Historical Legitimacy, Pictorial Order, and Critical Necessity

Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, pp. 117 – 121.

Let us agree that any account we give of the historical reality will correspond to it in a very summary and diagrammatic form. It is a little like the correspondence between the schematic maps of the Bay Area Rapid Transit System or London Underground and the knotted complexities of the real things: (1) the diagram leaves much out; (2) it is a small-scale registration of a large thing, and a static registration of a moving thing; (3) its emphasis is much distorted by the demands of its own form, whether symbolic lines or symbolic words; (4) the medium is conventional and demands understanding itself; (5) it is directed to a specific sort of use; (6) its meaning lies in its relation to a more complex reality. But the point is that it is *within its own limits* correct; it could be incorrect within its own limits. If the map showed BART going to Palo Alto it would not correspond with reality even in its own terms. The difference is that whereas we can go out and check the BART map by matching it directly with the running of the trains, we cannot go to the Sansepolcro of 1450 and match our diagram directly with Piero's thoughts and acts. We must find more indirect ways of validating our accounts.

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This is heavily trodden ground in the methodical discussion of several disciplines. The philosophy of historical explanation points particularly to a set of tests for external appropriateness. It would urge us to test any intentional account of an action for consistency with other performances by the same actor, with any statements he may have made about his intention, with the capacities of the culture he belongs to. We have done a little of that: we have snatched the programmatic term *commensurazione* from his lips; and we have pointed to the special mathematical skill of his milieu. It might also urge us to construe the internal rationality of intentional behaviour as a sort of acted out logical statement, a 'practical syllogism'; and since the statement comes in the final form of a finished work the effect of this is inevitably to refer us on to the more traditional method of interpretation. Hermeneutics—though I do not want to get involved in it—would also demand consistency with facts and performances outside the immediate object of attention: 'legitimacy' and 'generic appropriateness' urge us to check that what we claim is so is conceivable in the culture and does not ignore its sense of kind. But it also points more insistently to the need for internal adequacy in explanation. Not only should what we say be consistent with the painting in every part, it should be actively consistent both with those parts constituting a whole and with that whole standing in a legitimate relation to the external facts. However, this may seem to say rather little about the functional look of good explanations, and for this one falls back on weak forms of old general criteria: economy and pragmatic utility. The simpler way of reaching a certain level of coherent explanation is likely to be the more attractive: there is an obligation to demonstrate the need to invoke this or that bit of circumstance. The explanation must

pay its way, and the most obvious style in which it can do this is to solve an observed puzzle in the object or to alert us to a peculiarity in the object not previously observed.

This is all very cursory and brusque, but the universes I am invoking are well-known and accessible, and I am still anxious to elude methodical rigour of an inhibiting kind. If you take matter like that of the last paragraph and shake it, it sorts itself out into three intercommunicating criteria or—as I would prefer—three self-critical moods of a commonsense sort. As a student of the classical tradition I think of these as external decorum, internal decorum, and parsimony; but you will prefer me to refer to them as (historical) *legitimacy*, (pictorial and expositive) *order*, and (critical) *necessity* or fertility. They are not modes of proof but stances from which one may reflect on the probability of one intentional account as against another.

The first, legitimacy, is a matter of external propriety. Much of this is straightforward, a normal avoidance of anachronism. We try not to suppose things in the painter's culture which are not there. We look at one picture by a painter in the light of other pictures by him, with an expectation of some continuity, however much development—particularly in the cultures like Piero's where the painter's own work is seen as a genre for the finer points, the more elusive discriminations about manner. But delicacy is needed particularly at two points. One is not to drive a demand for legitimacy so hard and unidirectionally that originality or inadvertence or defiance are quite ruled out: many great pictures are a bit illegitimate. The other is in distinguishing between levels of authority. I might produce a contemporary text to show a certain notion was available in fifteenth-century Italy; but against this I might also know that in a certain genre, such as an altarpiece, notions of that complexion did not occur. The more general, the second, would have tentative priority over the less, but might have ot yield if the larger framework of explanation demanded.

The second, order, is a matter of adequately comprehending an internal organization, posited in the object one is addressing and reflected, in a different and informal guise, in the nature of one's explanation; both have an internal consistency. If the word did not have technical senses in both hermeneutics and the philosophy of truth I would have liked to call it *coherence*: 'order' counds bland. The area I have in mind is articulation, system, integrality, ensemble. That positing an intentional unity and cogency entails a value judgement and hypothesizes a high degree of organization in the actor and the object will not worry us. Only superior paintings will sustain explanation of the kind we are attempting: inferior paintings are impenetrable. What may appear as a lack of unity or organization in the explained painting is liable to be a sign of incompleteness in the explanation, a failure to take into account a circumstance that resolves this or that apparently detached element into an intentional unity. Thus, on the whole, the explanation positing the more complete and embracing order is preferable.

The third mood is critical necessity or fertility. One does not adduce explanatory matter of an inferential kind unless it contributes to experience of the picture as an object of visual perception. This has its implications to which I shall return. But there are many fifteenth-century circumstances that one could adduce as *consistent* with Piero's *Baptism of Christ* which one does not adduce because they are not necessary to the purpose: which is inferential criticism. It is a pragmatic mood, a demand for a sort of actuality.