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# The Heart or the Matter

● Brother Felician Patrick, F.S.C.

THREE SHORT QUESTIONS, closely related one to another, form perennial stimuli for fundamental discussions of the nature of art. These questions are: "What is the artist's central problem?" "What is the nature of the art object?" and "Does the perception of an art object differ from the perception of anything else?" Upon the interrelated answers to these questions have been built two dominant theories of aesthetics, the "communication" theory and a theory of modified hylomorphism. Since the communication theory is still dominant in many quarters, it will be discussed first in the light of certain inadequacies and unpleasant consequences connected with it. Thereafter, the second theory will be briefly set forth and compared with the first, with the purpose of testing the ability of both views to answer the three basic questions before us.

The communication theory of art may be said to embody the view that "the central problem of the artist is to communicate the most subjective experiences most effectively to the most percipients." Consistently present among the holders of this view are three elements: communication of something from the artist to the percipient, a subjective experience exerting some kind of causality *even in the percipient* of the completed art object, and the aim of pleasing a fairly large number of beholders. Prefacing a consideration of each of these elements, we might submit the view that these very notions have long been accepted by many without apparent proof, with the result that a warped scale of artistic values has grown up on all sides. The very proportion of time given to various arts and artists in both specialized and "survey" courses at all levels of education shows to what extent non-objective and non-artistic criteria have entered into the criticism of the recent past. Just how the communication theory gives rise to these disorders we shall attempt to show.

A pivotal point of inadequacy in the communication theory lies in the fact that only one of the arts, literature, employs materials which by their nature are designed to communicate at all. The elaborate extension of this purpose into painting, music, and other arts can easily lead to an artificial and subjective superstructure of "interpretation" which ignores the real values of the object. Even with literature itself, the process of communication does not begin to account for many of the factors which have made works immortal, e.g., sound patterns. Few critics, of course, hold that the literary artist sets out to transmit concepts to his readers after the manner of Longfellow's "A Psalm of Life." More general is the view that the artist has set out to objectify some experience which, until his work should be completed, would be forever doomed to remain merely his own,

incommunicable. However, even this subtler position seems at odds with the supreme detachment from their work shown by the greatest artists, and with the clear evidence that many good works have been fashioned from a variety of sources under circumstances tending at least to minimize the role of any subjective experience. Witness in support of these contentions such works as *Hamlet* and *The Canterbury Tales*. Indeed, we might say that throughout their major works neither Shakespeare nor Chaucer could be shown to have communication as his primary aim. Further, the scope of many works precludes the notion of one flash of inspiration which "burned to be communicated." The evidences of successive revision consequent upon public reception—not aesthetic dissatisfaction—suggest some other dominant aim. The very notion that the subjective perception could last long enough to guide the execution of a work of magnitude seems to run counter to normal psychology; yet the unity of vast art works rules out the possibility of a succession of "flashes" to guide the progressive carrying out of the work. While not in the least denying the presence of "a grace beyond the reach of art," in the process of the creation of a masterpiece, it seems necessary to insist that the purpose of communicating a unique and subjective experience could not realistically be considered primary.

The notion of the necessity of some striking experience on the part of the artist, both as the stimulus to create and as the reason, somehow, for the value of the art object itself, enjoys wide tacit acceptance. Yet here too the facts are troublesome. Shakespeare, for instance, wrote many of his plays merely to keep his company supplied. He created history plays from patchquilt sources when such plays were popular, and when they ceased to be popular he ceased to make them. Similarly, the topicality of *The Merchant of Venice* resembles the same quality in Anderson's *Winterset*. The artistry of such works can easily be seen under another literary theory, but not under this one. Beethoven wrote three overtures to *Fidelio* (Leonore I and II, and the Overture to *Fidelio*) because of such factors as consumption of time and difficulty of execution. Keats' work demonstrably improved when he progressed from the Shelleyish stringing together of brilliant impulses to the careful fashioning of integrated patterns.

A still more important consideration in the matter of the subjective experience is the assumption that value is in some way related to uniqueness. Again, the facts seem at variance with this popular view. Some of the greatest works in all languages are rehashings of traditional materials, with examples being too numerous to mention. Let *Lear*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Rape of the Lock*, and for that matter the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, suffice. Surely the highest genius and inspiration were present in the use of the materials; but the materials themselves were neither unique nor subjective. Moreover, there is no evidence to show that the reading of these works gives the reader any clear knowledge of the perceptions and concepts in the minds of Shakespeare, Chaucer, Pope, or Homer. In the

discussion of the consequences of the communication theory, this matter of subjective experience will again come to the fore. There remains in our consideration of the theory itself the item of the percipients of the art work.

"Communication to the most percipients" is an idea that serves well as an antidote to esotericism; but it contains within itself the cult of clarity and eventually of watery mediocrity, a trend all too common among "meaning-hunters" in the field of criticism. It has never been demonstrated that the greatest artists felt obliged to be hampered by the inadequacy of their public. If a composition in any art medium is to "wear well," it is almost *necessary* that it have values which will not only elude the initial perception of it, but permanently elude the perception of all but its most careful and analytical students. It is no valid criticism of an art object that many—even most—fail to understand it immediately or ever. "Snobbery" is an epithet easily hurled; and obscurity is relative.

Taking the theory as a whole, probably the strongest criticism we should submit is that of inadequacy with relation to the problems it seeks to state. When we move into a consideration of its consequences to criticism, our objections must grow more violent. To begin with, the communication theory has led for over a century to critical anarchy, an absolute subjectivism in the evaluation of art works. Since the privacy of the human mind makes it impossible fully to know the "contents" of another's mind, we can never fully determine how successful an artist has been in achieving his alleged prime purpose. Secondly, under this theory, who is to say what is good and what is bad in art (as art), so long as the artist has, to his own satisfaction, objectified his perceptions? We are left entirely without standards by which to judge works or even to educate ourselves to a better appreciation of the objectively worthwhile.

The "communication aesthetic," moreover, has always tended to lead the critic outside the work and into innumerable avenues of research even before he has attained a basic understanding of the work. While not denying the value of literary history, political history, and allied studies for shedding light upon the art object in hand, we might still decry the terminal attention given to these factors as a result of this theory. Chaucer, for example, was studied for centuries in terms of his sources, his possible historical prototypes for characters, his role in defining the structure of the language, his social criticism; but the objective analysis of magnificently *constructed* works was almost entirely overlooked. Much criticism, moreover, has amounted to little more than minute biographical "archaeology." Might not such emphases as these account for the museum-piece status of most great art in the eyes of a preponderant majority of college students today?

Finally, this aesthetic leads frequently to an evaluation of art objects on non-artistic grounds. This insult to the objective scale of created being

often masquerades in the guise of patriotism or piety, the most respectable substitutes for critical acumen. One recent translator, for instance, prefers Langland to Chaucer because she feels the former has a more serious outlook on life. Arnold lauds "high seriousness" as an artistic value; and vast quantities of dreadful religious art are scattered about as pitiable tributes to the decline of a genuinely artistic standard of values. As a century of criticism of art on non-artistic grounds seems at last to be ended, we find it necessary to restore such authors as Pope, Dryden, and even Chaucer to the rank merited by the objective value of their work, rank denied them by the romantics and moralists, who wanted their artists to communicate a sublime impression of one kind or another and cared little for the structures within the art object.

By way of suggesting a counter-theory to the communication aesthetic, we shall attempt a brief outline of the current application of Aristotelian causality to the production and existence of an art object. Clearly, originality will be almost totally absent, since an entire school of critics currently apply such criteria as will follow, at least to the extent that they stress objective analysis rather than subjective impression. It should be admitted at the outset that the analysis of art works as things-that-have-been-fashioned seems relatively weakest at the very point where other approaches may appear stronger, i.e., in the searching attention to the creative process. This process, especially in its "inspired" aspect, persistently eludes confinement within the bounds of rule and measurement (as Pope, eminently regular, was so quick to recognize). Nevertheless, it is the object more than the process which primarily interests the critic. Further, this approach primarily to the object and through the object to the process, seems far more dependable than its opposite as a guide to understanding art and the central problem of the artist.

Taking a traditional and even "classical" view, we submit that art is a process of making, and that an art work is a thing that has been made. The process involves a maker (efficient cause), material out of which a thing is made (material cause), the form achieved (formal cause), and the purpose for which the thing is made (final cause). In the criticism of an art object, we need attend only to the intrinsic causes, material and formal, with nearly all the attention being directed to a full appreciation of the form. But to attempt a statement of the artist's problem, we shall have to proceed to the making process and thus consider all four causes. Let us examine the intrinsic causes first.

Since all art objects are perceptible things, they all have material causes. Thus we can say that music is made from sounds, sculpture from stone, painting from color, and architecture from enclosed space. Literature, in this context, is made from words. For the reason that literature is made from words or language, the communication theory is most frequently

misapplied to it, since words by their nature do communicate. Nevertheless, we shall try to show that insofar as the words are being put to an artistic use, their communicative function is no longer to be regarded as primary. Words as such are merely the material cause of a literary art object.

Like all other matter, all these material causes need determination by a formal cause. In the case of every art, the formal cause may be said to be some pattern or structure wrought by the artist in the material at hand. Music is, then, sounds made into a pattern, architecture is space made into a pattern, and literature is words made into a pattern. Confusion arises only when the conventional perceptual and conceptual meanings attached to words—and to some tones—lead the critic to stress these meanings more than the structures that have been fashioned from them.

In literature, for instance, we see a process whereby material causes become successively determined or "informed," only to serve in turn as material for a further structuralizing or patterning. Sounds are informed by conventional meanings and become words, which are further systematized into language. At this point the communicative function of the words goes on with relatively little further determination; but the work of the artist is just beginning. He goes on to make patterns out of the sounds of the words and to make other patterns out of their meanings. In a highly wrought Shakespearean soliloquy, for instance, objective analysis reveals the presence of intricate patterns of assonance, consonance, alliteration, rime, cadence, meter, and rhythm—all of these fashioned solely from the sounds of the words employed. Moreover, an undreamed-of richness of variation-within-uniformity comes to light when the work is so approached. In the same selection, the meanings of the words will have been worked into contrasts, irony, logical progression in such a way that it is the pattern of meaning, not the meanings themselves, which accounts for the power of the passage. When this technique of analysis is applied to plays in their entirety, virtually a new world of harmonious structures is revealed.

Not the least of the merits of this "causality" approach is that it allows for a full appreciation and criticism of a work in the total absence of a biography of the "efficient cause." Whether or not we have arrived at a full understanding of the "inside" of Shakespeare's mind does not concern us. He made elaborate forms out of this particular matter; and the details of his life pale into comparative insignificance.

With regard to the perception existing in the mind of the artist, that is, the experience that will be objectified, it seems that in a great many cases this ideal to be achieved worked itself out as the object itself took shape. Therefore, in speaking of formal cause, it does not seem necessary to apply this term to anything outside the object (e.g., an "exemplar"), since

in so many instances the form did not integrally pre-exist in the mind of the artist.

The final cause of the art object and the art process may be discussed in two senses. For one thing, the purpose is primarily to delight the human percipient through the appeal of harmony, brilliance, magnitude, etc. to his faculties. Perhaps it may someday be shown that the roots of the pleasure in the beholding of unity-in-variety lie in the very compositeness (unity-in-variety) of human nature itself. At all events, it remains certain that the forms, (structures, patterns) are intended primarily to delight. That this employment of the human faculties is metaphysically good is scarcely ever doubted. A certain guiltiness in the presence of the doctrine of the Cross seems at times to prompt an overspiritualizing or even a denial of this purpose of delight; but these arguments are neither unanswerable nor relevant to the exact topic under discussion.

In another sense, the final cause of an art object may be said to be its own form, especially if we are centering attention on the art *process*. That this interpretation of art for art's sake need not violate teleology goes without saying.

With regard to the efficient cause of the art object, the artist, two assertions might be made. In the criticism of the art object, the artist is among the least important factors to be considered. In the examination of the problems of making forms, he is a prime factor. It is precisely here that the Aristotelian and Thomistic guides to thought become slightly less satisfying, since the direct intellectual knowledge of singular things is practically ruled out by the scholastic analysis of the knowledge process. Yet knowledge of singulars does seem to occur in both the "inspiration" to make a beautiful thing and in the appreciative perception of the beautifully made thing.

Prescinding, then, from a rash attempt to answer the tremendous question on the perception of an art object, we can note that steps toward an answer have been taken by mention of special aspects of form which can cause delight and of the problem of the knowledge of singulars. On the nature of the art object itself, the communication theory must, it appears, bow to the one which stresses analysis. Finally, might not the artist's central problem result from the clash between the "act" of the formal cause of the art-object-to-be with the inertia and balkiness of the indeterminate material cause, a clash which the artist's efficiency must overcome in an unusual, "inspired" manner? Is not this clash precisely what goes on in a less arduous way when anything—be it only a chair—must be *made*? The whole problem seems to be rooted not so much in the inherent difficulty of communication, as in the fundamental and inherent cleavage which works within all visible creatures, unities yet composite, existing beings yet so inert, combining vivifying form with lifeless matter.