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Howard A. Wiley

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Idea vs. Symbol

• Howard A. Wiley

IT SEEMS TO ME that if the central problem of the artist, literary and otherwise, could be compressed into one sentence, that sentence would be something like this: the central problem of the artist is to communicate the most subjective experiences most effectively to the most percipients.

Standing thus alone in its undefined opacity, this equation of superlatives appears barren and obscure. In order to elucidate it, we must unravel the strands of reasoning that lie coiled up in it.

We can begin most happily, I think, with the strand that lies behind the word "communicate." We know, if we have ever tried to tell anybody anything more subtle than the route to the postoffice, that communication between individuals is extremely difficult except on the most superficial levels. This difficulty is not immediately apparent because people have devised a large number of symbols (chiefly words) to which they respond similarly. If I say "cat" I can be reasonably sure that my hearer forms a mental image similar to my own. Thus I am able to discuss cats without fearing that he thinks I am talking about dogs.

But these common symbols, despite their remarkable capacities, suffer severe limitations. They fail to communicate in direct proportion to the subjectivity of what is expressed. The word "cat" represents a common object that both my percipient and myself are ordinarily familiar with. But many objects and experiences, particularly inner states of mind and subjective responses, have no exact symbols corresponding to them that will be readily understood by both the communicant and the percipient.

There is, of course, a large category of symbols designed to convey inner states of mind and subjective responses. Such symbols as sighs, gestures, facial expressions, postures, colors, sounds, and words like "love," "hate," "fear," "joy," etc. do manage to convey—roughly and inexactly—certain familiar and universal subjective conditions. But even these symbols fail most where the artist most needs them: in the communication of the different, the distinctive, and the unique.

This leads us to the next term in the equation, "the most subjective experiences." Every individual, in the complex of personal characteristics and peculiar experiences that he brings to the creation and perception of art, is unique. In some respects his personality, his attributes, his outlook are different from those of every other individual. And these differences, summed up as uniqueness, are the most valuable attributes he possesses. When the individual is an artist, the distinction of his attitudes, the freshness of his outlook, the special quality of his responses are the most valuable things he can communicate.

This uniqueness is, first of all, valuable to himself. It is the attribute

that sets him off distinctly from the "otherness" of his life, that gives him his separateness, his individuality, and thus his reality in the midst of the total flux of which he is a part. It is this individuality (of experiences, of responses, of attitudes) that is the ultimate value that he can convey as an artist.

For the percipient of art, this uniqueness in the artist has value because—if the artist can communicate it—it gives the percipient knowledge and insight that he can get in no other way, from no other source. What is common to all life and accessible to every individual, he can acquire without help. But what is peculiar to the individual beside him, he can acquire only if that individual is able to communicate it to him.

Thus the value of artistic material increases as its subjectivity and uniqueness increase. But the difficulty of communicating it also increases in direct proportion to these attributes. The more unique the artist's material, the fewer common symbols he finds available to evoke a response in the percipient similar to his own responses to the experiences of life.

This problem, which is fundamental to all art, sets up a two-way tension within the field of the artist's creative activity. It imposes on him two essentially contradictory motives. One is to express the distinctively personal and individual aspects of his experience. This naturally draws him away from those symbols that communicate most widely and readily. The other motive is to communicate as widely and effectively ("to the most percipients") as possible; and this motive draws him away from the distinctive and unique material in his experience.

Some aestheticians may deny that both these motives need to be present *simultaneously* in the creative process. But I do not see how art can be created with either of them lacking.

The "artist" who foregoes the unique and distinctive in his material actually foregoes art. It is one of the essential characteristics of a work of art that it conveys a quality of experience; and as experience can only take place within the individual, who brings a unique response to it, a quality of experience can only be conveyed through the communication of unique personal experience. Every true work of art is the result of translating "new" material—that is, the fresh, different experience of the artist—into intelligible terms. To the extent that the so-called artist falls short of this distinctiveness, to that extent he falls short of art. The "artist" who merely learns the teachable techniques of art and then draws the content of his work—the material of his "art"—from the common fund of plots, themes, ideas and situations, is only a carpenter. He gets his wood from the lumber yard. The true artist grows his own trees. Until the unique in the artist's experience becomes the material of his work, the result is only cabinet-making.

But communication is just as essential to art as *self-expression*. Again, the "artist" is not really an artist unless he communicates something intelligible. It may be argued in some quarters that pure self-expression,

unadulterated by objective intelligibility, is a sufficient artistic purpose. But this is a contradiction in terms. True art is an objective reality. To be art the created object must exist for two individuals. But nothing exists for two individuals—in this case the creator and the percipient—until it is intelligible to both of them. The “artist” who restricts himself to unintelligible self-expression—because his experiences are too ineffable to communicate—may produce “art” in his own mind, but he does not produce art for anyone else. His “art” has no objective characteristics, no symbols that are intelligible to another, no externalized meaning. Therefore it has no impact on this other. It fails to communicate, and thus is deprived of the most valuable attribute art possesses—the ability to bridge the gap between the experience of one individual and another.

If it is true, then, that these two contradictory motives contend in the artist’s field of creative activity, our original equation becomes more intelligible. The central problem of the artist is to discover a *balance of maximums* between these two motives, to establish an equal tension between them. In other words, he seeks to communicate his *most* subjective experiences *most* effectively to the *most* percipients.

If the balance between these two intentions is upset, the artistic product is cheapened. When too much weight is given to communicability, we get imitative repetitions of previously objectified experience—the trite and the banal. When too much weight is given to subjectivity, we get the unintelligible gibberish of the uncommunicated self, the finger-painting and the poems consisting of commas.

The artist’s first task, therefore, is to know himself. He must choose, either intuitively or reflectively, those experiences, responses and attitudes that are most distinctive to him. He must find in himself that quality of experience (which comes through in his work as style) that is most exclusively his own. He must cultivate honesty and originality of outlook, so that he does not fall into the fatal pit of borrowing his responses from those made available to him by models. He must borrow only those techniques that enable him to convey his own responses.

Once this distinctive material has been mined from the welter of his total experience, his next problem becomes the choice of symbols (or the creation of symbols) that will communicate this material most completely to the most percipients. And the more original and distinctive his experiences are, the more difficult this is. But he cannot yield—either to the ready recesses of unintelligible self-expression or to the adulteration of the distinctive by the choice of the easy, common symbols.

There can be no avoiding the fact that something must be sacrificed in the course of this arduous and exacting process. The effort to communicate as thoroughly and widely as possible is bound to reduce the distinctiveness of the basic material. And the effort to hold on to the distinctiveness of the basic material is certain to restrict the scope of its intelligibility. But it is a measure of the great artist that he can attain the maximum communicability of the most distinctive material of his private experience.