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ON TRUTH IN THE ARTS*

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Translated from the Spanish

By

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The issue of artistic information should not be confused with the one of truth in the arts. A work of art informs, but this does not mean that the information it supplies can be declared true or false. In other words, the fact that it informs -- using the term in the sense it is given by the theory of information -- does not imply that art necessarily performs a cognizant function; i.e., that it provides information about specific facts or about a given reality. But certain kinds of art, particularly the literary or representative ones, can provide truth or falsehood thereby (in the former case,) enriching our knowledge of reality. These statements presuppose or characterize art as a form of knowledge.

This raises important questions: a) Can we speak of truth or falsehood in the arts? If so how do we rank artistic truth in comparison with scientific truth, or truth in its daily use? b) What value or reach does truth have for the work of art's worth? If art -- or more accurately, a certain kind of art -- is a form of acquiring knowledge, does this cognition of nature appear in it in an essential and necessary way?

Let's look at these closely connected questions without erasing their margins.

Let's choose in the first place the concrete space in which these questions can be raised. It is doubtless that such a space is art which has historically been conceived and accomplished as

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a truthful reflection or a faithful reproduction of reality. This art aspires to represent, through its specific means, a reality which exists independently of its artistic representation: nature, society or the concrete individual. In a wide sense, this is the case of representative or realist art which, from prehistoric times (the paintings in the caves of Altamira or Lascaux) to the present has not stopped reaffirming its presence.

Interpretation of Reality

It is not superfluous to insist once more that representative or realist art, when it is truly art, in other words, when it is creative activity, not simple imitation, is never a copy of reality, whatever this reality may be. It is reality put into a form -- a human form -- by a creative act. Realist or representative art is such as long as reality takes the form that each creator has to invent. Of course, reality is already formed; there is already a series of real forms from which the artist starts and where he sets his foot. But art exists as realist or representative art only when these real forms adopt an unexpected and previously non-existent form: the one the artist invents or creates. In this way, the concept of art as a copy, an imitation or an exact reproduction of reality makes of the artistic form a mere repetition of the real form. It is an unsustainable concept because in ignoring the formal change, necessarily connected to the creative activity, art itself is being ignored or denied.

Hegel pointed out in his Aesthetics that the artistic reproduction of reality is, in the first place, a superfluous activity, insofar as it tries to give us what we already have in reality; secondly, it will always be an inferior activity, because no matter how perfect the imitation, it will never equal the model; thirdly, it ends up being a mechanical activity from which any creative element disappears; finally, imitation is impossible for arts such as architecture, music and poetry.

Now, when it is defended -- on a theoretical plane -- that art is "mimesis" or a truthful representation of reality, a similar relationship between representation and what is represented is not defended. Already in Greek antiquity, Aristotle had defined poetry as imitation, but excluding its trivial meaning: a close copy of a model. The imitation of which Aristotle speaks raises above that which is contingent and individual; that is why the artist should not limit himself to registering things as they are with all their particularities and contingencies; he must aspire to overcome that which is singular to search for that which is universal. In this sense, art is not under appearance or empirical reality, but rather over it.

This poetic universality is certainly not the one of science, owing to the fact that the former is obtained through the senses

while it speaks at the same time to the feelings. Furthermore, it is a universal reality whose territory is human, because it is, above all, for Aristotle, the imitation of human actions and characters.

Poetry (art) has, then, for Aristotle, a cognizant value. It gets us close to truth and it is truer even than history itself. But if poetry (art) can perform this function it is because -- as it happens with all true knowledge -- it shows us reality in its universality or essence rather than in its simple appearance or in its superficial phenomenological or contingent manifestations.

Lukacsian Criterion

The Aristoteleian distinction between essence and phenomena, or between necessity and contingency, serves as a base, nowadays, for a concept of art as knowledge, formulated by George Lukacs. Art must reflect, not the superficial aspect of reality, but its essence. But the way in which art accomplishes this reflection differs from that of science in that the latter dissolves the immediate connection between phenomenon and essence. For Lukacs, art is knowledge of the essence of reality; that is why, for him, authentic art is realism, and the issue of artistic knowledge becomes the fundamental issue of Lukacsian aesthetics. In this knowledge, man is present as a determinant element and truth does not happen at the universal level of science, but at a particular level, which for Lukacs does not mean the exclusion of universality but rather a symbolic representation of that which is singular and that which is universal. In art, all that which is universal presents itself in intimate connection with the individual concreteness of singular beings. That which is "typical" corresponds to the aesthetic category of particularity as an organic synthesis of that which is generic and individual, both as it refers to characters and to situations.

Lukacs is, in our times, one of the highest exponents of the concept of art as knowledge and of realism, not as a style among others, but as the art style which performs its cognizant function in the most complete and authentic manner. According to his concept, art offers truth through a different road from that of science: setting the anchor on essence undivided from phenomena, or placing the accent, not on that which is universal and abstract in science, but rather on that which is particular.

The concept of art as knowledge which, crossing diverse distances, goes from Aristotle to Lukacs, defends the cognizant function of art which realism performs as an essential function of artistic activity. But the existence of artistically valuable works which do not perform and do not intend to perform this function (non-realist works in general) cannot be ignored. This

fact alone can challenge the thesis that knowledge is an essential dimension of art. Furthermore, both Aristotle and Lukacs, referring mainly to the literary arts, do not make room for expanding the cognizant function of dramatic poetry (Aristotle) and of the novel (Lukacs) to the non-literary arts. On the other hand, if there is knowledge in art, that means we must talk about the truth supplied by artistic knowledge and, therefore, about the way in which truth appears in art, or more exactly in various kinds of art. In other words, the problem of the truth or falsehood of a work of art cannot be separated from the modalities with which art as a language is entrusted, i.e., from the relationships adopted in different signs by the significant and signified, as well as from the different manners of articulation of the signs in each particular art.

A Kind of Knowledge

If we talk about artistic truth, we have to start by recognizing it as a peculiar use of terms, because, in a strict sense, only propositions can be true or false. If we situate ourselves in the territory of art, truth or falsehood can only be attributed to the type of art in which we in fact find propositions, such as in literature.

A literary work is, above all, discourse; the articulation of certain signs to establish determined meanings. In literature we find ourselves in the kingdom of language, which is used in peculiar (aesthetic) manner, particularly in poetry. It is language; the words which are articulated in a certain order are the same ones with which, in ordinary language, we make statements or denials which can be true or false. In literature there are also statements which refer to facts and which, just as the ones in ordinary language, can be accepted as true or rejected as false. But literature as a creative activity produces an imaginary world and, therefore, the propositions which characterize ordinary language do not dominate in a literary work. They have their place in it but no matter how important their sum total is, it is not enough to secure artistic truth.

But if literature is fiction, an activity of the imagination, to what degree does it make sense here to talk about truth or falsehood?

In a literary work there are propositions which refer to facts, but the ones that dominate are mainly those which refer to imaginary events or characters, in other words, to those which do not exist in real life.

Certainly, the place for truth -- in the usual sense -- is proposition, inasmuch as it refers to a real fact. If this reference is lacking, there is no place in it, for truth or false-

hood. In the proposition: "The centaur attended a clandestine meeting," the territory for truth or falsehood is missing, i.e., the reference to a real being. A literary work is full of propositions of this nature, in other words, of propositions in which there is a reference to imaginary and, therefore, unreal events or characters. What is asserted or denied in them cannot be considered, strictly, true or false. What Cervantes says of Don Quixote, of his physical or spiritual figure, of his face, of his deeds, if taken literally, escapes truth or falsehood because of the simple reason that Don Quixote did not really exist and, if he had, Cervantes would not have intended to describe a real character as he worked and lived in reality. Nevertheless, Cervantes presents us with a form of human behavior which is not foreign to real life and which, on the contrary, reveals it in all its depth and wealth. If the character created by Cervantes did not really exist, there have been, and there are Quixotes, i.e., men who under certain circumstances reveal a peculiar nature, whose structure Cervantes unveils. In an analogous way, it could be said that Balzac is not the chronicler of the bourgeois society of the France of his time in "The Human Comedy"; that he does not refer to real facts and characters. He narrates facts and the lives of characters who did not exist. In the imaginary world created by Balzac, the key is not faithfulness to real events and characters. But through this unreal world Balzac delivers us with deep truth on the social reality of his time. Balzac reflects this world in his work which is still today, for us, a faithful portrait of a human world, through which we can get acquainted with a concrete social world as something alive and present, rather than as an archeological object.

We can see, then, that the propositions of "El Quixote" of Cervantes, and of "The Human Comedy" of Balzac, when considered in isolation, lack a value of truth; but when integrated to the total context of the work, they enrich our knowledge, especially by investigating human behavior (Quixotism) in a society where money governs and, with it, hypocrisy, greed and selfishness. Therefore, if in a literal sense the propositions of a literary work do not have a truth value, that does not prevent them from supplying certain information about concrete men and their social relationships.

Kafkaesque Bureaucrat

There are those who think that this cognizant function is only characteristic of the traditional form of realism, to which the above examples belong. But precisely the need to perform this function under new conditions when reality changes, demands in turn the overcoming of realism, in its traditional form, and a new way of structuring linguistic signs. That is what Kafka clearly reveals in the novel *The Process*. Here we confront a new social reality, vigorously prefigured more than a century ago by Marx: the reality of a depersonalized, alienated man, submerged in

the world of his work which, nevertheless, turns against him, and makes him a mere number. That is the world of abstract generality in which the bureaucrat of our times lives. If we consider Kafka's novel, we will see how strongly man has sunk in that impersonal and abstract world of the bureaucracy, in which true individuality is erased. The Kafkaesque Joseph K. is, certainly, an imaginary character, invented or created by his author. In a way, everything said about him cannot be considered true, inasmuch as the Joseph K. presented by Kafka did not really exist. Nevertheless, Joseph K's do exist in our real life, as does this impenetrable, mysterious world of officials who knit a dark net in which everything personal is lost. At any moment of our daily life, we can meet those who, like Joseph K., live an empty, abstract and depersonalized life. By virtue of the fact that those men and that world do exist, and that Kafka has portrayed them faithfully we can also talk of his realism, in other words, of the truth in his work and of the information on human and social reality he provides.

We learn something in Kafka, as we do in Cervantes, Balzac and Dostoyevsky, about concrete men and their social relationships; which is something we do not learn either in our daily experience or in psychology, history or sociological works. But what we learn in a literary work we learn inasmuch as we understand it as such: literary work, and not when we reduce it to the category of truth or falsehood.

The problem of truth in literature is presented, then, through its specificity as creative activity. Literature is imaginary or imagined work, that is, fiction, and, as such, it is a network of unreal or non-existent things. Nevertheless, it is precisely that network of fiction which allows for truth to become apparent: the artistic truth which is apparent in Cervantes "Quixote," Balzac's "The Human Comedy" or Kafka's *The Process*.

This artistic truth is not, therefore, truth in the habitual sense nor is it scientific truth. It is not the mission of literature to offer this type of truth leave alone to try to compete with science. It is neither the case of presenting a different form of truth obtainable by science nor of trying to reach it by a different road (through concepts in one case and through images in the other).

Artistic knowledge deserves such a name only if, in the first place, it enriches our vision of a certain reality (that of man's) and, in the second place, if it is a vision that science does not offer. That means that the difference in terms of knowledge between art and science does not only reside in the manner of knowing (as definitely supported by Burov and, to a certain extent, Della Volpe). Artistic knowledge allows for knowledge of forms of human experience, an attitude of man in the face of things,

which science does not reveal. Certainly, these artistic truths can be reduced to the simple usual or scientific propositions. In this way, for example, the truth which Kafka's *The Process* contains can be formulated in the following terms: "The bureaucratic world depersonalizes man and gets in the way of his establishing truly human relationships." But, to the extent that artistic truth of a work of art is reduced to this statement, it escapes through the same door through which such a reduction comes in. Literature, as a form of knowledge, has its own object and its own sphere of action: man in his relationships to things and in his mutual relationships. His own sphere and object will never get smaller regardless of the progress of science. If truth belongs to the sphere of propositions, and artistic truth in literature springs from such propositions, then in the non-literary arts where we do not find any propositions and, therefore, there are no truths in the habitual sense, we will have to try not to transfer to these works that which is valid in the territory of literature.

All in all, one distinction is obvious between the arts which are or can be representative due to the referential character of their signs -- such as painting -- and those which like music, because of their own nature, do not refer to reality.

With this in mind, let us see what happens when painting uses figurative signs. We can refer, as an example, to the Spanish artists El Greco, Velazquez or Goya, or to the great Mexican muralists of our time: Orozco, Rivera and Siqueiros. The Spanish artists show us reality in three different moments: the mystical Spain of El Greco, the Spanish court of Velazquez and the oppressed and barbarian Spain of Goya. The Mexican artists deal with the Mexican reality among the revolutionary flames which sparked in 1910. In none of these cases are we faced with a discourse or a net of propositions. That is why, when saying that painting offers us truths and that it enriches our knowledge of a human and concrete social reality, we are not using these terms in a strict sense. As we have stated before, only propositions can be true or false and only with such terms as a basis can we properly talk of truth and knowledge.

Nevertheless, considering that we are already in a different territory (which is not the one of proposition), we can talk about the truth of a representative work inasmuch as the artist does not capture the details, that which is merely external or superficial, but the essential aspects, the richest and most profound of a human situation or of a concrete relationship between man and things. In this the truth of the picture resides, and not in its correspondence to superficial aspects or in the faithfulness to detail.

Humanization of Art

But this truth does not present itself explicitly as truth inherent to a proposition, because the colors or lines are not signs with a fixed meaning adopted by convention. To be able to speak of pictorial propositions it would be necessary to reduce painting as a language to verbal language, which we, of course, reject. It is not the case of that which is contained in it in a concrete, sensible manner. That is due to the fact that the translation of the message contained in the pictorial work would only produce losses.

We have to, then abandon the concept of truth which we have dealt with in literature and admit that the representative pictorial work is true and performs a cognizant function inasmuch as it enriches our knowledge. Therefore, to the extent that painting contributes to enrich our vision of a world of humanized objects, it enriches at the same time our knowledge of that humanized reality. If we can talk of knowledge here, in spite of the fact that we are not at the level of discourse of literature, it is because pictorial realism is in a relationship of correspondence with a human reality or in a human relationship with the things that the picture reflects or reproduces.

Now, when we are in the territory of non-representative art (abstract painting or music), in other words, when we are confronted with arts which not only do not have discourse but also do not reflect a human reality either, or which reproduce an exterior reality, we cannot speak of truth or knowledge anymore.

The cognizant function of these arts is nil. This does not prevent them from being art, because they are creative activity through which determined meanings, which are not necessarily cognizant, are expressed and signified. But their signs lack the referential character of the signs in the literary and representative arts. This makes it obvious, once more, that the cognizant function is only one of the functions which art can perform

Metaphysical Absolutism

Nevertheless, sometimes, skirting the specific character that the signs must have so that art can perform this cognizant function and, trying to replace this need with metaphysical speculation, some people try to extend the cognizant character of the arts to non-figurative art. Abstract art, for example, is presented then as a form of knowledge not of a determined reality but of a universal or absolute reality. It would not be anymore a matter of knowing through art what is concrete and human, but the Universal or the Absolute. Art is seen as the most adequate way of knowing or representing the absolute. With this thesis some theoreticians of abstractionism repeat the same aesthetic

absolutism of the last century's great idealist metaphysics, particularly those of Hegel and Shelling. Abstract art would perform a high cognizant function only by eliminating that which is individual and concrete, it would be the representation or the revelation of the ultimate reality, as a new version of the absolute. But all this makes the function of art rest on the assumption about the existence of this ultimate and absolute reality which art is supposed to represent. With that we would be abandoning the concrete territory of art as a form of human praxis to settle in the foggy sky of metaphysical constructions.

The cognizant function does not exist in all the arts. There are arts which, because of the nature of their signs and their manner of articulation, do not pretend to perform such a function. On the other hand, art can perform and it has historically performed varied functions according to the dominant social interests and necessities of each historical phase of society. The cognizant function is, then, one among others, no matter how important it can appear to be in some of the arts and, in particular, in realist art as the most adequate to communicate cognizant meanings.

For Creation of New Reality

And when function exists, it has to do so with all the particularities that art imposes as a creative activity. Art can only "know" to the extent to which it is art. In other words, it can only perform a cognizant function, reflect or reproduce reality, by creating a new reality, not by copying or imitating the one already in existence. The cognizant problems which the artist faces have to be resolved artistically, by creating that new object which is capable of reproducing or reflecting reality. Only in this way can it offer the truths which other forms of human intellectual activity -- such as science -- cannot offer.

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