

## IS THERE ROOM HERE FOR THE ARTS?

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All human disciplines entail an ordering of experience. Indeed, this ordering is what makes them disciplines—*i.e.*, systems of learning or of action based on established principles. The very recording of experience which we call history is such a discipline. More highly developed orderings of experience are such fields as theology, philosophy, the sciences, and—despite “modern” appearances—the arts.

Of these, the most important to the man of the New Church is, of course, theology. For this is not simply a discipline developed by man; its ordering of experience is Divine, in the doctrinal exposition of the Writings, and in their opening of the inner sense of prior scriptures.

The rest of the disciplines mentioned above—philosophy, science, art, and history—are finitely limited. Not only is the experience on which they are based that of man in his life on this earth; the principles which govern their ordering are humanly derived. Hence the plethora of philosophic viewpoints, the constant reinterpretation of scientific data, the schools of art, the rewriting even of ancient history. In the New Church, we may hope, there will be consistency both among the various disciplines and in their individual development and application; for we strive to develop and apply them all from the Divine ordering of revelation.

That there should nonetheless be differences of opinion among New Church scholars in these fields is both inevitable and healthy. All men must work from appearances of truth, and each is limited by his own temperament, capacity, and experience. However, if we are to succeed in establishing a New Church culture that will have the strength of mutual understanding among the general fields of learning and activity, we must, it seems to me, observe some basic tenets regarding the various disciplines as orderings of experience. I believe the following to be important tenets:

- 1) The worth of a discipline—of philosophy, science, or art—is not in the experience but in the ordering of it.

- 2) The differences between the various disciplines result not from differences in the experiences encountered, but from differences in their ordering—as between, let us say, science and philosophy.
- 3) The differences between the various disciplines are very important and must be kept clearly in mind.
- 4) All disciplines are important to the New Church and its culture.

These statements offer nothing new. However, they tend to become obscured in our views and practices. While this may be a result of our common referral of them all to the theological truths of the doctrines, it can be a detriment to the clear development of each discipline in its own rightful aims and modes. And the situation is not helped by the increasing confusion around us concerning the boundaries of science, philosophy, and art, not to mention the current harvest of “higher criticism” applied to revelation.

Specifically, the names of the Swedenborg Scientific Association and of its organ, the *NEW PHILOSOPHY*, suggest an inconclusiveness regarding its function. And what do we call Swedenborg’s writings prior to his mission as revelator—“scientific works,” “philosophic works,” or just “preparatory works”? The last phrase, while it qualifies their use, fails to define their nature, and may be an evasion of important distinctions.

To repeat: the distinctions, I believe, are important; and they lie, not in different kinds of experience encountered or selected, but in the distinct purposes and modes that make each human discipline what it is and not something else.\*

It is not within the scope of this discussion to set forth the full distinctions of each discipline referred to above, though a series of articles in this journal toward that end would be of real value. My concern here is rather with the arts as comprising one of these disciplines; and concerning art, not to develop fully its function and mode, but rather to ask simply: “Why are not the men of

\* By selection I do not mean the mere picking out of certain experiences and exclusion of others. The ordering of experience involves selection, but under the broader activities of grouping and emphasizing and interpreting. Mere selection can be a detriment to a discipline, resulting in falsification (science and philosophy), prejudice and dogma (history and theology), and arbitrary censorship (theology and art).

the Church—specifically, the writers and editors of the NEW PHILOSOPHY—more concerned about art as one of the disciplines of the mind and of society?” Or, to put the question in more positive terms: “What is there in art as a distinct discipline that warrants formal attention to it in such a journal as this?”

One answer to the first question comes naturally to the mind of the reader of this journal—“Look at Swedenborg’s own record.” Rightly or not, he is frequently regarded as the prototype of a New Church man, not only with respect to his devotion to the Lord and His Word, but also as to the interests and pursuits of his life. Hence our interest in his preparatory works, aside from their great intrinsic value.

What do we find in Swedenborg’s writings related to the arts? Almost throughout, silence. That is, Swedenborg’s interests and pursuits impinge practically nowhere on the realms of music, painting, and literature. He wrote a few poems—imitative and not very good—in his youth. He remarked almost inadvertently on the architecture and interior decoration of churches he visited in his travels. But in his chief concerns—his reading, the people he sought out, the labors of his life—the arts appear to have been of little consequence. He developed, along his way, the concept of the imagination as a function or plane of the mind below the rational, as shown in *Rational Psychology*; but he appeared little interested in pursuing its development within himself.

In a remarkably well-rounded career, Swedenborg concentrated upon the search for the highest concepts and values—the nature of God and of the human soul, and the fundamental relation of the two worlds which man inhabits. In this search he sought to know the kingdom of nature and the Word, and developed principles respecting three great disciplines—theology, philosophy, and science. The latter two became steps to a greater end, and were left behind. Nevertheless, the man of the Church today is rightly concerned with the same disciplines, from the practical aspects of science to the abstractions of philosophic theory and theological doctrine.

What, then, of the arts? Shall we, apparently taking Swedenborg’s example, ignore them as a serious and formal discipline, worth attention only as a form of recreational byplay?

I believe that the answer is “No”—that, for example, the pages of this journal should testify to an interest in that branch of

philosophy called esthetics, as it now testifies to the worth of metaphysics, epistemology, and even of logic. I should like to present a case for art by outlining its function against the background of certain misconceptions to which people generally, religious people specifically, and New Church men particularly, appear prone.

As already stated, it is the thesis of this discussion that human disciplines entail an ordering of experience, that the worth of an individual discipline is in its distinct purpose and mode of ordering, and that art is one such discipline. We can then say this:

Art is an ordering of experience.

If we further add the term "good" to this equation, on both sides:

Good art is—what? An ordering of good experience?

There is no such thing as good experience. It is the human ordering of the flux of experience that has validity and value, whether it be in the realm of philosophy, of history, of science, or of art. So we say rather:

Good art is a good ordering of experience.

This leaves the large question, "What constitutes a good ordering of experience?" Whatever the answer, it cannot, I believe, be the same answer for philosophy as for science, or the same for art as for either of the other two. And in the confusion that follows a failure to distinguish between the disciplines, it is almost always art that suffers.

We expect art to represent nature or to generalize upon it, and it cannot and should not try. This is not its function. Or we expect it to offer a philosophic profundity, and it cannot and should not try. This is not its function. Some people (not of the New Church) expect it to reveal spiritual or theological truths; and it cannot, for this is not its function. Some people within the Church expect it to teach moral lessons; and even this it is not the function of art to do.

What, then, is the function of art, except to recreate? It is to re-create. The purpose of art as a discipline, for which its mode is suited as is that of no other discipline, is an ordered re-creation out of the flux of experience so that, as re-creation, the experience may be shared. Not isolated, as abstract concept; not concluded,

as generalization; not simply recorded as is the barest history, but shared, in the immediacy of affectional response. This is an ordering of experience, as true and significant in its own way as are the other disciplines by which the mind develops and a human culture comes to fruition.

Unlike the philosopher, the artist is not intent on abstracting universals from experience, discarding the particular, removing his work as much as possible from the here and now. Like the scientist, the artist remains on the plane of experience itself. But unlike the scientist, he does not generalize; nor does he seek the common basis of physical laws as his ordering of experience. For while the realm of art is the realm of experience in itself, it is more than physical experience—it is the whole complex of human experience.

Herein lies the value of art, that it is concerned with human values (as science *per se* is not), and with affectional responses (as philosophy is not). It is an ordering of experience directed by man's most abiding interests—his manifold loves expressed in human relationships and viewpoints. As such, it shares with religion itself a warmth of purpose denied to philosophy and science as disciplines. For art directly engages man's will, both that of the artist in his ordering from affection, and that of the recipient in his affectional response. That the intellect is also engaged in the various modes of art no student of Bach, Rembrandt, or Shakespeare could question. However, though the media of the several arts must be studied in any developed consideration of esthetics, they cannot be our concern here.

Man was born on this earth in order that his mind might be formed in the crucible of experience. In his development from the sensual to the rational and, through regeneration, the spiritual, he has need of many disciplines. This is the basic assumption of liberal education, the true meaning of culture, and the reason for devotion to difficult pursuits. The question of relative importance of the disciplines, beyond the Divine discipline of the Word, should not arise. All are needed, and none can replace any other. Like the sciences, like philosophy and history, the arts are a human ordering of experience. They need to be studied, their principles and modes understood, their works appreciated and used. This is a task for the New Church, if its culture is to be entire, its philosophy complete.