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**Review Article:
A Fresh Approach to Reality***

We live in an epoch in which science establishes man's domination over nature and, moreover, regulates the government of the social context. Our civilization basks in the pride that it perpetually corrects the flaws of its successes, that it will devise additional scientific projects to undo its ill effects on the quality of human life. The euphoria of progress, the confidence that two steps forward will let us forget the one step backwards, makes contemporary science both a blind and a blinding power. We call "eccentric" the man who, like Baudelaire in the last century, warns us that progress is humanity's most ingenious torture.

What is most needed today are not flamboyant and romantic epics which rant against science and its technological excrescences, but rather enlightenment about our own delusions. We need to understand thoughtfully the kind of knowledge which gives rise to the legitimate quarrel about the aims of human society, to the question of Being concealed within and by the will to mastery, and to reflections about our historical origins and future destiny. Here we must learn to distinguish between scientific knowledge and a knowing grounded in the issues of the human sojourn. In learning this distinction we will no longer hide from ourselves the fact that success in conquering nature raises and does not settle the question of human responsibility at the social and political levels.

Piguet's call for "knowledge of the singular and a logic of realism" is both critique and reflection. It is critical in that Piguet exposes the inherent limitations of the traditions (conceptualism and nominalism) structuring our present-day assumptions. The criticism here proceeds constructively, in response to the question where the power of these traditions lies. His call is reflective in that he considers directly the issues of the human sojourn. The critique is insightful and helpful, but we shall here concentrate on the reflection on, and the exemplification of, the issues.

What is real is singular (French *individuel*). Piguet here resumes an ancient, now often forgotten principle. Ultimately, only this family receiving me here and now is real: its singularity reveals a universality of meaning "going beyond" the here and now, while a universal characterization all by itself peters out into an indifferent generality claiming to cover a variety of unsubstantial particulars. Or this organ recital we hear welling out to fill and reform the entire cathedral, and which might provide the impetus for understanding analogous occasions.

Or that time and place where we learned to clear a campsite, to build a fire, to hunt and eat in rhythm with the unpredictable. Or . . .

Most centrally Piguet asks: How can the singular be retained as the substance of life? and he understands this question as a challenge to philosophy. How can *reflection* contribute to the retention and comprehension of the singular? Philosophy itself can be neither art nor science. Art works directly present singularity; for instance, parts of Faulkner's *Go Down Moses* portray a boy who learns to hunt and eat in rhythm with the unpredictable. Scientific works, on the other hand, enhance our powers of operation by teaching us to concentrate on our own conceptual generalities; by its nature, science provides methods of control which, by themselves, bypass singularity. Plato (*Republic*, Books II and III) and Augustine (*Confessions*, Book III) considered art works centrally placed in their respective societies as a danger to the individual: instead of learning to be his own self, he can be seduced into living the lives of others. But for us today science poses the threat to man, and those engaged in reflection must take due account of the danger. In one passage toward the end of his work, Piguet summarizes the limitation of science:

Contrary to what is too often thought, technology does not enslave man. It is science that enslaves human intelligence, namely to the extent that our intelligence encloses itself within its ipseity and denies its own alterity. (9124)

The singular, that to which we respond, is an otherness making demands on us. Science orients us to concentrate on what we have and to make careful demands on the environment, which either confirms or refutes our pretensions. For society as well as for the individual, concentrating exclusively on human operation results paradoxically in an enslavement to our own constructs.

Piguet's effort to answer the question unfolds in nine "books" pursuing the problematic in the domains of aesthetics, art (music in particular), theology, economics, and sociology. Despite its length, the work is aphoristic in style ("paragraphed" rather than paginated); indexes, bibliographies, and short summaries of the book in four languages (English included) aid the reader to focus on the issues. The discussion of "internal totalities" and of what he calls the "semantic reversal" appears most central, the rest being exemplification and ramification.

To begin with the notion of totality. Every singularity is ensconced within a pattern of engagement. In Melville's *Moby Dick* Ishmael remarks:

. . . in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fireside, the country . . .

Yet this "lowering, or at least shifting" leads one *into*, not away from a totality. In Ishmael's case, the totality is whaling. Similarly, we encounter our spouses

adequately not as "persons" pure and simple, but in terms of the common enterprise of the household. The human problem is not to strip away the functionality in such cases, but to let oneself *into* it.

This observation of the human condition immediately calls for a distinction between internality and externality. The totality in which we are involved not only allows for singularity, it also works against it. Since every context, whether whaling or housekeeping, has its own definition of success, we can turn away from the singular beings within and work for the perfection without. We must in any case give the totality its due: catch the whale, balance the books, or whatever. Thus we can always neglect the real and attend to the skeleton of its appearance. This human predicament gives rise to a certain restlessness in any human enterprise, and to comedy and tragedy in the realm of art.

Piguet argues that our philosophic tradition displays a clear tendency to direct attention to the totalities themselves. No doubt some insight into the nature of totalities *per se* does enhance our dealings with particular ones. But it is vain to hope that increased power over particular totalities will allow human beings to fulfil their own nature. Piguet calls this vain hope which guides intellectual development in the West: detotalization of internal totalities for the sake of retotalization into external totalities.

Only internal totalities allow of singularity, i.e. reality. The role of circumstance furnishes a helpful sign of the difference between "inside" and "outside" concerns. If the pattern of our engagement is unrooted in, indifferent to its where and when, then we are working to establish a mode of generality having only particularity as a correlate. In contrast, "everything in an internal totality is totally circumstanced," Piguet argues.

The circumstance is therefore not a residue, but the constitutive driving-force . . . in an internal totality the circumstance is the *principle of determination*, while in an external totality it is a residue left *out of account* by the given principle of determination. . . . Goethe remarked: 'all my poems are poetry of circumstance.' (3132, 3133)

Here we can suggest that the scientific attitude, whatever it means personally to any given scientist, commits the whole of society to externality.

Perhaps the most crucial question, however, is: How are we to understand the possibility of our own re-entry, the avenue on which we can resume our role *within*? Description never leads to wisdom. Melville's Ishmael suggests an alternative:

The living whale, in his full majesty and significance, is only to be seen at sea in unfathomable waters; and afloat the vast bulk of him is out of sight . . . and out of that element it is a thing eternally impossible for mortal man to hoist him bodily into the air so as to preserve all his mighty swells and undulations And the only mode in which you can derive even a tolerable idea of his living contour is by going a-whaling yourself; but by so doing, you run no small risk of being eternally stove and sunk by him.

Not simply must one's "conceit of attainable felicity" be lowered or shifted toward the singular. This seemingly simple event follows only upon a radical conversion on our part, one in which we somehow renounce without abandoning the claims of the totality while affirming ourselves essentially as exposed to the circumstances. This radical and dangerous exposure requires first of all that we give credit to the real beings we encounter, and this crediting is incompatible with the mere effort to secure the constructs of our effort. As Piguet remarks, "every internal totality is mortal" (4329).

What *difference* would the "realism" envisioned by Piguet make? Teaching is one domain of special interest:

Good teaching consists in leaving behind the level of general culture and of individualizing the subject taught. A man is well educated when amidst the common assets of general culture he can read the presence and true transcendence of the singular. The teacher must thus bear witness to the authority of the thing of which he speaks, he should not appeal to his own speech or to the effect of his words on others. But this thing is just what it is, namely in terms of its own individuality. If teaching is really a dialogue (as is often said), it cannot be such without the silent presence of the materials which are taught and which found transcendently whatever each may say about them. (9218)

Piguet speaks here to the crisis of the humanities (the sciences are little more than trades and are taught accordingly, especially in North America). For in teaching Melville, Faulkner, or Thoreau; Shakespeare, Chaucer, or Conrad; Plato, Kant, or Marx we have the choice: either to acquaint the students with their culture or to direct them toward each work in its singularity. In the first case, the teacher assumes that he is the authority and the students recipients; in the second case, the work under consideration emerges as the authority and the teacher's receptivity stands as an example for the students. In the first case, the teacher transmits culture (a favorite phrase); in the second case, he pierces it. In the first case, the students must listen to the teacher, in the second case, the teacher mediates a reflective experience by listening to the works themselves.

Vaguely aware of the crisis, some professors endeavor to create a sense of cultural elitism, a cultivation of the mind which keeps to itself and away from the vulgarity of our historical epoch; their students find it increasingly difficult to see any vital connection between this culture and their own lives, and so they drift naturally toward the natural and social sciences which speak if not pander to the commerce, industry, and consumerism dominating the actual scene. Other professors desperately try fancy hardware or various rhetorical tricks to liven up the classroom; in graduate schools students in literature most often ape the methods of the sciences (hypothesis, observation, tabulation). The first are the servants of the dead, and the second enforce a reduction of internal to external totalities. *Both* unwittingly serve the interests of formalism which, as Piguet remarks (5424), is "the beginning of all nihilism."

The transmission of culture builds on one traditional faith: that we do justice to our own nature, and to the nature of that which we encounter, by stabilizing the *concepts* through which we experience things. The exercise of gimmicks on the undergraduate level, and tabulation of the graduate level, resume the later faith of our tradition: that human mastery of circumstances follows upon an adequate arrangement of the *names* we give to (concepts of) things. But, Piguet argues, both conceptualism and nominalism have "had their day." Originally, both the ancient and the modern faith understood human nature as underway toward things. But, these ways being indirect, the means could and did replace the end. It is high time, then, that we learn to think things directly. How can teaching proceed in accordance with such "realism"?

Chiefly by using analogy. The principle of analogy has since ancient times stood in contrast to the axiom of non-contradiction. Piguet explicates the principle (4410 ff.) and discusses its employment in the work of Levi-Strauss (8140 ff.).

Students as well as teachers, confronted with whales, a neighbor, or a painting by Monet, can only come to understand them in their *singularity*, gradually and painstakingly, on the basis of a prior involvement with, say, the woods, old friends, or paintings by Van Gogh. This, of course, happens in any case, but teaching in accordance with the logic of realism must erect this procedure into a principle. For it allows for what Gabriel Marcel calls "the primacy of Being in relation to knowledge." The previous and the forthcoming are not *compared*: comparison installs us at the level of concepts or, worse, names. Analogy allows the *power* of one experience (the paintings of Van Gogh) to infiltrate the other (those by Monet); soon enough later to distinguish the two powers.

The axiom of non-contradiction, on the other hand, prescribes that in the face of a being (while whaling or tending the household or . . .) we extract the meaning of it, take possession of its *one* meaning. It assumes that we do most justice to whales and to ourselves by concentrating on concepts or names: on the knowledge of them. As compensation, this alleged primacy of knowledge in relation to being generally gives rise to a certain sentimentalism, since many things (e.g., our spouses) insist that we respond to them otherwise.

Students, of course, must eventually employ the principle of analogy themselves. But the teacher who, by his own analogy, can embody the power of one matter (the narration of Proust or the thought of Kant), helps his students more to understand other matters (Faulkner or Plato) than does the teacher who gives the longest and most accurate description of these others.

We often forget that teaching in the humanities has for its subject matter *art*. In some disciplines the students obviously study art *works*. Art itself, *techne* in Greek, as a human possibility, lies at the heart of any humanistic discipline. This human possibility was originally understood as a human responsibility: to be human = to help things become what they really are. "Art in part completes

what nature is unable to finish, and in part imitates her," says Aristotle (*Physics*, 199 a 16). The art of the vinedresser brings out the nature of his vines, helps them produce their grapes. The art of the stonemason alters the haphazard shape of the stone, allows its nature to assert itself in the strength of its supporting power. The art of the statesman helps the context of human life, the State, to evolve in a direction doing justice to human nature. The art of the thinker-writer hews the issues of the human sojourn into visible and audible form. In this broad and most significant sense of the term, a good historical account or a meaningful sociological study contains as much art as the art work obviously so classified in the bastions of culture.

If in the humanities we ask the students to study, i.e. to partake of, art, then "aesthetics", the meditation upon the workings of art can rightly lay claim to the status of a propaedeutic to all teaching of the humanities. Yet few teachers in the arts have undertaken such meditation with consequence. Precisely in the disciplines having for their obvious subject matter art *works*, and often even in the domain of aesthetics proper, professors tend to presume that art works are vehicles either of "beauty," i.e. a sweet balm for a world-weary soul, or of "ideology," i.e. a sneaky packaging of a "point" for opinion-hungry souls. Not to bother mentioning the various "scientific" approaches treating art works and their authors as a geologist treats his rocks. The much-discussed crisis in the humanities evidences itself most sadly in the teachers themselves who do not really know what they are teaching; that the student public has little liking for the arts, is only the symptom.

Piguet's own meditation on aesthetics occupies Books Five and Six. In search of a third possibility, he resumes the two strains of our tradition:

Classical logic founds itself chiefly upon generalization, and contemporary logic mainly on formalization. By generalization the vital experience is surpassed by a concept; the special case is subsumed by the general law and every perception becomes the embryo of a concept. But in art the concept is subordinated to vital experience, the sole criterion: it is perception which here subsumes the concepts. To find the universal within the singular, aesthetics must therefore give up generalization. The same can be said of formalization. To formalize . . . is to think the sign instead of the thing. But in art the thing is given immediately and is in itself its own sign. It is therefore impossible to think the sign in place of the thing. (5741)

Most significantly, what we now call "science" leads us to think *signs* first of all, and only secondarily things; thus the impotence of science in the face of "environmental problems." But a novel by Faulkner, or even an historico-sociological study such as Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, gives us immediately the thing of which it speaks; it is a sign, but its own and one which makes no sense to us unless we relate directly to the thing. Thus art works are always "realistic" in Piguet's sense — to the extent that they are art works at all.

Imbued directly or indirectly with the spirit of science, as endorsing it or merely reacting to it, a teacher can indeed "think the sign in place of the thing." But then he will not do justice to the works under consideration. Students notice this. Either the professor's comments fail to aid them into the work or the students' participation in the work stands in no relation to the professor's comments. But art works themselves provide their own lessons; they reassert themselves independently of the misguided views held about them. Thus Piguet sees in art works, and especially in aesthetics, the fountain of salvation from nihilism.

What is art? Responsible participation in an internal totality conditioned by a semantic reversal and consummated in an encounter with a singular.

What is an art *work*? An internal totality so constructed as to invite such participation. However, as Piguet says (5620), "a work is the place where the artist issues a rendez-vous to those to whom he addresses himself." We can, of course, either refuse or ignore the invitation. Thus a work is essentially, and not just with the passage of time, mortal.

How can we properly teach the arts, the humanities? By analogy, and by analogy only. If a teacher in the humanities cannot reproduce, in his own manner and out of his own matter, the power of the singular emergent in the works he asks the students to study, he should not be teaching those works. If he can indeed recreate the power in even one great work, his students learn something about all great works — and about the human condition *per se*. Such is the power of the singular.

The question of *language* lies at the core of the crises in society engendered by the domination of science. Language makes us what we are. Man is the *zoon logon echon*, that living being unwrapped in *logos*, language. Paradoxically, language consummates itself in our experience not of it, but of what it reveals. As distinctively human beings we are responsible for articulating *things*: the articulation makes sense only when transparent to its origins.

Today, however, linguists and "linguistic philosophers" advise us to look to the sign first of all, and to the thing only later, if at all. Their advice appears self-evidently true because it reproduces in specifics the general orientation of science. But as a result intellectual effort has become at bottom meaningless, and we have to seek substance elsewhere (in some alleged intimacy of subjective life).

Teachers in North America have long complained that their pupils cannot write decent English. In blaming various causes, they often only name other symptoms within the syndrome. The consumerism reinforced by television (both the advertising and the programming) *also* installs us at the level of signs rather than of things, of means rather than ends; the automobile nowadays (in the form of pointless driving) *also* deprives us of focus ("through that car window everything you see is just more TV," as Robert Pirsig so well put it).

Psychologism *also* manifests the disease in its effort to convince us that we don't have lovers but sexual, intellectual (etc.) "relationships," that alarm clocks do not awaken us but "alter our behavioral adjustment."

Failing to understand the crisis, teachers aggravate the disease. Since language is misconstrued as a system of signs, and since the teachers' task appears as leading the student toward better language, it follows that more and more concentration is needed: upon the signs! But systems of signs are only simulacra of language, and the teachers' task is to show the pupils the *things* which can indeed only be adequately brought out for what they are within language. The painter Robert Henri was proceeding "realistically," in Piguet's sense, when he advised his students to concentrate on *what* they painted and to allow "orginality" and "technique" to evolve by themselves out of this focus upon the real. In insisting on improving the means of expression and communication, our grade school teachers and university professors misunderstand both human being and language: they assume that pupils already have something to express or communicate, *and* that language is a mere means.

At present, the chief exigency of a "university education" consists in learning to think signs in place of things. No wonder then that many students cannot understand the relevance of the humanities. Such thinking is native to the sciences and to the School of Commerce. In the humanities it rightly appears, if not perverse, at least out of tune with the subject matter. The popularity of the "social sciences" no doubt stems precisely from their ambiguity: the subject matter suggests that substance must be lurking somewhere, while at the same time the study appears scientific.

Language originates (finds and refinds its origin) as an internal totality in which man must recurrently allow for the semantic reversal correlative to the emergence of the singular things of the moment. To understand and to know are linguistic but also *circumstantial* events. Thus, Piguet argues, they demand that we suspend the "loquacity" so native to us (because it is a function of our ipseity) for the sake of "plunging ourselves into a silence of reception" (this plunge being the precondition of any encounter with alterity). Understanding things in their singularity, and building out a knowledge on this basis, requires that we be "empty of any substance of our own and let speak that which is at issue" (4422). The speech which then evolves belongs to that which elicits the speech. "To the question, Who speaks? one can answer . . . : no one. *Euphe-mein*." (The Greek literally means "to speak well of things" but came to mean "to keep silent out of respect"!)

Although Piguet's book is long (equivalent to several books bound in one), reading it is a pleasure. Its aphoristic style allows for critique and reflection tied at every moment to real, and not merely academic, issues. Since the English-speaking reader is asked to consider not the formulation, but the matter itself, he soon forgets that he is reading an alien tongue.

As a Swiss, Piguet is liberated from the various vogues dominating France, Germany, England, and America. This independence seems to have accentuated not only his sensitivity to the concrete realities of his own country (from which he draws many of his own examples) but also the breadth and depth of his familiarity with the current philosophical efforts throughout the world. At present Professor of Philosophy in Lausanne, he has lectured in many countries. In 1971 he was visiting professor at the Université de Montréal and came to the Université de Moncton (N.B.) to deliver a series of lectures. His tone is that of a man speaking *from* local roots *to* historically and geographically universal concerns.

* *La Connaissance de l'individuel et la logique du réalisme*. By J.-Claude Piguet. Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1975. Pp. 944. SF 118.