of America, iii, 2 (May, 1955), 136-139.

[10] Henry Margenau, "Advantages and Disadvantages of Various Interpretations of the Quantum Theory," Physics Today, vii, 10 (October, 1954), 8.

[11] "Suggestions for the Better Correlation of Literature and Science," in M. F. Ashley Montagu (editor), Studies and Essays in the History of Science and Learning (New York, 1944), 244.

[12] Henry Margenau, "The Competence and Limitations of Scientific Method," loc. cit., 137, and The Nature of Physical Reality, a Philosophy of Modern Physics (New York, 1950), 297-298, 458; Northrop, Logic of the Sciences and the Humanities, 317.

[13] Introductory Note to Croce's "Intuition and Expression," in Rader, Modern Book of Aesthetics, 92-93.

[14] "Beauty and Imitation," in ibid., 12. See also Benedetto Croce, Aesthetic, As Science of Expression and General Linguistic, Revised Edition (New York, 1953), 49-50.

[15] Benjamin Rowland, Jr., Art in East and West. An Introduction Through Comparisons (Cambridge, 1954), 103-104.

[16] Langdon Warner, The Enduring Art of Japan (Cambridge, 1952), 88.

[17] Anada K. Coomaraswamy, The Transformation of Nature in Art (Cambridge, 1935), 28-29.

[18] George Wald, "The Origin of Life," The Physics and Chemistry of Life, by the Editors of Scientific American (New York, 1955), 3, 21, 25.

[19] The Nature of Physical Reality, 334-335. See also Hans Reichenbach, The Rise of Scientific Philosophy (Berkeley, 1951), 176-179, 186; Otto Oldenberg, Introduction to Atomic Physics (New York, 1954), 262-270.

[20] Theory and Practice in Historical Study: A Report of the Committee on Historiography. Bulletin 54. Social Science Research Council (New York, 1946), 130.

[21] Henri Pierenne, "What Are Historians Trying to Do?" Methods in Social Sciences, A Case Book, edited by Stuart Rice, for the Committee on Scientific Methods in the Social Sciences of the Social Science Research Counvil (Chicago, 1931), 442.

[22] F. J. Teggart, Theory and Processes of History (Berkeley, 1941), 173, 233-234, 238, 244. See also Ralph Turner, The Great Cultural Traditions, The Foundations of Civilization, (2 vols.) (New York, 1941), i, Preface, ix.

[23] Theory and Practice in Historical Study. Bulletin 54, 112-115.

[24] Ideas and Opinions . . . (New York, 1954), 323, 336.

[25] DeWitt Parker, The Analysis of Art (New Haven, 1926), 104-105; John Hospers, Meaning and Truth in the Arts (Chapel Hill, 1946), 149.

[26] T. E. Hulme, Speculations. Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art, edited by Herbert Read (London, 1954), 149-150. See also R. G. Collingwood, The Principles of Art (Oxford, England, 1947), 313-317.

[27] Herbert Read, The Philosophy of Modern Art: Collected Essays (London, 1952), 39.

[28] Theory and Practice in Historical Study. Bulletin 54, 134.

[29] For example, when Bert J. Loewenberg considers the position of historical relativists, he puts insistent demands upon them for explicit formulation and clarification of their assumptions, terminology, and logic. "Some Problems Raised by Historical Relativism," The Journal of Modern History, xxi (1949), 21.

[30] Primitive Art (Irvington-on-Hudson, 1951), 1.

[31] The Mind and Society, 4 vols. (New York, 1935), iv,1628.

[32] Goldwater and Treves (editors), Artists on Art, 417.

[33] Aesthetic, 176.

[34] "The central idea of the Italian Renaissance is that of perfect proportion. In the human figure . . . this epoch strove to achieve the image of perfection at rest within itself." Heinrich Wolfflin, Principles of Art History . . . (New York, 1932), 9-10. See also Bernard Berenson, Aesthetics and History in the Visual Arts (New York, 1948), 198-199.

[35] Frank P. Chambers, The History of Taste . . . (New York, 1932), 207. The movement culminated with Cezanne whose work was characterized by a lack of verisimilitude. Hulme, Essays on the Philosophy of Art, 100-101; Clive Bell, Since Cezanne (New York, 1948), 14.

[36] Read, Philosophy of Modern Art, 218; Hulme, Essays on the Philosophy of Art, 76-77.

[37] Goldman and Treves (editors), Artists on Art, 424. Much of the art of Léger is characterized by his "love of beauty of machinery." Alfred A. Barr, Jr., Masters of Modern Art (New York, 1954), 84-85.