

POINT OF VIEW AND THE RENAISSANCE

IT is said of the Florentine painter, Paolo Uccello (1397-1475),

that the discovery of perspective had so impressed him that he spent nights and days drawing objects in foreshortening, and setting himself ever new problems. His fellow artists used to tell how he was so engrossed in these studies that he would hardly look up when his wife called him for a meal, and would just exclaim: "What a sweet thing perspective is!"¹

The discovery of the laws of perspective and the effect created by painting from a fixed and particular point of view was perhaps the most original and momentous invention of the Renaissance. The ancient Greeks had understood foreshortening, and Hellenistic painters were skilled in creating the illusion of depth, but not before the fifteenth century were the tricks mastered of representing the external world in art according to scientific perspective and from fixed points of view.² The Florentine artist Filippo Brunelleschi (d. 1446) is often credited with being the first to apply the mathematical laws of perspective systematically, and other Florentines – Masaccio, Donatello, and, of course, Uccello – followed diligently in his footsteps. Nor was this interest and delight in representing nature exactly as it appeared to an onlooker an Italian monopoly. Jan van Eyck (d. 1441), a contemporary of Brunelleschi, was exploring the same techniques, as were almost all of his contemporaries in the North. When he signed the picture known as *The Betrothal of the Arnolfini* with the words «I was here» («Johannes de Eyck fuit hic») he was vouching not so much for the legal validity of the human exchange depicted there, as for the historical and scientific accuracy, and thus the authority, of his eye-witness painted account.³

The success of this new way of representing reality as that which can be seen and measured and thus depicted with scientific precision took Europe by storm. By 1525 Albrecht Dürer could write a textbook (*Die Unterweissung der Messung*) on perspective and foreshortening, illustrating it with such famous woodcuts as «The painter Studying the Laws of Foreshortening by Means of Threads and a Frame».⁴ No successful artist from that time onward could afford to be ignorant of the techniques for producing the illusion of reality based on a fixed and personal point of view. This new way of seeing the world was internalized and came to seem "natural" and obvious to all.⁵ Older ways of representing reality came gradually to be dismissed as primitive, immature and, of course, "medieval".

In subsequent years, these Renaissance tricks of scientific visual representation were mastered and their effects thoroughly explored. The techniques were tested and artists toyed with the visual effects made possible by manipulating them. But for all of their playfulness and exploration, few of the artists of the Renaissance and after were willing or able to imagine depicting the natural world in an old-fashioned or medieval mode, one which ignored the laws of a fixed and individual perspective. Only with William Blake in

1. Quoted in E. H. GOMBRICH, *The Story of Art*, New York, Phaidon 1951, p. 183. An earlier version of this paper was published under the title, *Point of View: An Intellectual Revolution of the Baroque Age*, in *Going for Baroque. Cultural Transformations 1550-1650*, ed. by F. Guardiani, Toronto, Legas 1999, pp. 11-8.

2. GOMBRICH, pp. 164-5.

3. GOMBRICH, p. 173.

4. GOMBRICH, p. 264.

5. See E. H. GOMBRICH, *Art and Illusion. A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, 4th edn., London, Phaidon 1972, esp. Part Three: *The Beholder's Share*, pp. 153-244. On the importance of the viewer's collaboration with the artist to produce the illusion of reality in a painting, see Ch. 8: *Ambiguities of the Third Dimension*. Gombrich quotes with approval Sir Herbert Read, for example: «We do not always realize that the theory of perspective developed in the fifteenth century is a scientific convention; it is merely one way of describing space and has no absolute validity» (p. 209).

the late eighteenth century,⁶ and then nearly a century later with Cézanne and the modernists,⁷ would artists consciously turn their backs on these “laws” of representation, and become willing to sacrifice “linear perspective” and what had come to be known as “correct drawing” for other values.

The purpose of this brief communication is to explore the implications of this artistic revolution for the intellectual history of the Renaissance and for that of our own time. I wish to emphasize the novelty of this invention—the personal point of view—and to suggest that the internalization of the new principles of perspective and point-of-view had implications also for intellectual history. Just as it became usual to “read” works of art in terms of their point of view and perspective, so it came to be commonplace to assume that all philosophical, theological, and political opinions were, like visual artifacts, expressions of an author’s individual point of view. Thus was born the possibility of “source criticism” (the scientific description of the various sources of a doctrine or a text, each having its own perspective and offering a distinct point of view), the “history of ideas” (including the notion that an individual author’s point of view was constantly changing and was thus in need of careful description: the young and the old Augustine, or Luther, for example), and the historical-critical method of which the Renaissance philologists were the early harbingers. Thus too, were created “schools” of philosophy and theology (Platonism, Thomism, Scotism, Augustinianism, Jansenism) and of politics (Gallicanism, Ultramontanism), each increasingly defined by its idiosyncratic point of view on various key issues.

The results of this expansion of the realm of visual perspective and point of view into the other arts and sciences were far-reaching, if largely unremarked at the time, or indeed for the next four centuries. The rejection of the medieval and ancient way of viewing the world of thought was as powerful as, and has proven even more tenacious than, the new ways of representing reality introduced by the Renaissance artists. We are the inheritors of these ways of thinking; they still seem to us self-evident, and thus it remains very difficult to imagine viable alternatives, either in the past, or in the present.⁸

Let me suggest with two examples some of the ways in which intellectual life was revolutionized by this discovery of the joys of perspective and point-of-view. First, consider the creation of the world and the Biblical account thereof. The notion of creation has a long history in song and story as well as in philosophical, theological, and scientific inquiry, but it is only in the sixteenth century that it was transformed primarily into an “historical” problem: was the Biblical account a scientifically trustworthy and substantially accurate report of the historical event of creation? Jan van Eyck may be thought to show the way into this new thought-world when he vouched for the historical and scientific accuracy of his painting by placing the words «I was here», in the middle of his depiction of the *Arnolfini Betrothal*. In the same way, sixteenth-century scientists and theologians were able, for the first time, to imagine that the Bible provided something like an eye-witness account of the creation and to treat the sacred text as a visually accurate, and therefore trustworthy, description. Moses could be imagined as the “artist” of creation, and his description of the works of the six days as a personal testimony which, because it described creation from his own point of view and perspective, could be investigated and evaluated just like any other scientific work of art. Moreover, the artist himself was now open to critical historical investigation, and even to the “discovery” that Moses could not have been present at the creation and that his account might therefore be less than fully trustworthy. The question of authority—the authority of Sacred Scripture—was thus historicized. Interest shifted almost imperceptibly in the sixteenth century from a consid-

6. GOMBRICH, *The Story of Art*, p. 368.

7. GOMBRICH, *The Story of Art*, pp. 405-11.

8. M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy. The Making of Typographic Man*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press 1962, remains important as an extended meditation on this theme.

eration of Moses as the scribe, and God as author of Genesis, to the question of the human author's accuracy and his ability, like Jan van Eyck, to portray the scene of creation in a believable and trustworthy fashion.

It was against this background, of course, that Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo carried out their famous observations of the stars and planets. Leaving aside the unspoken question of whether they might be better artists of creation than Moses and the Biblical authors, these scholars certainly thought that they could improve on the pictures of creation and of the created world provided by Aristotle, Ptolemy, and the medieval Arabic astronomers. And in fact they could. By setting out with a firm grasp of the scientific principles of visual perspective, they could construct a "world-view"⁹ that was more pleasing, more accurate, more true to visual appearances (all of the values prized in contemporary artwork) than that of their predecessors. What might easily pass unnoticed in this achievement, however, are at least two of the unspoken assumptions that made it possible: first, the assumption that there can be only one non-erroneous interpretation of the evidence, and that based on the laws of visual perspective and of a determinate point-of-view. Painters knew, of course, that there could be multiple interpretations of the same data; they played with the illusionary possibilities of linear perspective in all of their works. Scientists and philosophers seem to have been less playful. Imbued with the same enthusiasms as the artists, they began to imagine representing the world "as it really is" (*i.e.*, as it appears from a fixed and personal point of view).

The second tacit assumption was that Moses, Aristotle, Ptolemy, and all of the medieval scholastics were trying to do the same thing as Copernicus and Kepler and Galileo, that is, to construct a model or a picture of the universe using the science of visual perspective and point-of-view. Because they took this for granted, the scientists began to historicize the work of their predecessors, and to focus attention not on the realities that the older writers were trying to describe, but rather on those authors' descriptions – that is, on their personal perspective and point-of-view, and on their failure to provide a visually persuasive (*i.e.*, scientific) representation of the motions of the stars and planets.

So successful has been this process of historicization that we are today scarcely able to tell the story differently, to imagine that Moses, Aristotle, and Ptolemy were not at all under the thrall of Renaissance linear perspective – whose laws had not yet been invented. What might they have been trying to do, if not to provide the kind of picture of reality that we have come to expect from all scientists?¹⁰ What other, and more adequate, ways of understanding their science will allow us to continue to learn about and represent the creation in a fully satisfying way? These are the questions that have emerged in the past few decades as we in the West come gradually out from under the domination of Renaissance perspective and point of view.

A second illustration of the convergence between art and thought may be found in the history of Jansenism. Cornelius Jansen, a professor at the University of Louvain and then bishop of Ypres, died in 1638, only days after completing the manuscript of his magnum opus, entitled *Augustinus*. This book was the culmination of a lifetime devoted to reading and study of the voluminous writings of the great fifth-century bishop, Augustine of Hippo. Jansen hoped to find in Augustine the key to overcoming the divisions of the Church, and definitive (*i.e.*, clear and distinct) answers to the great theological questions which were riving her. Jansen's enormous book is, I believe, the first in a long, long line of books on Augustine that attempt to depict in clear and distinct terms the salient aspects of his thought – his personal and authoritative point-of-view on the world and on its Creator and Redeemer. That Jansen's is among the very first of such studies is surely noteworthy;

9. The term "world-view" seems to have been a seventeenth-century coinage.

10. At least until the middle of the twentieth century, when, as in the arts, non-linear and perspectiveless scientific accounts have once again become imaginable.

it means that we had to wait more than a thousand years after Augustine's death for our first historical and critical monograph! Surely this is not because preceding generations had neglected Augustine's writings; that is demonstrably false. Nor were the medieval writers simply too lazy or incompetent to carry out such a study. Rather, it seems, it was only in Jansen's time that one could imagine treating Augustine as a creative artist, and his thought as a consciously crafted work of art in the dominant mode, *i.e.*, with a fixed and personal point of view. In doing so Jansen created something new, "Augustinianism", that is, a coherent doctrine (artistic creation) to rival and to countermand the other "schools of thought", such as Lutheranism, Thomism, and Scotism, not to mention Gallicanism and Ultramontanism, which had thrown Europe into such a maelstrom of competing points of view. These other schools had been constructed in the same way, according to the laws and rules of the visual arts which allowed one to distinguish each writer's, or each group's, unique perspective and point of view on key and defining issues.

The success of this intellectual revolution scarcely needs to be emphasized. Its principles and presuppositions have been the touchstones of the entire edifice of higher education into the late twentieth century. The very words "perspective" and "point of view", used to denote an intellectual opinion in almost every undergraduate essay, are witnesses to the success of the artistic metaphor as applied to philosophy, theology, and political theory. Astonishing as it may seem, there were no corresponding terms to express such an idea in the ancient or medieval world. The Middle Ages were, if we can imagine such a thing, a world without a point of view.

Such an assertion is, of course, difficult to prove, but it is an hypothesis that is well worth testing, and that has important implications for pre- and post-modern intellectual history. If "point-of-view" is a relatively recent innovation rather than an eternal truth about the structure of the universe and of human knowledge, then some of our most cherished beliefs, including our faith in the historical-critical method as the summit of scholarship, are called into question. And such questioning has already begun. Just as the nineteenth-century artists gradually came to forego the artful (*i.e.*, artificial) and pleasing certainties of linear perspective and "correct" drawing in order to emphasize other qualities such as solidity, depth, colour, and expressive or symbolic meaning, so too are intellectual historians gradually finding other values to emphasize in their studies of the past. Now, in the first years of the third millennium, historians are nearly ready to sacrifice some of the sophistication and seeming certainty of the historical-critical method. It can now be said in the academy that the "Thomist" and "Scotist" and "Augustinian" points of view, as discovered and codified by the "classical" seventeenth-century interpreters, are chimeras. Soon it may be possible to suggest, for example, that the long-cherished division of early Christian exegesis into Alexandrian (bad) and Antiochene (good) schools of interpretation is equally groundless, being the artificial product of modern intellectual predilections for clear and distinct points of view. Likewise the search for the "historical" Jesus and for the "real" (pre-Justinianic) Roman Law may soon be recognized not as scientific investigations but as the polemical exercises between competing points of view which they are.

Some of this new-found freedom has come to us from the Post-Modern theorists. Foucault and others have pointed toward a new intellectual aesthetic that transcends the old linear ways of thinking. But they, or at least their students, seem not really to have escaped the old model. Theirs seems often to be, rather, a carrying out of the visual logic of the Renaissance to one of its possible consequences: that there are multiple points-of-view, and all of them are equally personal and equally in/valid.

As a medievalist I am permitted to be blissfully innocent of all these gambits. I study characters for whom Augustinianism, Neo-Platonism, and Aristotelianism had not yet been invented or "visualized". The ninth-century deacon of the Church of Lyons in Southern France, a gentleman by the name of Florus, was every bit as impressed by Augustine as was the seventeenth-century Dutchman Cornelius Jansen, and he knew the texts of

Augustine equally well. When Florus wanted to harvest the fruits of Augustine's thought he did so not by constructing an historical-critical commentary, but by creating florilegia (collections of flowers – like his name), picking relevant passages from here and there throughout the length and breadth of Augustine's works. These florilegia became the heart of the medieval "gloss" or standard commentary on the Bible. They reflected no single and personal point of view, but rather a common inheritance built up from all the authorities, and in which all readers shared equally.

My own favourite among these pre-moderns is, of course, St. Thomas Aquinas. It is a pleasure, and often a shock for new readers, to watch him invoke the whole gamut of authorities – from Aristotle to Augustine to the famous Dionysius the Areopagite; the Greek Fathers as well as the Latins; the disciples of Plato as well as the Moslem commentators on Aristotle, all to support in their respective ways the truth of the Christian faith. This is not, of course, the Aquinas of the Renaissance or, by and large, of the modern Age. That Thomas was an intellectual genius because he had a particular, Aristotelian, point of view on the cosmos. Viewing everything through the peephole of that perspective, this Pseudo-Thomas could distinguish clearly and distinctly the crucial elements and errors and false perspectives of other authors, and thus refute them.

The real Thomas Aquinas was able to write and think as he did precisely because he had no point of view – he was not an Aristotelian ... or even a Thomist. If he were asked, he would surely describe his point of view as that which was common to all Christians in all places and at all times: *Quod semper, ubique, ab omnibus creditum est*. Such a condition was the ordinary one for most people before the Renaissance, when opinions (*doxa*) ceased, for a time, to be common (*orthodoxa*) and became instead the expression of particular and personal points-of-view.

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