



## On Cassirer's Conception of Art and History

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# On Cassirer's Conception of Art and History

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It is important for the reader of Ernst Cassirer's historical works to be aware of his conception of history itself. Our purpose is to present this conception against a peripatetic background. By so doing we bring into sharp focus the radical difference between the poetic conception of history and the prudential one.

## I. «WHAT IS» AND «WHAT OUGHT TO BE»

It is impossible for man to encompass the Reason that governs the manifold of history. Even if our knowledge of the past were more than piecemeal, even if it covered all the facts, the unifying Reason that lies behind these facts as their governing principle would still remain hidden in its essential features. Ultimately, the ways of this Reason remain inscrutable. There remains ever a profound discrepancy between this Reason and what is reasonable to us, between the Reason that governs both necessity and contingency and the reason which remains confined to understanding in a more or less superficial manner what lies within the bounds of necessity or of probability which is an approximation or an appearance of necessity. In other words, there remains a profound discrepancy between the actual plan of history and any plan of it our reason might construct. For even if all events did happen by necessity, there is no assurance that human reason could discern the governing principles of history from the past which, after all, is only an indeterminable section of all history. This would seem to demand that the events of history form a series of the mathematical type in which the governing relation of the whole series can be known from only a part. But, as a matter of fact, necessity and probability are far from covering even the main events and features of history. So many things might have been other than they were. And among the things that actually happen some are necessary, some probable, and some improbable. The role of improbability must never be underestimated. Highly important events, events entailing tremendous consequences, may come about in a purely fortuitous fashion. Such might be the accidental death of a strong leader during a national crisis. At times these improbable events fit into the scheme of what we think ought to be, as does «good fortune» in the Aristotelian sense of the term. Most of these improbable events, however, go quite against our sense of what ought to be.

Our life and all history abound with events and actions which, according to our reason alone, are irrational, i.e., with actions and events which our reason cannot dispose in an orderly and consistent whole under a unifying

principle. What is is often not as it should be, and this «irrationality» weighs heavily upon all history as well as upon every individual. The government of all circumstance does not lie within the reach of man, since he does not enjoy the science of good and evil. From the viewpoint of what our reason can encompass, the irrational seems to reign supreme. As it is said in the Book of *Ecclesiastes*: *Under the sun, the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the learned, nor favor to the skilful: but time and chance in all*<sup>1</sup>. *There are just men to whom evils happen, as though they had done the works of the wicked: and there are wicked men who are as secure as though they had done the deeds of the just*<sup>2</sup>. Things do not always happen as we think they should, and what is not as we think it should be is to us irrational. The resolution of this irrational element to the rational, i.e., to what ought to be, is not realized within the confines of a human life, nor within the totality of history as we know it. In the face of this inability to discover a reasonable plan or scheme in the events that have happened or happen, reason experiences the humiliating pathos of frustration and is inclined to rebel against the stubborn factuality of what was and what is, and to substitute what should have been and what ought to be.

Now, according to Aristotle there are some purely human and, to a degree, legitimate means of lessening this pathos. They are poetry and the fine arts in general, by means of which a form more in accord with our reason is imposed on these apparently irrational elements of real life. In his *Poetics* he says:

... The poet's function is to describe, not the thing that has happened but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e., what is possible as being probable or necessary. The distinction between historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse—you might put the work of Herodotus into verse and it would still be a species of history; it consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do—which is the aim of poetry, though it affixes proper names to the characters; by a singular statement, one as to what, say, Alcibiades did or had done to him<sup>3</sup>.

With respect to his work, the poet enjoys a share, as it were, in the science of good and evil<sup>4</sup>. In tragedy, for example, he resolves human actions into what ought to be. The action takes place in conformity with our reason. The spectator witnesses, as it were, the triumph of what ought to be. Terror, misery, injustice, chance, are dominated by a reason akin to divine Reason under whose guidance all things cooperate in their way to the good. In tragedy, actions and events which might be are

1. *Ecclesiastes*, IX, 11.

2. *Ibid.*, VIII, 14.

3. *Poetics*, c.9, 1451a36. Unless otherwise indicated, we reproduce the translation found in RICHARD MCKEON'S *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Random House, New York 1941.

4. Cf. A.-M. PARENT, *La connaissance du bien et du mal*, in *Laval théologique et philosophique*, vol.I, n.1, pp.47ff, 1945.

given a type of universality; they are given the form of what ought to be, in such a way that the parts and the whole lie within the encompassing grasp of human reason. In the experience of viewing the tragedy, the audience is relieved of that burden of real life where reason is constantly thwarted. Both epic poetry and tragedy are as temporary reliefs from the overbearing tragedy of history in which the final resolution into what ought to be never falls within the bounds of human experience.

The underlying idea of this cathartic function was expressed by Aristotle in the following passage:

As for the poetry which merely narrates, or imitates by means of versified language (without action), it is evident that it has several points in common with Tragedy.

The construction of its stories should clearly be like that in a drama; they should be based on a single action, one that is a complete whole in itself, with a beginning, middle, and end, so as to enable the work to produce its own proper pleasure with all the organic unity of a living creature. Nor should one suppose that there is anything like them in our usual histories. A history has to deal not with one action, but with one period and all that happened in that to one or more persons, however disconnected the several events may have been. Just as two events may take place at the same time, e.g. the sea-fight off Salamis and the battle with the Carthaginians in Sicily, without converging to the same end, so too of two consecutive events one may sometimes come after the other with no one end as their common issue. Nevertheless most of our epic poets, one may say, ignore the distinction<sup>1</sup>.

The cathartic function of comedy has been well described by Cassirer in his *Essay on Man*:

Comic art possesses in the highest degree that faculty shared by all art, sympathetic vision. By virtue of this faculty it can accept human life with all its defects and foibles, its follies and vices. Great comic art has always been a sort of *encomium moriæ*, a praise of folly. In comic perspective all things begin to take on a new face. We are perhaps never nearer to our human world than in the works of a great comic writer—in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, or in Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*. We become observant of the minutest details; we see this world in all its narrowness, its pettiness, and silliness. We live in this restricted world, but we are no longer imprisoned by it. Such is the peculiar character of the comic catharsis. Things and events begin to lose their material weight; scorn is dissolved into laughter and laughter is liberation<sup>2</sup>.

When Aristotle says that poetry differs from history by its universality, this universality is obviously not to be identified with the universality of our science. The statements of poetry are more of the nature of universals, they have greater affinity with universality proper (*mallon ta katholou*), whereas those of history are singulars. This type of universality of course we encounter in all the fine arts. The statue of the disc-thrower is not that of a certain historic individual, but rather is it a representation of *the* disc-thrower. But we must add immediately that neither is the statue of *the* disc-thrower a mere sensible sign of the disc-thrower in vague generality. It is rather an image of the disc-thrower concretized in *this* particular object. It is, as it were, a concrete universal; it has both universality and particularity; it is as an intuited universal. It might be remotely compared with a separated substance where universality is wholly realized in a single individual.

1. *Poetics*, c.23, 1459a16.

2. ERNST CASSIRER, *An Essay on Man*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1944, p.150.

In poetry, a statement is called universal in the sense that it tells us what such a person will probably or necessarily do. What is probable or necessary has universality. But again, the universality is here concretized and intuited in a singular form. The universality of poetic concreteness Aristotle shows from comedy:

In Comedy this has become clear by this time; it is only when their plot is already made up of probable incidents that they give it a basis of proper names, choosing for the purpose any names that may occur to them, instead of writing like the old iambic poets about particular persons<sup>1</sup>.

When we show the difference between history and poetry by the greater universality of the latter, we might be inclined to infer that the perfection of poetry should be judged according to its approximation to scientific universality alone. Aristotle's doctrine of universality taken as a whole, however, precludes any such interpretation. In one of the texts already quoted, he said that «poetry is something more philosophic and of greater import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars». From this, we might be led to think that, though statements of poetry are of the nature of universals, the poetic universal is nevertheless still defective in so far as it still retains a mode of particularity. That is not the case however. Such an interpretation would be to confuse the imperfect universality of tentative generalization with the intuited universality concretized in a work of fine art. These two universalities lie, as it were, in opposite directions and are associated with contrary movements. The former tends away from the singular by abstraction toward pure universality which is achieved only when we see it in its formal independence of the singulars; whereas the latter moves rather from the universal toward the singular while retaining universality. The singular of fine art is not just an instance of some abstract nature. It is, as it were, the intuition of universality in the singular and of singularity in the universal. In this respect the singular of poetry is better than the singular of nature. And since the poet pursues that type of singular, his singulars do not have to be true to fact.

If the poet's description be criticized as not true to fact, one may urge perhaps that the object ought to be as described—an answer like that of Sophocles, who said that he drew men as they ought to be, and Euripides as they were. If the description, however, be neither true nor of the thing as it ought to be, the answer must be then, that it is in accordance with opinion<sup>2</sup>.

At this point it should be remarked that in the poetic individual we recover somehow what we lose in the knowledge of universality by abstraction from singulars. Fine art tends to achieve an object which has both universality and particularity, an object having simultaneously and in its very oneness the perfection of both through the dominance of universal form in the singular. We might say that the fullness of universality emerges in particularity, as if the singular were an overflow of the abundance of universality. It is as if, when contemplating a work of

1. *Poetics*, c.9, 1451b11.

2. *Ibid.*, c.25, 1460b33.

fine art, we intuited not merely the universal in the particular, but rather the particular in the universal. In this the fine arts offer us the most humanly complete object we can attain. They restore to us in a simultaneous union both what the intellect loses in the process of abstraction and what we miss when confined to sensation. Through imitation they intensify singularity just as they enrich universality by allaying its opposition to the concrete, an opposition which was due to the process of abstraction from the singular.

We have already said that the work of fine art may be, at least remotely, compared to a separated substance in that it has universality and individuality. But in so far as it offers us a kind of intuition of the particular in the universal, we may compare it to the intelligible species of the separated substances, which is «*universalis virtutis*». The following two lengthy passages from St. Thomas will make clear what we mean when we say that the species of a separated substance is «*universalis virtutis*».

...Others have said that the angels indeed have knowledge of singulars, but only in universal causes to which all particular effects are reduced—in the same way that an astronomer forms a judgment about some future eclipse by means of the dispositions of the celestial movements. This position does not, however, escape the aforementioned difficulties, because to know the singular in universal causes in this way is not to know it as a singular, that is, as it exists here and now. For the astronomer who knows a future eclipse by means of the computation of the celestial movements knows it only in the universal and not as it is here and now—unless he perceives it with the senses. However, administration, providence, and motion concern singulars as they exist here and now.

Hence a different solution must be given. Just as man knows the genera of all things by different cognitive powers, the universal and immaterial by the intellect and the singular and corporeal by the sense, so the angel knows both by one intellectual power. For the order of things is this that the higher anything is, the more unified is its power and the greater is the number of things to which this power extends; just as it is evident in man that the common sense which is superior to a proper sense, though it is only one potency, knows everything which is known by the five external senses and certain other things which no external sense knows, as for example, the difference between white and sweet. And the case must be considered similar in other things. Hence, since in the order of nature the angel is higher than man, it would be inconsistent to say that man could know by any of his faculties anything which the angel could not know by its one cognitive faculty, i.e., by its intellect. Wherefore, Aristotle considers it inconsistent that God should be ignorant of the strife which we know, as is evident in *I de Anima* and *III Metaphysicorum*. The manner, however, in which the intellect of the angel knows singulars can be gathered from this that, just as things flow from God that they subsist in their proper nature, so also they flow from God that they be present in the angelic knowledge. It is manifest, however, that not only what pertains to the universal nature in things but also those things which are principles of individuation flow from God, for He is the cause of the whole substance of the thing as regards both its matter and its form; and in so far as He causes He knows, for His knowledge is the cause of the thing, as has been shown (q.14, a.8). Therefore, just as God through His essence, through which He causes all things, is the likeness of all things and through that same essence knows all things not only as regards their universal natures but also as regards their singularity, so the angels know things not only according to their universal nature but also according to their singularity through species infused by God, in so far as they (these infused species) are certain multiple representations of that unique and simple essence<sup>1</sup>.

1. *Ia*, q.57, a.2, c.



... Since the species of things existing in the intellect must be immaterial, they cannot, in the mode in which they exist in our intellect, be the principle of knowing singulars which are individualized by matter, because the species of our intellect are of a contracted power so that one of them leads to the knowledge of only one thing. Hence, just as the likeness of the nature of a genus cannot lead to the knowledge of the genus and the difference so that the species could be known through it, so the likeness of the nature of a species cannot lead to the knowledge of the principles of the species and the individuating principles which are material principles, so that through it the individual could be known in its singularity. But the likeness of the intellect of a separated substance, since it is of universal power (*universalis virtutis*), existing as one and immaterial, can lead to the knowledge of the principles of the species and the individuating principles which are material principles. Thus through it (the likeness) the separated substance can know by its intellect not only the matter of the genus and species but also that of the individual. And it does not follow from this that the form through which it knows is material or that it is infinite according to the number of individuals.

Furthermore, a superior power can do whatever an inferior power can do, but in a more eminent way; hence the inferior functions through many (means) where the superior power functions through only one. For in so far as a power is superior, to that degree it is more collected and unified. On the contrary, the inferior power is divided and multiplied. Hence, we see that the common sense apprehends by one power the different genera of sensible things which the five external senses perceive. In the order of nature, however, the human soul is inferior to the separated substance. The former can know universals and singulars by means of two principles, that is, by means of sense and intellect. The separated substance, therefore, which is higher, knows both in a higher mode by means of one principle, namely the intellect<sup>1</sup>.

From these two texts then we see that since the knowing faculty of separated substances is not scattered in intellects and internal and external senses, they have a more intense and sharper view even of sensible reality than we have. We have likened the works of fine arts to the species of separated substances because in the works of fine arts we recover something of that unity which we lost in the manifold of our scattered knowing power. In an oblique manner the works of fine arts fill the gap between our universal of science and the singular of experience.

Cassirer's terminology is not to be identified with ours, but we may well subscribe to the underlying idea of the following passage from his *Essay on Man*:

So long as we live in the world of sense impressions alone we merely touch the surface of reality. Awareness of the depth of things always requires an effort on the part of our active and constructive energies. But since these energies do not move in the same direction, and do not tend toward the same end, they cannot give us the same aspect of reality. There is a conceptual depth as well as a purely visual depth. The first is discovered by science; the second is revealed in art. The first aids us in understanding the reasons of things; the second in seeing their forms. In science we try to trace phenomena back to their first causes, and to general laws and principles. In art we are absorbed in their immediate appearance, and we enjoy the appearance to the fullest extent in all its richness and variety. Here we are not concerned with the uniformity of laws but with the multiformity and diversity of intuitions. Even art may be described as knowledge, but art is knowledge of a peculiar and specific kind<sup>2</sup>.

Now it might be said that the peculiar cooperation of intellect and sense which we have just referred to is actually common to all art, to that of the shoemaker as well as to that of the sculptor and the musician; for

1. *Contra Gentes*, II, c.100. Cf. also c.98.

2. *An Essay on Man*, p.169.

art is about singular contingent things and implies a movement from the universal to the particular since art, like prudence, although subjected in the intellect, is nevertheless terminatively in the sense. To this we answer that this common factor indeed explains how an intellectual virtue may produce a singular work, but it does not account for the universality of the particular that is a work of fine art, nor does it account specifically for the peculiar type of particularity, as we shall see in a moment. We all agree that the mind has the capacity of producing sensuous images concretely expressive of what ought to be. In this connection it should be noted that the principle of the work of art is in the artist as an intellectual agent who conceives and dominates the work produced.

We correctly employ (the name «making») in connection with those things which come about through the intellect. In these things the intellect of the agent dominates what he produces so that he could make it thus or otherwise, but this is not the case regarding the things of nature<sup>1</sup>.

The artist has a complete understanding of the work that his mind deliberately and freely conceived. He has conceived the idea of the concrete «what ought to be» over and against the «what is not as it ought to be» which our experience of reality presents to us. The imitation that is the work of fine art is a sensuous expression of this «ought to be», an expression immediately derived from reason and exceeding the expressiveness of nature itself. The «ought to be» thus expressed may legitimately be called «pure sensuous form». Reason through sense has the ability to organize matter into a sensuous image of what it conceives. When we call this image «form», we mean an image where the form, the universality, the «what ought to be» is concretely expressed.

Now an image is an expressive similitude of some other thing called the original. It is a similitude of that other thing either as regards the species (sometimes called form) or as regards some proper accident which is a sign of the species, such as figure. Obviously the works of art belong to the latter kind of image; hence they are symbols, since they must, through resemblance, convey the form of what is expressed. The form they express does not inhere in them absolutely, but *proceeds* from the original is essential to image. The image, then, is a dynamic conveyor of form, and the form which is the image is processive.

Since the work of art is an imitative symbol of what ought to be, and since what ought to be does not as such come to us from experience, the work of art is not empiric. This is clear enough in the case of the artist who produces the work. But neither is the work empiric to the contemplator. The latter does not properly contemplate the work of art as such unless he sees it as expressive of what lies beyond experience and as a dynamic form. In contemplating a statue, for example, the form that is empirically known is the figure of the stone, which is there in an absolute manner. The statue is seen as a work of fine art only when we see the figure as expressive of, and hence as proceeding from, what lies beyond and is prior to,

1. ST. THOMAS, *In VII Metaphysicorum*, lect.6, n.1394.



empiric perception. Hence, the image in question is not *there* in the ordinary sense. From all this it is evident that «art gives us a new kind of truth — a truth not of empirical things but of pure forms»<sup>1</sup>.

This consideration permits us to see better the difference between the natural singular and the peculiar singular of a work of fine art; it permits us to see that, in a way, the singular of fine art is better than the natural singular. For the singularity of which the artist is the cause, that is, the singularity of the universal in concretion, is not formally the singularity of *this* stone in this place, or of *this* line on this page of this book, which can be seen without being aesthetically understood. Empiric singularity is indeed necessary, but it cannot be more than instrumental to what we shall call poetic singularity. The empiric singularity can be no more than a pure vehicle for a singularity of a higher type, that is, higher in the line of expression as conceived from the mind with universality. The work of fine art as such has no empiric individuality; nevertheless, its poetic individuality is more expressive of what ought to be than the empiric individual. Hence although it is not better entitatively, it is representatively better. If what ought to be were given fully empirical existence, it would be better than what is empirical but yet not as it ought to be. In the light of what we have just said, it is evident that we may subscribe to the idea underlying the following passage from Cassirer:

A great lyrical poet has the power to give definite shape to our most obscure feelings. This is possible only because his work, though dealing with a subject which is apparently irrational and ineffable, possesses a clear organization and articulation. Not even in the most extravagant creations of art do we ever find the «ravishing confusions of fantasy», the «original chaos of human nature». This definition of art, given by the romantic writers, is a contradiction in terms. Every work of art has an intuitive structure, and that means a character of rationality. Every single element must be felt as part of a comprehensive whole. If in a lyrical poem we change one of the words, an accent or a rhythm, we are in danger of destroying the specific tone and charm of the poem. Art is not fettered to the rationality of things or events. It may infringe all those laws of probability which classical aestheticians declared to be the constitutional laws of art. It may give us the most bizarre and grotesque vision, and yet retain a rationality of its own—the rationality of form. We may in this way interpret a saying of Goethe's which at first sight looks paradoxical, «Art: a second nature; mysterious too, but more understandable, for it originates in the understanding»<sup>2</sup>.

What we have so far maintained concerning the peculiar perfection of the fine arts seems to be dangerously near the romantic theory of poetic imagination. This theory has been substantially stated by Cassirer, though he does not agree with it:

In romantic thought, he says, the theory of poetic imagination had reached its climax. Imagination is no longer that special human activity which builds up the human world of art. It now has universal metaphysical value. Poetic imagination is the only clue to reality. Fichte's idealism is based upon his conception of a «productive imagination». Schelling declared in his *System of Transcendental Idealism* that art is the consummation of philosophy. In nature, in morality, in history we are still living in the propylaeum of philosophical wisdom; in art we enter into the sanctuary itself. Romantic writers in both verse and prose expressed them-

1. CASSIRER, *An Essay on Man*, p.164.

2. *Ibid.*, p.167.

selves in the same vein. The distinction between poetry and philosophy was felt to be shallow and superficial. According to Friedrich Schlegel the highest task of a modern poet is to strive after a new form of poetry which he describes as «transcendental poetry». No other poetic genre can give us the essence of the poetic spirit, the «poetry of poetry». To poeticize philosophy and to philosophize poetry—such was the highest aim of all romantic thinkers. The true poem is not the work of the individual artist; it is the universe itself, the one work of art which is forever perfecting itself. Hence all the deepest mysteries of all the arts and sciences appertain to poetry. «Poetry, says Novalis, is what is absolutely and genuinely real. This is the kernel of my philosophy. The more poetic, the more true»<sup>1</sup>.

Obviously the romantics were misinterpreting a perfection we must concede to the production and to the contemplation of the works of fine art. Poetry still remains «*infima doctrina*», even when it is strictly religious. Nevertheless this does not prevent it from having a peculiar perfection no where else to be found by us. As Goethe said, art does not pretend to show the metaphysical depth of things; it merely sticks to the surface of natural phenomena,—and Cassirer refers to Goethe approvingly<sup>2</sup>. However, insofar as, apart from displaying and revealing so striking a realm, one which, apart from being our noblest type of making, cannot be otherwise attained, art furnishes us a close approximation of genuine intuition of concrete universality, it represents a mode of knowing in which, more than in any other, we imitate the perfection of a knowing power complete and undivided in one single faculty. And this cannot be said of any strictly human science. It is a case, then, of «*perfecta imperfecte, imperfecta perfecte*».

It may appear inconsistent to disagree with the idea of the romanticists that poetry is the highest form of knowledge and still claim for art a perfection which cannot be claimed by any strictly human science. But as a matter of fact there are many instances in which a lower type of knowledge is better in some important respect than a higher type. Experience may be better than science; mathematics and prudence better than wisdom proper; opinion better than certitude; touch better than sight<sup>3</sup>.

1. *Op. cit.*, pp.155-6.

2. *Op. cit.*, p.157.

3. For instance, in the *Metaphysics* (I, c.1, 981a10) Aristotle shows that with respect to the end of medicine, experience without theory is better than theory without experience. We shall quote the text at length. We must note, however, that in one respect the Philosopher is using the term art in a broad sense, and in another he takes it in a very restricted sense. In a broad sense, insofar as it comprises medicine and shoemaking as well as the fine arts; in a restricted sense, insofar as he opposes art and experience, whereas art as an intellectual virtue implies the proximate faculty of production (*Ethics*, VI, c.5). In the *Metaphysics* we read:

«With a view to action experience seems in no respect inferior to art, and men of experience succeed even better than those who have theory without experience. (The reason is that experience is knowledge of individuals, art of universals, and actions and productions are all concerned with the individual; for the physician does not cure *man*, except in an accidental way, but Callias or Socrates or some other called by some such individual name, who happens to be a man. If, then, a man has the theory without the experience, and recognizes the universal but does not know the individual included in this, he will often fail to cure; for it is the individual that is to be cured). But yet we think that *knowledge* and *understanding* belong to art rather than to experience, and we suppose artists to be wiser than men of experience (which implies that wisdom depends in all cases rather on knowledge); and this because the former know the cause, but the latter do not. For men of experience know that the thing is so, but do not know why, while the others know the «why» and the cause. Hence we think also that the master-workers in each craft are more

As we just mentioned, quoting Goethe, art does not pretend to show the metaphysical depth of things. Its end is the enjoyment of form, an enjoyment which engages our powers of knowing in unison in the face of an object deeply penetrated insofar as it is a construction born of the human mind. It is with respect to the real objects as we know them in experience that the imitations may be better in the line of representation. Again, the poetic action of a hero, for example, is not a real action and cannot lay claim to the depth of reality. A deeper claim to reality which the fine arts can make was indicated by Aristotle when he said that the incidents in a tragedy arousing pity and fear may accomplish its catharsis of such emotions<sup>1</sup>. Whereas on the one hand the aesthetic contemplation gives us a foreshadowing of the fullness of contemplation, a fullness we can experience only when our knowing faculties—sense and intellect—are engaged in unison, the subordination of tragedy on the other hand to moral catharsis must be most disconcerting to transcendental aesthetes.

## II. POETRY FILLING THE GAPS

The universality and the particularity of poetry then have their difference. We must now go back even farther and bring to light the difference between the likeliness of poetic necessity and probability and that of science or dialectic.

As Aristotle mentions, both in the *Physics*<sup>2</sup>, and in the *Metaphysics*<sup>3</sup>, only in the order of things which happen either always or for the most part can there be certain knowledge by inference, for they alone are in conformity with rule and reason. They alone belong to the realm of rational possibility. The poetic possibility which Aristotle continually refers to

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honourable and know in a truer sense and are wiser than the manual workers, because they know the causes of the things that are done (we think manual workers are like certain lifeless things which act indeed, but act without knowing what they do, as fire burns—but while the lifeless things perform each of their functions by a natural tendency, the labourers perform them through habit); thus we view them as being wiser not in virtue of being able to act, but of having the theory for themselves and knowing the causes. And in general it is a sign of the man who knows and of the man who does not know, that the former can teach, and therefore we think art more truly knowledge than experience is; for artists can teach, and men of mere experience cannot.—ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, I, c.1, 981a10.

Again, although metaphysics is wisdom proper and the noblest and most divine of purely human sciences, nevertheless prudence, which is not wisdom proper, is the wisdom for man and more necessary (*Ia-IIx*, q.57, a.5). Mathematics too, with respect to formal certitude, is better than metaphysics. «... Mathematica sunt abstracta a materia, et tamen non sunt excedentia intellectum nostrum; et ideo in eis est requirenda certissima ratio».—*In II Metaph.*, c.3, lect.5, n.336. «Cum enim mathematica sit media inter naturalem (scientiam) et divinam, ipsa est utraque certior».—*In de Trin. Boet.*, q.6, a.1, ad 2 q.

According to the *De Partibus animalium* (I, c.5, 644b22-645a10)—and in several places e.g., *In I de Anima*, lect.1, n.5, St. Thomas refers to this passage with approval—scanty and uncertain knowledge of things divine is better than copious and certain knowledge of things within closer reach. And although the sense of touch is the lowest of our knowing powers, nevertheless it is the most necessary and the most certain, for which reason it is called the sense of the intellect—*In I Metaph.*, lect.1, nn.6-9 and *II de Anima*, lect.19, nn.482-486.

1. *Poetics*, c.6, 1449b27.

2. *Physics*, II, c.5, 197a.

3. *Metaphysics*, VI, c.2, 1027a19.

must lie at least within this genus: it must be a possibility which does not go against the grain of reason; reason must be at home with it; it must call for spontaneous assent. What is possible in this sense may be principle of a reasonable sequence; for example, given such and such a character, that he perform such an action is reasonable enough—and so forth. In this way an orderly whole may arise. Poetic possibility, however, is of a peculiar kind, just as poetic reason is different from scientific reason. We shall determine this idea gradually.

Now in one sense poetic possibility is narrower than scientific possibility, and in another sense it is far more extensive. A scientific possibility, as is evident, may be most unpoetic. Poetic possibility must be related to the narrower universe of man and of human reason, an order where human reason itself is principle. The rationally possible thus becomes what ought to be according to the principles of human reason, that is, in the realm in which we are active and productive. This realm, as we have already insinuated, is twofold: the one of reality, the one in which we live our real life, and the one of imitation. In the latter, however, reason has greater command, for it masters an order of what ought to be, as in tragedy. Poetic possibility, then, might be designated as sympathetic possibility in imitation.

Within this realm what ought to be has unity. What may be has infinity. In this, poetic possibility follows the general rule of the good, the true, and the beautiful. As Aristotle says:

Again, it is possible to fail in many ways (for evil belongs to the class of the unlimited, as the Pythagoreans conjectured, and good to that of the limited), while to succeed is possible only in one way (for which reason also one is easy and the other difficult—to miss the mark easy, to hit it difficult); for these reasons also, then, excess and defect are characteristic of vice, and the mean of virtue; for men are good in but one way, but bad in many<sup>1</sup>.

And the same holds for truth as opposed to mere opinion and error, for the proper and true reason of a thing is one. A thing of beauty must be one in its proportion and order. And all this holds, in general, of poetic possibility, truth and beauty. Cassirer has expressed this idea in a paragraph we have already quoted (cf. page 10) concerning the unity and «rationality of form» found in lyric poetry.

The contemplation of a work of fine art may, as we have already pointed out, be considered as having a value in itself insofar as it offers us a peculiarly unified mode of knowing. It may, under this aspect, be taken also as an imitation and a foreshadowing of a more divine way of knowing. But it may also be considered functionally, such as when it produces a catharsis or incites to greater perfection. It serves, in a way, to fill the gap between the diffused and humanly unreasonable world of reality on the one hand and rationality as we may conceive it on the other. It is for this reason, no doubt, that we tend to infuse poetic reason into reality.

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1. *Ethics*, II, c.6, 1106b28.

As has already been said, poetic possibility or likeliness, narrow in one respect, encompasses, always in its own mode, a realm reaching far beyond objective possibility. Even the impossible as well as the fortuitous may be poetically likely. As Aristotle said:

Speaking generally, one has to justify (1) the Impossible by reference to the requirements of poetry, or to the better, or to opinion. For the purpose of poetry, a convincing impossibility is preferable to an unconvincing possibility; and if men such as Zeuxis depicted be impossible, the answer is that it is better they should be like that, as the artist ought to improve on his model. (2) The Improbable one has to justify either by showing it to be in accordance with opinion, or by urging that at times it is not improbable; for there is a probability of things happening also against probability<sup>1</sup>.

Although the actual cause of the fortuitous is not a determinate cause in nature, although it is *paralogon*, it may be used as reasonable and reasonably marvellous in poetry, as Aristotle points out in the following passage:

Tragedy, however, is an imitation not only of a complete action, but also of incidents arousing pity and fear. Such incidents have the very greatest effect on the mind when they occur unexpectedly and at the same time in consequence of one another; there is more of the marvellous in them than if they happened of themselves or by mere chance. Even matters of chance seem most marvellous if there is an appearance of design as it were in them; as for instance the statue of Mityls at Argos killed the author of Mityls' death by falling down on him when a looker-on at a public spectacle; for incidents like that we think to be not without a meaning. A plot, therefore, of this sort is necessarily finer than the others<sup>2</sup>.

The reason why poetry may use the fortuitous as reasonable and marvellous is presumably to be seen in the fact that what in reality happens from chance in things pertaining to human happiness, is either a good or an evil. Thus we deem it reasonable that good fortune happens to a man deserving of the good and that misfortune befalls a man deserving of great punishment. Moreover, this is considered all the more reasonable and marvellous when such an outcome could not be expected from the natural course of events. However, the abuse (i.e. over-use) of chance would be poetically unreasonable.

To say that poetically ordered incidents produce the greatest effect upon the mind when they occur unexpectedly and at the same time in consequence of one another seems to demand the union of two apparently incompatible elements. After all, it may be objected, what happens as a reasonable consequence of another event or action is expected, and what is expected is not astonishing, and the marvellous belongs to the genus of what astonishes. If in a tragedy the sequence of events were so logical that the end could be foreseen from the beginning, an intelligent spectator could walk out after the first act. Similarly if in any work of fine art the whole could be fathomed from a part or any group of its parts, it would not have the order and proportion that pleases; it would not have that peculiar illumination called clarity. The various actions in a tragedy continually raise problems, as it were, and cause wonder. These problems for which in ordinary life there is no likely solution — likely solutions on this level

1. *Poetics*, c.25, 1461b9.

2. *Ibid.*, c.9, 1432a1.



would as a rule be unlikely — are resolved by what ought to be. There is no tragedy without reference to real life and the problems of real life, just as there is no painting without reference to some real object as an original imitated. Thus, in the fine arts, what is irrational on one plane is engaged in a continuous process of rationalization. This rationalization is not just the rational outcome of the plane of reality. The marvel consists in bringing the irrational to the level of what ought to be, each step being as an unforeseen liberation. Any work of art must be «marvellous» dynamism, as we have already insinuated when speaking of the dynamic form that is an imitation. That is why in aesthetic contemplation there is assent to the unforeseen as to what should be. Any work of art is a conquest of what should be, a conquest for form, by the creative power of reason in opposition to that irrationality which pervades the universe of our daily life and daily apprehension. Art remakes things in a manner to which we are innerly attuned. The marvel consists in the very process of attuning which takes place not only in the making by the artist but also in the very contemplation insofar as the contemplator himself must continually confer the «what is» to the here intuitively concretized «what ought to be». As Cassirer says, criticizing Bergson:

Our experience of beauty is not, however, of such a hypnotic character. By hypnosis we may prompt a man to certain actions or we may force upon him some sentiment. But beauty, in its genuine and specific sense, cannot be impressed upon our minds in this way. In order to feel it one must cooperate with the artist. One must not only sympathize with the artist's feelings but also enter into his creative activity. If the artist should succeed in putting to sleep the active powers of our personality he would paralyze our sense of beauty. The apprehension of beauty, the awareness of the dynamism of forms, cannot be communicated in this way. For beauty depends both on the feelings of a specific kind and on an act of judgment and contemplation<sup>1</sup>.

As we have seen in the last quotation from the *Poetics*, that which is really improbable may be brought within the realm of poetic probability. The range of the improbable which may be used in poetry is extremely broad, as Aristotle points out in another passage of the same work:

The marvellous is certainly required in Tragedy. The Epic, however, affords more opening for the improbable, the chief factor in the marvellous, because in it the agents are not visibly before one. The scene of the pursuit of Hector would be ridiculous on the stage—the Greeks halting instead of pursuing him, and Achilles shaking his head to stop them; but in the poem the absurdity is overlooked. The marvellous, however, is a cause of pleasure, as is shown by the fact that we all tell a story with additions, in the belief that we are doing our hearers a pleasure<sup>2</sup>.

A likely impossibility is always preferable to an unconvincing possibility. The story should never be made up of improbable incidents; there should be nothing of the sort in it. If, however, such incidents are unavoidable, they should be outside the piece, like the hero's ignorance in the *Ædipus* of the circumstances of Laius' death; not within it, like the report of the Pythian games in *Electra*, or the man's having come to Mysia from Tegea without uttering a word on the way, in *The Mysians*. So that it is ridiculous to say that one's plot would have been spoilt without them, since it is fundamentally wrong to make up such plots. If the poet has taken such a plot, however, and one sees that he might have put it in a more probable form, he is guilty of absurdity as well as a fault of art. Even in the *Odyssey* the

1. *An Essay on Man*, pp.161-2.

2. *Poetics*, c.24, 1460a11.

improbabilities in the setting-ashore of Ulysses would be clearly intolerable in the hands of an inferior poet. As it is, the poet conceals them, his other excellences veiling their absurdity<sup>1</sup>.

The fortuitous death of Mytis' assassin is made wholly visible. But some happenings and the manner in which they come about are so improbable that they cannot be brought into full view without destroying even the poetic probability. In such cases, Aristotle says, the poet must confine himself to insinuation; he must treat them from afar. Only on that condition will the improbable be poetically reasonable and acceptable.

There remains one more point to be considered. The poet sometimes uses historical truth, not merely for the construction of a plot, but also for the sake of poetic persuasion. When Aristotle wanted to show that the statements of poetry are rather of the nature of universality, he used comedy as an example.

In Comedy this has become clear by this time; it is only when their plot is already made up of probable incidents that they give it a basis of proper names, choosing for the purpose any names that may occur to them, instead of writing like the old iambic poets about particular persons<sup>2</sup>.

But in some cases poetry must lean on history for the sake of rendering an event poetically likely. Some event essential to a tragedy may be such that, if it were not known that something similar actually occurred in reality, it would fall short of poetic possibility.

In Tragedy, however, they still adhere to the historic names; and for this reason: what convinces is the possible; now whereas we are not yet sure as to the possibility of that which has not happened, that which has happened is manifestly possible, else it would not have come to pass. Nevertheless even in Tragedy there are some plays with but one or two known names in them, the rest being inventions; and there are some without a single known name, e.g. Agathon's *Antheus*, in which both incidents and names are of the poet's invention; and it is no less delightful on that account. So that one must not aim at a rigid adherence to the traditional stories on which tragedies are based. It would be absurd, in fact, to do so, as even the known stories are known to a few, though they are a delight none the less to all<sup>3</sup>.

The historical truth, then, is used as a pure means to enhance poetic likeliness; in this role it is a pure function of poetry. Hence, it should be noted that even in this case poetry is not given as a form of history. The intent is not to illuminate the person or action referred to. The name of a historical person or the reference to an action that really occurred is merely exploited for the sake of the drama. Any dramatization of history is for the sake of the drama, not for the sake of history.

Let us recall at this point the distinction we have made between the empiric individual and the poetic individual. Because tragedy uses an historical name and an allusion to some historical event, it does not mean that in such a case the historical individual takes the place of the poetic individual. The two remain wholly distinct. The historical personage is a pure means to make the poetic «individual-universal» likely. What

1. *Op. cit.*, a26.

2. *Ibid.*, c.9, 1451b11.

3. *Ibid.*, b15.

the tragedian wants is assent to *his* subject, the one of *his* creation, and not at all to the one, or to the event, that actually occurred. It is true, however, that the audience would be happy to believe that the two are identical insofar as we should like things to be what they ought to be and insofar as even poetic likeliness is enhanced by support from what is. Now while the dramatization of history for the sake of drama is legitimate, the dramatization of history for the sake of history is a fraud and creates an illusion in the pejorative sense of the word. It is contrary to poetic truth as well as to historical truth.

Nevertheless, it is easy to see how this process could be reversed, that is, how poetry could be used as a function of history, how poetic reason could be diffused over and between our historical data, for the purpose of filling the gaps, and coordinating them into a likely whole attuned to our conditioned judgment of what ought to be. Human reason would thus attempt to fill the breach between the Reason that lies behind all history and our own reason. The gap would be filled in the mode of human reason, in fact, in the mode of that part of human reason where we enjoy the greatest creative freedom and mastery. The truth of art would become the truth of what is. The function of the historian of this type would be to infuse reason, fully human likeliness, into the irrational stuff of what was.

### III. THE DRAMATIZATION OF HISTORY

In a special chapter devoted to history (*An Essay on Man*, c.X), Cassirer stresses the importance of empirical investigation:

In his quest for truth the historian is bound by the same strict rules as the scientist. He has to utilize all the methods of empirical investigation. He has to collect all the available evidence and to compare and criticize all his sources. He is not permitted to forget or neglect any important fact<sup>1</sup>.

Now it appears that it is precisely in this that history differs from poetry. Nevertheless, all this, in the opinion of Cassirer, furnishes merely the matter of history, and this matter of itself is not yet history in the modern and strict sense of the word. To the above quoted lines he immediately adds: «Nevertheless, the last and decisive act is always an act of the productive imagination». The insistence upon the necessity of empirical investigation and so forth, was called for because he had just referred approvingly to Burckhardt and Mommsen who insist upon the poetic form of history. Mommsen «defined his ideal of the historical method by saying that the historian belongs perhaps rather to the artists than to the scholars»<sup>2</sup>. From Burckhardt he had quoted:

What I construct historically is not the result of criticism or speculation but of imagination seeking to fill the gaps in observations. To me history is still in a large measure poetry; it is a series of the most beautiful and picturesque compositions<sup>3</sup>.

1. *An Essay on Man*, p.204.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, p. 203-4.

We can readily understand why he had to mention the necessity of empirical investigation. «But even though we cannot deny that every great historical work contains and implies an artistic element, it does not thereby become a work of fiction»<sup>1</sup>.

Nevertheless, if in history the last and decisive act is always an act of the *productive* imagination, if «it does not go beyond the empirical reality of things and events but *molds this reality into a new shape*, giving it the reality of recollection»<sup>2</sup> and if recollection «is new intellectual synthesis — a constructive act»,<sup>3</sup> it is difficult to see how what was originally called history can be more than secondary and material, however necessary; it is difficult to see how history in Cassirer's conception could avoid being formally poetic. Avowedly the most important thing about history is what the historian has done about it, what he has constructed with the data. Hence it still remains difficult to see how we might distinguish history from art. The architect too needs bricks and appropriately mixed mortar and he must construct in conformity with the law of gravitation. He too, then, is bound by the same strict rules as the scientist insofar as the material element and certain empirical laws are concerned. From thereon, however, like Cassirer's historian, he is free to construct and to fill the gaps as he poetically sees fit.

The very step made by the historian, Cassirer points out, is an ideal reconstruction:

To define historical truth as «concordance with the facts»—*adæquatio rei et intellectus*—is however no satisfactory solution of the problem. It begs the question instead of solving it. That history has to begin with facts and that, in a sense, these facts are not only the beginning but the end, the alpha and omega of our historical knowledge, is undeniable. But what is a historical fact? All factual truth implies theoretical truth; when we speak of facts we do not simply refer to our immediate sense data. We are thinking of empirical, that is to say objective, facts. This objectivity is not given; it always implies an act and a complicated process of judgment. If we wish to know the difference between scientific facts — between the facts of physics, of biology, of history—we must, therefore, always begin with an analysis of judgments. We must study the modes of knowledge by which these facts are accessible<sup>4</sup>.

The historian, like the physicist, lives in a material world. Yet what he finds at the very beginning of his research is not a world of physical objects but a symbolic universe—a world of symbols. He must, first of all, learn to read these symbols. Any historical fact, however simple it may appear, can only be determined and understood by such a previous analysis of symbols. Not things or events but documents or monuments are the first and immediate objects of our historical knowledge. Only through the mediation and intervention of these symbolic data can we grasp the real historical data—the events and the men of the past<sup>5</sup>.

However, we must hold that the aim of the historian is to be in conformity with what has actually been. But since he cannot get at the past except by the devious ways indicated by Cassirer, he must be extremely cautious. A truly critical sense will prevent him from treating the past

1. *Op. cit.*, p.203-4.

2. *Ibid.*, p.205. Italics my own.

3. *Ibid.*, p.185.

4. *Ibid.*, p.174.

5. *Ibid.*, p.175.

as if it were present. The indirectness and remoteness of the past allows for much free construction. What is the standard of this construction? This offers no difficulty for Cassirer. That is a matter of genius, of personal incommunicable intuition. Like the poet, says Cassirer quoting Mommsen, «the historian is not made, he is born»<sup>1</sup>. The truth of history is not empirical; it is ideal.

Pericles' great funeral oration is perhaps the best and most impressive description of Athenian life and Athenian culture in the fifth century. The style of all these speeches bears the personal and genuine mark of Thucydides. «They are all distinctly Thucydidean in style», it has been said, «just as the various characters in a play of Euripides all use similar diction». Nevertheless they do not convey merely personal idiosyncrasies; they are representative of the epoch as a whole. In this sense they are objective, not subjective; they possess an ideal truth, if not an empirical truth. In modern times we have become much more susceptible to the demands of empirical truth, but we are perhaps frequently in danger of losing sight of the ideal truth of things and personalities. The just balance between these two moments depends upon the individual tact of the historian; it cannot be reduced to a general rule; in the modern historical consciousness the proportion has changed but the elements have remained the same. With regard to the distribution and the strength of the two forces every historian has his personal equation<sup>2</sup>.

The historian, then, has the right to understand the past, or whatever traces of it have been handed down to us, in his own way; and this understanding of it is history. «It is the keen sense for the empirical reality of things combined with the free gift of imagination upon which the true historical synthesis or synopsis depends»<sup>3</sup>.

We all agree upon the inevitable shortcomings of the historian, but we had hitherto considered these inevitable shortcomings for what they are. Now, however, they become part and parcel of historical truth. Historical truth is in the new shape born of the creative present.

History is the attempt to fuse together all these *dissecta membra*, the scattered limbs of the past and to synthesize them and mold them into new shape<sup>4</sup>. It is the gift of the great historians to reduce all mere facts to their *fieri*, all products to processes, all static things or institutions to their creative energies<sup>5</sup>.

One might now ask with reason how he could distinguish such a historian from a tragedian who, in order to render his drama more persuasive, would spice his work with references to recognized data. To this, one might answer that the historian still differs from the poet because of the stubborn data with which the historian must work. But this again does not satisfy our question. The historian would still be no more than a bad poet in the sense that he could not master his matter, that he could not successfully mold things and events into a new shape. Or we might put it otherwise: we might say that the historian is a poet with an alibi. He can always blame the facts for the defects in his poem.

1. *Op. cit.*, p.205.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, pp.204-5.

4. *Ibid.*, p.177.

5. *Ibid.*, p.185.



Are we to understand that in Cassirer's conception of history, our ignorance of the true data is rewarded by the freedom we derive therefrom? It would not be enough to say that the historian may feel secure in his freedom; he knows that no datum can hamper his freedom, for he can never possess all the actual data. As Cassirer points out, the so-called facts of history allow sufficient freedom. The stuff of history comprises more than can be reached by the methods of science. Historical documents are about persons and peoples, characters and events, ideas and actions which cannot be measured by science. The same «physical» data could still be interpreted in different ways as is most clearly shown in our judgment of human actions. Cassirer himself has something to say on this question:

...The description of particular facts, of a «here» and «now», is by no means a privilege of history. The uniqueness of historical events has often been thought to be the character distinguishing history from science. Yet this criterion is not sufficient. A geologist who gives us a description of the various states of the earth in different geological periods gives us a report on concrete and unique events. These events cannot be repeated; they will not occur in the same order a second time. In this respect the description of the geologist does not differ from that of a historian who, for instance, like Gregorovius tells us the story of the city of Rome in the Middle Ages. But the historian does not merely give us a series of events in a definite chronological order. For him these events are only the husk beneath which he looks for a human and cultural life—a life of actions and passions, of questions and answers, of tensions and solutions. The historian cannot invent a new language and a new logic for all this. He cannot think or speak without using general terms. But he infuses into his concepts and words his own inner feelings, and thus gives them a new sound and a new color—the color of a personal life<sup>1</sup>.

If the historian succeeded in effacing his personal life he would not thereby achieve a higher objectivity. He would on the contrary deprive himself of the very instrument of all historical thought. If I put out the light of my own personal experience I cannot see and I cannot judge of the experience of others. Without a rich personal experience in the field of art no one can write a history of art; no one but a systematic thinker can give us a history of philosophy. The seeming antithesis between the objectivity of historical truth and the subjectivity of the historian must be solved in a different way<sup>2</sup>.

We agree that when our judgment of human actions is concerned, then the principle «*qualis unusquisque est, talis ei finis videtur*». It is impossible to get round the subject. We know that pride may be judged humility and vice versa. Cassirer however offers a solution to this problem which reminds us of Adam Smith's independent observer.

Perhaps the best solution is to be found not in Ranke's words but in his works. Here we find the true explanation of what historical objectivity really means and what it does not mean. . . . Ranke's sympathy, the sympathy of the true historian, is of a specific type. It does not imply friendship or partisanship. It embraces friends and opponents. This form of sympathy may best be compared to that of the great poets. Euripides does not sympathize with Medea; Shakespeare does not sympathize with Lady Macbeth or Richard III. Nevertheless they make us understand these characters; they enter into their passions and motives. The saying *tout comprendre est tout pardonner* holds neither for the works of the great artists nor for those of the great historians. Their sympathy implies no moral judgment, no approbation or disapproval of single acts. Of course the historian is entirely at liberty to judge, but before he judges he wishes to understand and interpret.

1. *An Essay on Man*, pp.186-7.

2. *Ibid.*, p.187.

Schiller coined the dictum *Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*, a saying echoed by Hegel and made one of the keystones of his philosophy of history. «The lots and deeds of the particular states and of the particular minds», says Hegel, «are the phenomenal dialectic of the finitude of these minds out of which arises the universal mind, the unlimited mind of the world. This mind wields its right—and its right is the highest—in them; in universal history, the judgment of the world. The history of the world is the judgment of the world, because it contains, in its self-dependent universality, all special forms—the family, civil society, and nation, reduced to ideality, i.e., to subordinate but organic members of itself. It is the task of the spirit to produce all these special forms». Even Ranke, however opposed to Hegel's fundamental views, could have subscribed to this one. But he conceived the mission of the historian in a less presumptuous way. He thought that in the great trial of the history of the world the historian had to prepare, not to pronounce, the judgment. This is very far from moral indifference; it is, on the contrary, a feeling of the highest responsibility. According to Ranke the historian is neither the prosecutor nor the counsel for the defendant. If he speaks as a judge, he speaks as the *juge d'instruction*. He has to collect all the documents in the case in order to submit them to the highest court of law, to the history of the world. If he fails in this task, if by party favoritism or hatred he suppresses or falsifies a single piece of testimony, then he neglects his supreme duty<sup>1</sup>.

In other words, Cassirer places the burden of historical objectivity on the ability to sympathize «objectively», without moral sympathy, without moral judgment. Let us note that this was precisely the problem. Can the sympathy and the moral judgment be separated? To substantiate his opinion on the sympathy of the true historian, which is of a specific type, he gave a remarkably interesting example, an example taken from tragedy. «Euripides does not sympathize with Medea; Shakespeare does not sympathize with Lady Macbeth or Richard III. Nevertheless they make us understand these characters; they enter into their passions and motives».

Cassirer's solution would be valid if the appreciation of an imitation were the same as the appreciation of the original, if the characters and actions of history were the same as dramatic imitations. But as Aristotle has pointed out,

... though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art, the form, for example, of the lowest animals and of dead bodies<sup>2</sup>.

The judgment of a *dramatis persona* is detached in the sense that one may understand and approve of the representation of the villain of a tragedy as well as of the hero, without approving or disapproving of the original. But Cassirer's position is logical enough. It does suppose the identity of history and poetry, or rather that the form of history is poetic. The historian is in reality a dramaturgist.

The dramaturgist is the author of the *dramatis personæ*, of what they say and do, of the whole drama that is a miniature universe. They are his external work, and as an artist he pursues the good of his work, not his own personal good. Let us note however that, particularly in the case of the drama, this does not mean that the dramaturgist goes about creating his characters without any reference to moral judgment. He would be indeed a poor dramaturgist if his imitations did not succeed in eliciting,

1. *Op. cit.*, pp.187-189.

2. *Poetics*, c.4, 1448b10.

on the part of the audience, moral condemnation of the villain and admiration for the hero. The forms of art are dynamic, as we have seen in the previous paragraphs. The originals are involved. Although the judgment bearing on the original and that bearing on its imitation are of a different order and without direct correspondence, nevertheless the imitation of an evil action can be good only if the evil action is known for what it is. If the dramatist did not know which moral actions are to be approved and which are to be condemned, he could not possibly move his audience.

We can now see the preposterous consequences of Cassirer's conception of the true historian's specific type of sympathy. Given the historian's freedom, he may present the characters and actions in such a way that, knowing what actions the readers approve and disapprove of morally, he can make and predetermine moral judgments to bear upon what are thought to be the historical characters and actions.

When Mommsen wrote his *Roman History* he spoke as a great political historian and in a new and modern tone. «I wanted to bring down the ancients», he said in a letter, «from the fantastic pedestal on which they appear into the real world. That is why the consul had to become the burgomaster. Perhaps I have overdone it; but my intention was sound enough»<sup>1</sup>.

From what we have said then, regarding art and Cassirer's idea of history, it seems to be quite evident that Cassirer's idea of history is a combination of art and history (both terms taken in the Aristotelian sense) with art playing the leading and determining role. The same basic principles which he expounds in his treatment of art (*An Essay on Man*, c.IX) seem likewise to apply to history. It is true that Cassirer expressly says that the ideality of history is not the same as that of art, since art «turns our empirical life into the dynamic of pure forms», while history does not go beyond the empirical reality of things and events but gives this reality a new shape in the ideality of recollection<sup>2</sup>. It is true likewise that Cassirer insists that the historian is bound by the same strict rules as the scientist. «Nevertheless the last and decisive act is always an act of the productive imagination»<sup>3</sup>. The artistic creativeness and freedom of the artist appear to be limited in the historian only by the facts of the past; but the facts, according to Cassirer, already contain a theoretical element<sup>4</sup>—and that means free construction. And in all such construction the mind is the informing principle proper to the artist rather than the subject informed as is the Aristotelian knower. The creativeness and freedom of the historian would differ from the artist's at most only by degree and not by any difference of kind. The relation of universality and particularity of the «individual» of history reminds one too of the same relationship which we have described as belonging to the works of the fine arts.

Art and history, says Cassirer, are the most powerful instruments of our inquiry into human nature. What would we know of man without these two sources? We should be dependent on the data of our personal life... To complete the picture...

1. *An Essay on Man*, p.185.

2. *Ibid.*, p.205.

3. *Ibid.*, p.204.

4. *Ibid.*, p.174.

we could make psychological experiments or collect statistical facts. But in spite of this our picture of man would remain inert and colorless. We should only find the «average» man—the man of our daily practical and social intercourse. In the great works of history and art we begin to see, behind this mask of the conventional man, the features of the real, individual man. In order to find him we must go to the great historians or to the great poets... Poetry is not a mere imitation of nature; history is not a narration of dead facts and events. History as well as poetry is an organon of our self-knowledge, an indispensable instrument for building up our human universe<sup>1</sup>.

Furthermore, the effect of the knowledge of history is almost like the cathartic function of comic art.

Life in the light of history, says Cassirer, remains a great realistic drama, with all its tensions and conflicts, its greatness and misery, its hopes and illusions, its display of energies and passions. This drama, however, is not only felt; it is intuited. Seeing this spectacle in the mirror of history while we are still living in our empirical world of emotions and passions, we become aware of an inner sense of clarity and calmness—of the lucidity and serenity of pure contemplation... Written and read in the right way history elevates us to this atmosphere of freedom amidst all the necessities of our pure physical, political, social, and economic life<sup>2</sup>.

Cassirer, of course, would not deny that history contains an artistic element. He expressly demands that it have this element; he merely denies that history thus conceived is fiction<sup>3</sup>. In his *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*<sup>4</sup>, he describes the union of exact and empiric research with art, which he considers necessary for the advancement of scientific knowledge and which mapped out the road which philosophy was to follow in its progress to Cassirer's own form of idealism. In virtue of this union of the world of knowledge with that of artistic creation the way was opened for reducing metaphysical antinomies to logical correlations, and both art and science became more conscious of their essential freedom in their forming function. The object now becomes a combination of what was formerly object and *ego*, for it is that to which all the productive and creative powers of the *ego* are directed and in which they first find their verification. In the necessity of this object the *ego* recognizes the form which it placed there itself. Again it must be remarked that Cassirer makes no claim to belief in the Aristotelian idea of history, for he says that the Greek thinkers themselves were unable to offer a philosophical analysis of specifically historical thought and that such an analysis appeared only in the eighteenth century<sup>5</sup>. Finally it should be pointed out in fairness to Cassirer that his idea of history is no mere accidental trapping of his system; it is rather a particular application of his general principles, and is the only idea of history which is logically compatible with those general principles. In his general theory of knowledge the object of knowledge, i.e. what we are seeking to know, is not the «things that are», in the Aristotelian sense of this expression, but rather the ideal logical order or plan of the totality of our experience. That for him is

1. *Op. cit.*, p.206.

2. *Ibid.*, pp.205-6.

3. *Ibid.*, p.204.

4. CASSIRER, *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*. Leipzig, Teubner 1927, pp.150ff.

5. *An Essay on Man*, p.172.

the «real». «It is thus», he says, «a logical differentiation of the contents of experience and their arrangement in an ordered system of dependencies that constitute the real kernel of the concept of reality»<sup>1</sup>. And since his method or mode of knowledge is the dialectic, the result is that all knowledge becomes symbolical and relative. In history too the ideal element has predominance, for the task of the historian is to give an event meaning, i.e., to locate it in a rationally and freely constructed system<sup>2</sup>. The plan of the course of all events, rather than «what was»; seems to be the object of history. In forming this plan the historian takes his point of departure from the present and in the light of his present intellectual and moral needs constructs the past in such a way that it forms a complete systematic rational whole. Since this interpretation is really an attempt to formulate a plan of universal history, it naturally must remain in the realm of the relative, for it is only an approximation made by our reason of the plan according to which events actually do take place. Since this is only an approximation, each generation has the right and the obligation to appropriate the past in freedom and to understand it according to its own principles<sup>3</sup>. Were any generation to arrive at the absolute plan of history, it would mean at least that it was in possession of all the principles of the total history of the universe—a state of affairs which from the nature of the case is impossible, since history is forever in the making. But since the particular in a way manifests the general, though not completely, each succeeding generation is in a better position to make a relatively closer approximation of the structure of universal history; no generation, however, will ever reach it. The human mind must be content with the symbol it forms, for neither metaphysics nor dialectical thought can yield any higher form of knowledge<sup>4</sup>.

In the beginning of this chapter we pointed out the unbridgeable abyss which separated the divine Reason which actually governs history from human reason which is, as it were, only a shadow of the former. Although Cassirer would never admit it, for it would be very naïve in relation to his system where metaphysics is reduced to logic and the transcendent is made immanent, he is actually attempting to bridge this abyss which separates the human from the divine Reason. The limit to which this symbolic construct of history, the product of human reason, tends is the divine Reason which governs both necessity and contingency and which remains ever infinitely separated from human reason.

It is possible, indeed, to select from history those facts and trends which conform to human reason, but this will not be history in the full sense of the word, unless history be merely for the sake of human rationalization, unless historical reality is produced merely for the sake of furnishing

1. CASSIRER, *Substance and Function and Einstein's Theory of Relativity*, c.4. Translation by W.C. and M.C. SWABEY, Open Court Publishing Company, Chicago-London 1923.

2. CASSIRER, *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance*, p.6.

3. CASSIRER, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. A Study in the History of Renaissance in the Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. III, 1942, n.2 and n.3, p.324.

4. *Ibid.*, p.138.



the historian with material for construction according to his ability. In such work only those fortuitous events which conform to poetic plausibility could be reasonably assimilated, whereas in the world of fact it is only rarely the floods of the contingent can be made to flow in the tiny channel of human reason. Perhaps we are so accustomed to this type of arbitrary selection that we have lost awareness for all that does not, nor could fit in with our possible plans. We have become insensible to the fact that much the greater part of what happens in this world is humanly quite irrational. As St. Thomas says:

Since we have no knowledge of the reason behind the dispensations of Providence in each case, it may well appear to us that the good and the wicked endure the same lot; but it is nevertheless beyond doubt that all the good fortune or misfortune in the path of just and unjust is penetrated by that intelligent order whereby Divine Providence directs the course of all things. Events strike us as irrational and aimless because we are ignorant of this ultimate order. It is as if one entered the shop of an artisan and, being unacquainted with the use of each, had the impression that the tools of his trade were far more numerous than necessary; whereas for a man with full knowledge of this craft the diversity of tools would be perfectly reasonable<sup>1</sup>.

It might now be asked where we fundamentally disagree with Cassirer's conception of history. We do not, of course, claim the same object for history; neither do we limit ourselves to the dialectical method, though we do freely admit its legitimacy and usefulness in its proper place. We too maintain that the past is extremely difficult to reach, that the search for relevant facts is in most instances predetermined by theories and hypotheses, that much of what appears under the name of history is of the type advocated by Cassirer. But these are some of the very reasons because of which we think that the historian should be a prudent man, and by prudence we mean that intellectual virtue which is conditioned by the rectitude of the appetite. This is certainly no guarantee of pure «historical objectivity». «Pure objectivity» belongs to what actually was in the past as measured by ever-present eternity. The historian tries to reach this «what was» as best he can, but he can scarcely lay claim to that «objective sympathy» advocated by Cassirer. The good historian should be aware of these limitations; but whether he be good or bad, he shall be judged according to what he seeks to discover in the past and according to what he actually sees in it.

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1. *Q. D. de Veritate*, q.5, a.5, ad 6. The example of the artisan's shop is taken from St. Augustine, *I Super Genesim contra Manichæos*, c.16: «Si in alicujus opificis officinam imperitus intraverit, videt ibi multa instrumenta quorum causas ignorat: et si multum est insipiens, superflua putat. Iam vero si in fornacem incautus ceciderit, aut ferramento aliquo acuto se vulneraverit, noxia existimat ibi esse multa: quorum usum quia novit artifex, insipientiam ejus irridet. Sic in hoc mundo quidam audent multa reprehendere, quorum causas non vident: multa enim, etsi domui nostræ non sunt necessaria, eis tamen completur universitatis integritas».