

ELDER OLSON
Associate Professor of English
The University of Chicago
Visiting Lecturer of English
University of Puerto Rico, 1952-53

EDUCATION AND THE HUMANITIES

If education is a means to the end either of knowledge or of skill, it is clearly contingent upon a given conception of knowledge or skill, and therefore upon the condition of knowledge in a given field at a given time. Certainty in what is to be taught usually produces certainty in how to teach it; conversely, uncertainty in the subject-matter is almost bound to produce uncertainty in methods of instruction. It must therefore be a matter of serious concern to the humanities educator that the state of learning in his subject is satisfactory only in its historical and similar "factual" elements, while in any question relating to the natures, powers, and values of the objects which are the center of that subject and which give that subject its importance— I mean the objects of art— it is such that one may doubt whether it involves knowledge at all.

For it is natural in our day to test whatever professes to be knowledge by comparing it with science; and such comparison, in this instance, is not likely to flatter the vanity of the humanist. In the sciences, it would seem, theory

and practice have gone hand in hand, with the result that the projects, and even the fantasies, of one generation appear commonplace beside the real achievements of the next. Scientific discourse, despite its remoteness from common speech and its unintelligibility to the layman, is a model of clarity, uniformity, and precision; failure to understand it is at once imputed to lack of training, rather than to any flaw in the discussion. Method and principle have been so firmly established that in the most abstruse and complicated problems many minds arrive independently at the same conclusion, and all concur once the proof is shown. The most complex cooperation is possible to researchers who have nothing in common but their science. Even the predictions and conjectures of science are respected because of the foundations on which they rest; and it is only in the realm of prediction and conjecture that any significant dissension arises among scientists. There is agreement as to what is or is not scientific knowledge; at any rate, there is no difficulty as to the proper course of study, or as to the qualifications of a scientist. Finally, to cut the list short, science seems to be so much a matter of the things studied, rather than of the man studying, that it is supposed as independent as possible of the individual researcher; its progress is not much impeded by the death even of the eminent scientist, who leaves behind him knowledge solid as coral, to be built upon by succeeding generations.

The state of the arts, considered as departments of knowledge, is the very reverse. Contemporary literature has not surpassed the work of Homer, Dante, or Shakespeare as the jet fighter has surpassed earlier aircraft; contemporary critical and aesthetic theory exhibits no superiority to that of the past. The integration of theory with practice is minimal; indeed, theory is so general and so uncertain that it can offer small, if any, guidance to the practising artist. Critical terminology is so ambiguous that perhaps half the

critical controversies of today are over words. There is not only no agreement upon method, but none even upon the possibility or impossibility of method. No point of doctrine has been advanced which has not been repeatedly and vigorously denied. There is no agreement upon what constitutes critical knowledge, or upon the proper course of study; and any evaluation either of critic or critical project is sure to provoke sharp controversy. Finally, artistic theory seems so much a question of the man studying rather than of the things studied that each theory might almost be said to die with its author; the extension and even the application of a given theory are matters of the greatest uncertainty; rather than progress we see difference and change. In short, whereas our sciences exhibit all the tokens of knowledge, our artistic theories exhibit only those of opinion and taste.

Such, doubtless, would be the common conclusion after the comparison of the arts and the sciences. Yet the case is by no means so simple. The true situation of the humanities, I believe, is not so much that we do not know as it is that we do not know that we know. It is not that some twenty-five centuries of inquiry and theorizing have failed to supply us with knowledge, but that we have failed to recognize that knowledge as knowledge, and consequently have failed to profit by it. Chaotic as the present condition of criticism and aesthetics may seem, it is the result of only a few causes, and consideration of these will, I hope, set the whole matter in a different light. These causes are 1) the peculiar nature of art as a subject-matter, 2) the relation of art, as knowledge, to other sciences, and 3) our general failure to recognize, and hence to interpret properly, certain phenomena produced by differences of method.

One aspect of the peculiarity of art as a subject-matter is the difficulty of apprehending the artistic fact. In the physical sciences the concrete fact is established by the

senses, whether aided or unaided by instruments: the eye sees sodium burn upon contact with water, or sees the litmus paper turn from pink to blue, or the needle register upon the graph, or the pointer shift upon the dial; however different the interpretations of these as data, however different the systems of inference constructed upon these, these themselves remain solid, clearly ascertained. The mathematical sciences are completely independent of the concrete fact; their data lie in their axioms, definitions, and postulates. But the case of the arts is completely different. All objects of art involve primary sensory presentations, but the object itself, as object, is not perceptible to sense. Of a painting the eye sees only certain lines and colors, of a sculpture only certain planes and masses; it is not by the faculty of sight alone that we determine that the painting depicts a face marked by nobility and suffering, or the sculpture, the agony of Christ. Similarly in all other arts: acuteness and attentiveness of the senses involved are only a small part of the whole business of perception of the object. A child or youth who can readily learn propositions of mathematics or of physics cannot be expected to understand, in any significant sense, such poems as Wordsworth's **Ode on Intimations of Immortality** or Yeats' **Sailing to Byzantium**; he can say what the words say, but he cannot perceive what the poem is, simply because he lacks sufficient experience to make the experience depicted in either poem intelligible to him. Nor is the experience required for the perception of a work of art a matter only of human experience, in the general sense; it is also a matter of experience with the forms and devices of art.

The "facts" of art, then, are difficult of apprehension, since they depend for their apprehension upon the coexistence and coercion of a number of faculties in a given observer — faculties, one might go on to say, not always given by nature, and not always easy of achievement. What is more,

the unqualified observer, who is not in possession of the facts is quite likely to mistake such impressions as he does have for the facts themselves. Artistic inquiry is thus lodged at the outset in the difficulty that there will be a high variability in what is taken as fact; but we must not suppose that therefore such inquiry cannot be based upon fact, or that the facts can never be ascertained. Granted that not everyone who can read can comprehend poetry, that not all who can hear can understand music, that not all who can see can perceive the qualities of a painting or a sculpture, it does not in the least follow that perception and comprehension are impossible. The work of art is as solid and real an existence as the natural phenomenon, and its attributes are as determinate; the business of the aesthetician and critic is to ascertain what the work is and what its attributes are.

But facts alone do not constitute science; they are merely the raw material of the data upon which a science is erected; and a second aspect of the peculiarity of art as a subject-matter is that it demands, for scientific formulation, that the unusual powers of perception just mentioned be coupled with unusual philosophic proficiency. When attributes are rare in themselves, their coincidence in one individual is likely to be rarer still; it is therefore not surprising that the aesthetician, trained in the consideration of philosophic theories of art, has seldom the trained sensitivity required to put him in possession of sufficient data, nor that the critic, skilled in the scrutiny of particular works, has seldom the philosophic discipline required for the construction of sound theory, or even for the conversion of fact into datum. Yet, if the aesthetician has been too general and the critic too particular, it does not follow that art is inamenable to scientific inquiry, but that humanistic education has been at fault: the aesthetician should have had rigorous training in the examination of individual works, and the critic should have been trained in philosophic method.

A third aspect of the subject, perhaps the one most likely to seem to render it unsusceptible of scientific treatment, is its apparent lack of scientific "laws". All science, it may be argued, depends upon some supposition of constancy; for example, the natural sciences depend upon the supposition of constancy in nature; what would be the point of inquiring into the force of gravitation or the speed of light, if the force of gravitation could be brought under no constant formula, or if light had no fixed speed? On these grounds, what possible constancy can be found in art? Hydrogen explodes under certain conditions, and anyone who fulfills those conditions, animal or man, willingly or unwillingly, will explode it; but whether a tragedy will turn out excellent, or turn out to be a tragedy at all, is entirely dependent upon the skill and genius of the poet; the forms of individual works of art are never predictable from an inspection of their medium; the very painter who produced a good painting last month now produces one which is bad; and so on. On the contrary, art is always individual; an individual work is produced by an individual artist; and of the individual there is no science.

This line of argument was sufficiently plausible to induce a gifted and intelligent American poet to bid farewell to criticism, some years ago; but it is plausible rather than sound. The argument amounts, to this statement merely, that there is no necessity in art; and this statement is false. The artist need not have theoretical knowledge, true; the creative process is wrapped in mystery, and perhaps insoluble mystery— true also; and true that the form cannot be predicted from the materials, and that the reaction of the audience and the value of the work, and much else as well, are also unpredictable in any particular instance. But all this is really beside the point: the crux of the argument is whether, because a work of art is always an individual thing, it is absolutely unique, or not. If it is absolutely unique, in

the sense that no proposition which is true of a given work is true of any other, there is no possibility of scientific knowledge of art; but if on the other hand it is not absolutely unique, and if the propositions which apply to two or more works can be shown to deal with them essentially as art, the possibility of knowledge is clear.

Now I doubt whether anyone can really hold the position that a proposition which is true of any one work is false of all others; and I am even more doubtful whether any evidence could be found to support such a position. For the facts run too clearly otherwise. If this position is true, how do we recognize music as music, painting as painting, poetry as poetry? How, indeed, do we recognize art as art at all? Again, we think that there is such a thing as skill in art; but could there possibly be a skill with respect to absolutely inassociable particulars? The slightest reflection will show us that indeed objects of art, even generally considered, have much more in common than not. Every artist uses a certain medium, words, tones, rhythms, line, color, mass; and every medium has its definite powers and limitations; for example, musical tones cannot depict a face as line and color can, for the simple reason that tones have no position in space; and if the use of a medium is an element in the production of art, it follows that good art will involve a proper use of the medium, and that bad use will produce bad art; and if so, there is clearly a field of inquiry which must apply to all individual works utilizing a given medium. But more: the artist does not merely use a medium, but achieves a certain form by its use; mere line and color do not constitute a painting, nor mere tones music. Now, no form in any one art is the same as a form in any other; there are therefore considerations of form essential to music as music, painting as painting, poetry as poetry, which must again apply to all the individual works within a given art. This latter area of inquiry is indeed the starting-point of all the "laws" or

necessary propositions of art: if a certain form is to be achieved, a certain whole to be produced, then such and such parts will have to be assembled in such and such ways, and the medium will have to be employed in such and such a fashion. The artist may not choose to achieve a certain form; but some form he must achieve, and whatever it may be, he is bound by it; unless he does what the form requires, he will fail. He may not wish to compose a classical tragedy; but if he does wish to, he will have to compose a tragedy such as Aristotle described.

But, some one may object, if art is thus clearly a field for scientific inquiry — for this is what your argument amounts to — why has the development of theory in art not kept pace with that of theory in science? I must admit that it has not; and has not for several reasons. In the first place, evolution in art has generally happened much more rapidly than in nature; the result is that we are confronted with innumerable, and apparently quite ephemeral, forms — a fact which immensely complicates the business of classification and analysis. Secondly, certain human tendencies have operated to produce, not so much premature theory, as premature rejection of theories, and thus produced apparent disorder. Chief among these are the tendency to regard art as finite and completely developed, whereas, like all that depends upon human invention, it is really capable of indefinite development; the tendency to suppose that even sound theoretical bases are nullified by the emergence of new forms and devices; the tendency to suppose that theory need not expand with art; the tendency to ignore differences of kind and function among art forms; and specially the tendency to confuse validity with universality, and hence to insist that a principle must be universally and absolutely true because it is true specifically and conditionally, or conversely to insist that a principle is utterly false because it is not true universally and absolutely.

The chief reason, however, is that certain sciences which are of the utmost importance to the proper development of artistic inquiry have not developed themselves to such a degree, or at any rate, in such a way, as to afford art the instruments it requires. Most important of these, I should say, is psychology; for every work of art is governed by the effect which it is to produce, and this is in every instance a psychological effect. Had psychology developed a clear and well-integrated theory of the emotions, following, let us say, the lines either of Spinoza or Locke or Hume, all of whom differentiated and analyzed the causes of many kinds of emotions, the influence of this upon critical development would have been enormous. As the matter stands, the use of Freudian, Jungian, and other contemporary theories in artistic inquiry, particular or general, has produced nothing which I should consider valuable, and a great deal which I should consider trash.

The primary cause of confusion and uncertainty in the theory of art, however, is neither the peculiarity of the subject-matter nor the relation of art to other sciences, but the third factor I have mentioned: our failure to comprehend certain phenomena of method. Here the fact is plain: critical theory has developed an astounding number of very diverse methods, and we tend to interpret that diversity as contradiction. Theories of art are always part of actual or potential philosophic systems: an Aristotelian system produces an Aristotelian theory of art, a Humeian system a Humeian theory of art, a Kantian system, a Kantian; conversely, examination into any systematic theory of art, or of criticism, will carry us into philosophic assumptions upon which the theory rests. We do not take matters of method sufficiently into account either in philosophy or in science; we speak glibly about philosophic or scientific knowledge as concerned with the natures of things, ignoring that what we call knowledge and science is as much a function of our modes of

thought and expression as of the natures of the things we seek to conceive and express. A scientific conception is not the resultant simply of the thing conceived, but also of the manner of conception; a scientific statement is the resultant not merely of the conception, but also of the manner of expression. What may we know of a given subject, whatever it may be? Only such of it as we may conceive. What may we express of what we conceive? Only so much of it as we can express. But then much of the subject must escape our conception, and much of the conception must escape our expression. We tend to fail to observe this, or to disregard it if we do observe it; we equate statement with conception, and conception with thing conceived, as readily as we equate what we see of a thing with what there is to be seen of it, although we know that the image is the product not only of the thing seen but of the seeing eye.

Language and thought are both selective, that is, cannot deal with the whole of the subject with which they propose to deal; what is more, they are restrictive, that is, once they have made their selection, they are bound by it. Thus any philosophic problem is relative to its formulation; and since any solution to a philosophic problem is relative to that problem, any solution is relative also to the formulation of that problem. Any philosopher, consequently, though he profess to talk about the universe, can really talk about that universe only as it is formulated in his discourse; and his whole philosophy, insofar as it is consistent, is a function of the kind of dialectic he exerts upon so much of the subject as he has been able to isolate. Sufficient understanding of this point carries with it the conviction that no one philosophy can be all-sufficient, and the further conviction of the possibility of many valid philosophies. The humanist who attempts to understand aesthetic and critical theory in terms of differences of philosophic method will soon reject the no-

tion that such theory is a mere whirligig of taste, or that contemporary criticism is a mere arena of contending opinions.

The state of affairs, then, in aesthetics and criticism, is that the subject is perfectly susceptible of scientific treatment; that progress in it is necessarily dependent upon the development of certain sciences such as psychology which it needs as instruments; and that disciplines such as philosophic methodology and dialectic are requisite to demonstrate that the apparent disorder is only diversity, and to exhibit the powers and limitations of the various methods. If so, the course of education is perfectly clear. Since the subject is capable of being brought to a scientific condition, it should be brought to it; and this is likely to happen only if the effort is made to produce students equally skilled in the perception of art and in the theoretic disciplines. Logic, dialectic, and the study of philosophic and scientific method must form part of the artistic curriculum, and be as closely integrated as possible with the study of the arts themselves. The history of philosophy must be studied side by side with the history of the arts, and with the history of the theory and criticism of the arts; and sciences which are instrumental must be studied as well, and brought to the point where they are instrumental to some purpose. It is thus, and perhaps only thus, that humanistic studies will regain their ancient prestige as the body of studies primarily responsible for what we call culture in man.