

## THE AESTHETIC EDUCATION OF MAN

I want to begin my paper with a quote from Hermann Hesse's Novel *Demian* : " I wanted only to try to live in accord with the promptings which came from my true self. Why was this so difficult ? "

The intent of this paper is to provide a basis and justification for the contention that it is through the aesthetic education in its most extensive, comprehensive meaning that man can be truly himself and become fully man. Why is this, as Hesse laments, so difficult and why is the problem so urgent in our own age, an age that has been called the age of alienation, complexity and anxiety ?

Alienation is by no means solely a contemporary phenomenon. It has long been the subject of philosophical and sociological study. Hegel, who introduced the term, conceived the history of man as the history of man's *Entfremdung* or alienation. Marx treated the concept of alienation in economic terms and introduced it into sociological theories. Alienation, complexity and anxiety have always been part of the human personality and the human condition. Man has always been dissatisfied, searching for truth, beauty and freedom, and longing to realize his vision of a fuller, more authentic life.

But it is the intensity and urgency of the feelings of alienation and anxiety that distinguish our age from others. The twentieth century is indeed a century of crisis. Technology, whatever its degree of development may be, has brought into sharp focus characteristics of the human condition that have always existed, but never in the same measure and intensity as to-day. The explosive pace of technological development and its growing complexity have brought about an increasing mechanization of our work, our leisure time, our very lives, and led to the atrophy of man's sensibility and creative instincts.

In addition to mechanization, the constant and rapid change of our institutions, our customs and our values caused the breakdown of our traditions and an encounter with nothingness. A loss of faith is manifested in all areas of human endeavour : in physics and mathematics with the discoveries of Heisenberg and

Goedel; in religion and philosophy; in art and literature. Man himself has become dehumanized. His creative, imaginative powers, his sense of freedom and dignity, his appreciation of beauty and truth are rapidly being destroyed. The value of his very existence is being questioned in a society which is dominated by economic concerns and needs and finds no place for millions of people who are considered marginal, useless and superfluous.

The problem we face to-day with a most immediate urgency is the question : How can we restore the integrity of creative life which is threatened by the danger of automation ? How can we bring about a renaissance of that image of man to which Pico de Mirandola dedicated his famous "Oration on the Dignity of Man" ? How can we revitalize the vision of the good life of which Plato speaks in his ideal society ?

The claim I put forward here is that the development of our aesthetic sensibility and our creative impulse can contribute significantly toward such a renaissance. The aesthetic education of man is of utmost importance for the creation of a culture in which man will play a more vital role than is the case to-day.

I am, of course, not proposing a return to a pre-technological age. No one can question the immense benefits that science and technology have conferred upon mankind. What we must challenge is a technology that is detached from human needs and values and disregards man's spiritual, moral and aesthetic concerns. Science and technology must not be abandoned, but controlled and directed, for as Dr. Johnson warns : "Science without conscience is the ruin of the soul".

To bring about a change in the direction of our sciences and technology, or rather in the way they have been used and taught, we must first redefine the goals of liberal education and re-awaken those human qualities which have long been neglected in our educational tradition. This tradition was based on the conception of man as *homo sapiens*. Man's essential nature was held to be reason and therefore, the primary function of education was to develop the rational faculty to the fullest. This educational attitude, fundamentally anti-sensuous, anti-vitalistic and anti-aesthetic in character, was formulated in the Middle Ages under the influence of the logical tradition of Aristotle. It was

continued in the Renaissance in spite of the flowering of Renaissance Platonism and its humanistic spirit, and in spite of a revival of aesthetic activity.

The educational tradition which gives rational judgment the highest place in the hierarchy of human values continued to dominate Western culture and is still the guiding principle in our schools, our colleges and universities, and in our educational thinking. In its emphasis on the development of the intellect it neglects to take into account the fact that the image of man as *homo sapiens* is no longer undisputed and clear. The supremacy of reason is being questioned by the acknowledgement of the paradoxical in physics and mathematics and the discovery of the irrational and unconscious by depth psychology.

*Homo sapiens* is replaced by *homo faber*. Man is no longer the rational animal, but a creature of drives and practical needs. Modern psychology rediscovered our feelings and wants; it delved into the hidden levels of the self and revealed its instinctual side and the power of the unconscious. New insights into the essence of being and the complexities of life were gained, insights that had been closed to the categories and abstractions of reason. And yet, our educational system holds on to the medieval logical tradition that over emphasizes the power of reason and glorifies abstraction and theory. It disregards the enormous advances made by modern depth psychology; it fails to remember the wisdom of the ancients who well knew the many-sided aspects of the human personality and the dark, mysterious forces that invade our dreams and guide our waking hours.

An educational system that is almost exclusively intellectual and overlooks the other faculties of man must be abandoned. Education must involve the total human personality—his reason as well as his senses, his emotions, his instincts and creative impulses. It must integrate all human faculties, and this can best be done by assigning a more central role to art and the aesthetic experience. There is no better way than through the aesthetic to educate our sensory responses, to involve our feelings and creative instincts and reach the innermost depth of the human psyche. The great German philosopher, Kant, states in the *Critique of Judgment* that it is in the feelings of aesthetic pleasure

that sense and reason, intellect and will, cognition and desire are brought into relation by means of the free play of the imagination.

If we are to experience harmony and wholeness both in our personal and social life, if we are to create a civilization in which all our potentials are functioning to the fullest possible degree, we must educate men to feel and act as well as to think. We must remove the false dichotomies that exist between the cognitive and the affective, between the scientist and the poet.

What I am advocating is not an abandonment, but a revision of our educational tradition. I want to stress the need for an education that is complete, an education that does not neglect the cultivation of the intellect, but stresses equally the development of our non-rational faculties. What we need is a reevaluation of values wherein the hierarchical system, in which intellectual values assume a higher place than aesthetic ones, will be replaced by a system of equality. Here art and beauty will no longer be considered mere ornaments and entertainment or a mode of escape from the hardships of life, but they will take their rightful place in the scale of values together with reason. Our responses to beauty and form and our creative imagination will be held to be as essential for the quality of our lives and the level of our culture as are our reasoning powers. Only thus will we become truly whole and remove the deep tensions between the rational and the non-rational, between reason and will, between reason and instincts.

In fact, by removing these false dichotomies, we will discover the intimate connection that exists between the activity of art and that of science. Both the scientist and the artist search for truth and order. The scientific theorem, like a work of art, involves an act of discovery, a leap of the imagination and a desire for meaning that goes beyond the mere record of facts. Art and science alike must be instilled with that "instinct of relationship" of which Whitehead speaks when he says in *The Aims of Education*: "You may not divide the seamless coat of learning: what education has to impart is an intimate sense for the power of ideas, for the beauty of ideas, and for the structure of ideas, together with a particular body of knowledge."

He speaks of a "sense of style in art, in literature, in science, in logic, and in practical executions. They all have aesthetic qualities . . . Style is the ultimate morality of the mind".

The creative, instinctive powers of man are not only at work in the arts, but also in the realm of knowledge and science. To Plato, intuition was the highest form of knowledge; and Aristotle, who criticized Plato's theory of Forms on empirical grounds, was in the last analysis led to conclusions similar to Plato's, recognizing the intuitive character of the apprehension of the first principles of all reasoning. Kant, in addition to sensible intuition, introduced the concept of pure intuition which came to constitute the germ of contemporary intuitionism. Bergson interprets intuition as that kind of "intellectual sympathy" by which one is transported into the interior of an object. And Husserl, reviving Platonic and Aristotelian essentialism, speaks of an intellectual intuition that gives us "the vision of essences".

Although scientists and mathematicians interpret the equivocal term intuition differently than philosophers, they too, acknowledge its importance in the scientific enterprise and connect it with the invention of hypotheses, the designing of experiments, the introduction of new concepts and new techniques. But they stress the fact that these intuitive, imaginative insights or "hunches" do not arise *ex nihilo*, but depend upon previous experience and require empirical verification.

Thus imagination, intuition and creativity, our sense of style and form play a major role not only in the arts, but in all fields of human endeavour. They are essential for the well-being of man and represent a deep and basic need whose neglect may destroy the most fundamental aspects of the human personality. They must be stimulated and developed by an education that is based on aesthetic principles.

In speaking of the aesthetic experience and its essential qualities and function, we must be aware of the fact that we are dealing with concepts that are open and fluid and do not possess a set of necessary and sufficient properties. Any attempt to state their defining characteristics must fail, since only approximate validity can be attached to them. But in spite of the absence of defining

properties, in spite of terminological vagueness and the constant emergence of new art forms and new movements, we cannot dispense with a search for clarification and understanding.

The aesthetic education of man should, I believe, provide two kinds of experiences : first, the aesthetic experience in a wide sense which can be part of any general experience—theoretical or practical, individual or social, scientific, philosophical, religious—in short, every experience that makes up our lives. Second, the aesthetic experience in a more restricted sense which is connected with the making or the contemplation and appreciation of a work of art. Both types of experiences, in so far as they can claim to possess aesthetic qualities, variously interpreted as unity, harmony, clarity, expressiveness, are not different in kind but in the degree of intensity and purity.

The aesthetic in a wide sense can be attached to any experience that is meaningful and enriching. Wherever material is given shape, wherever movement possesses direction, wherever thought and action aim at ends and purposes, life has, as it were, form and color and composition. The making of a vessel or garment, the framing of laws and constitutions can be creative just as is the moulding of a piece of clay into a sculpture, the writing of a poem, the composing of a fugue. In its most essential aspects, life has aesthetic qualities. Life is aesthetic when it is lived fully and deeply, free of narrow utility, commercialism and mechanization; when it is lived intently and passionately, yet with control and proportion. Life is aesthetic in the awareness of its creative potentialities; when it has style and unity, a unity that is dynamic, imbued with tension and passion, yet integrated into a coherent whole.

Since art provides our aesthetic experience with the highest degree of intensity, it plays an all important role in the aesthetic education of man. The artist, in creating, endows an ordinary experience with depth and meaning and the highest degree of intensity and feeling. In contemplating his work, we relive the suffering and ecstasy, the whole gamut of emotions that went into the making of a work of art. We share the artist's sense of liberation and wholeness, his delight in the lawfulness and perfection of harmonious proportions and his heightened sense of humanity. "Art", as Whitehead says, "gives an elation of

feeling that is supernatural. A sunset is glorious, but it dwarfs humanity and belongs to the general flow of nature. A million sunsets will not spur on man toward civilization. It requires art to evoke into consciousness the finite perfections that lie ready for human achievement."

Because we are dealing with a fluid concept whose nature and function cannot be clearly defined, a variety of different, often contradictory answers have been given to the questions; what is art? What is its meaning and function? I want to mention one school of art, namely the formalists who claim that art is *sui generis*, existing for its own sake, needing nothing from life. Like the pure mathematician, the artist—they claim—is concerned only with formal relations that have no connection with actual existence.

Indeed, I agree with the formalists that art transports us into a "sphere of highest exultation", but I question their contention that this exulted state does not affect our lives. The formalists, influenced by Kant, further state that art must be "disinterested" and possess no purpose that is in any way connected with life. But I believe that Kant who, according to Hegels spoke the first rational word in aesthetics, meant something different by the "disinterestedness" of art and its "purposiveness, without purpose". Art is indeed disinterested in the utilitarian, the practical, the merely subjective and narrow sense, but it does not lack the intensity and vitality of the creative power of life. It serves no purpose and function in our struggle for survival or material gain. But it possesses purposiveness, an inner principle of rightness and harmony, found alike in the object of art and in the creative individual in whom the "unconscious activity of nature breaks out in the consciousness of man".

True art transcends the narrow barriers of the individual and personal. It puts upon the immediate present the stamp of the universal. To seek the universal in the particular, the ever-enduring in the transitory is the clue to the very nature of all great art. Perhaps therein lies its most profound meaning and its moral and social significance that it evokes in us feelings and emotions that transcend the narrow limits of the personal. In moments of deepest contemplation, we are no longer individuals,

but gain access to what Jung calls "the collective psyche". We are caught in a common rhythm and share the feelings and striving of all mankind.

According to Jung, the creative impulse arises from the unconscious; not from the personal unconscious of the artist, but from the collective unconscious, the sphere of mythology whose primordial images or archetypes are the common heritage of mankind. In the creative process of art, these archetypal images, which are inaccessible to the conscious will, are translated into the language of the present. They enter our consciousness and lead us back to the deepest sources of life. Indeed, when we look at Giacometti's disembodied, elongated figures and antediluvian faces, we see behind the imagery of art the primordial image of mankind. We are transported back to the beginning of time and seem to enter the abyss of primordial ages, where the voices of all men resound. The experience of art is not individual and subjective, but truly universal.

In the aesthetic experience the Platonic identification of the beautiful with the true and the good is realized. Knowledge and truth, free of fragmentation and narrow specialization, gain meaning and significance. The good, based on a sense of style and form and proportion, represents an ethics that transcends the traditional concepts of morality. It is an ethics not identified with utilitarian principles or categorical imperatives, but with the use of man's powers and the harmony of his soul. We act not for the sake of expediency or duty, but out of the fullness and richness of our true selves. We transcend the narrow limits of subjective motivations to what Nietzsche calls "a love above oneself. . . whose manifestation is a work of art".

The influence of art is all pervasive. Its questions and problems are intrinsically bound up with the idea of humanity. While giving expression to the human drama and its dilemmas and despair, art demonstrates the tragic sense of life and its belief in the indestructible creative will of man to achieve his humanity and affirm life in all its forms—its height and abyss, its suffering and exultation. Art and the aesthetic become a source of the power to form and shape and enrich our experience and conduct. They produce a feeling of strength and vitality, of heightened sensitivity and joy. In the aesthetic dimension we find those regulative



principles by means of which the unity and harmony of the human personality is achieved. The fractured being of modern man becomes whole and integrated. His creative power, which was frustrated by the dehumanizing effects of our technological mass society, is restored. And if we agree with those philosophers who like Spinoza, hold that the creative will in its striving toward self-realization is the essence of man, then it is indeed through the aesthetic that we become truly ourselves and fully man.

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**Rose Pfeffer**

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