

Afterword: Knowledge and Value

If a man is sufficiently unimaginative to produce evidence in support of a lie, he might just as well speak the truth at once.

—Oscar Wilde

The reader will have noticed that the two concepts which have presided over these chapters—meaning and significance—bear a close resemblance to the concepts knowledge and value. Meaning is the stable object of knowledge in interpretation, without which wider humanistic knowledge would be impossible. The chief interest of significance, on the other hand, is in the unstable realm of value. The significance of meaning in a particular context determines its value in that context. For, significance names the relationships of textual meaning, and value is a relationship, not a substance. Value is value-for-people. Textual meaning has wide interest only when it has actual or potential value for a number of people. And this value changes. A poem may have a very different value for me at age twenty and age forty. It may possess different values for people in different cultural contexts. A poem has no absolute value.

Hence, the stability of textual meaning is no sufficient anchor in the shifting currents of value. Knowledge is not unquestionably a sufficient end. If a text is going to be worthless to most people in most contexts, then a knowledge of its meaning, no matter how accurate and scholarly, is knowledge without value. Pure *scientia*, knowledge for its own sake, is a pathetic fallacy. Who is knowledge, for whose sake we know? If value is that which is valuable for people, a lot of literary knowledge is at once valid and trivial. Those who argue for academic freedom have only gained a starting point when they have won their battle.

Because humanistic inquiry is free, it requires justification, and entails all the anxieties of freedom. Free inquiry implies choice: of subjects, of emphasis, of problems. And choice cannot be ethically or axiologically neutral. To pursue one inquiry is to neglect another. Valid interpretation is not enough. Some knowledge is not worth having.

Textual commentary is threatened nowadays by a bigger danger than the innocent accumulation of worthless knowledge. In its decadently skeptical forms, it threatens to degrade knowledge and value at once, simply by attempting to create value as a substitute for knowledge. Some French theorists, Derrida and Foucault, for instance, along with their American disciples, hold to the doctrine that since genuine knowledge of an author's meaning is impossible, all textual commentary is therefore really fiction or poetry. Emancipated by this insight, we can face the *écriture* of the past without illusion, as representing no stable or accessible meaning. We can write about writing with new-found creativity and freedom, knowing that we ourselves are creating a new fiction which will itself be fictionalized by those who read us. The challenge is to make these fictions creatively, interestingly, valuably.

Skepticism in the humanities is not confined to the French or to literary theory. It goes back to the nineteenth century and wears many guises.¹ Marxists, for instance, prefer the word "ideology" to the word "fiction." Certainly, historians had composed Whig or Tory histories long before Marx wrote of "ideology" or Mannheim of "the sociology of knowledge." But the word "knowledge" cannot be taken seriously in such a phrase, any more than can the word "truth" in "the sociology of truth." I do not find any structural differences among the various relativisms which beset the humanist. The pattern of skepticism is the same whether one applies old-fashioned terms like *worldview*, *ideology*, and *the sociology of knowledge*, or up-to-date terms like *Welt*, *difference*, *episteme*, or *paradigm*. All of them say that humanistic inquiry is enclosed within a windowless framework which provides access to no other framework; humanistic inquiry is determined by ideology taken in its broadest sense.

I do not mean to suggest that only humanists subscribe to this dogmatic relativism. It is also accepted by those scientists, few in number, who accept Kuhn's concept of the *paradigm* as set forth in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. It is greatly significant that Kuhn's theories have won wider acceptance among humanists than scientists. Humanists frequently apply the term *paradigm* to their own domains, despite Kuhn's recent warning against such application.² They no doubt do so on the assumption that Kuhn's term represents a recent, documented, scientific version of *worldview*, *ideology*, *episteme*, not to mention *Welt*, *approach*, *perspective*, and *language*, the last four representing relativistic dogmas challenged in earlier chapters of this book.

It is especially useful to perceive the structural similarity of Kuhn's paradigm, with all the other terms which make knowledge relative to, and trapped inside some prison-house of the mind—all these terms which stand for Kantianism gone mad. It is useful because Kuhn's theory has been examined and found wanting by some first-class epistemologists, while the theories of, say, M. Foucault have not been subjected to criticism sufficiently imposing to cause him to write a concessionary "Post-script" such as one finds in Kuhn's second edition. If Kuhn's theory is incorrect in principle, all structurally similar theories are incorrect in principle because the flaw lies precisely in their structure, in their insistence on the incommensurability, the incommunicability of paradigms, ideologies, worldviews, and so on.

The flaw in all such dogmatic relativism is exposed by Sir Karl Popper, in his critique of Kuhn, with a trenchancy that cannot be improved upon: "*The Myth of the Framework is, in our time, the central bulwark of irrationalism. My counter-thesis is that it simply exaggerates a difficulty into an impossibility.*"³ In chapters 1 and 5 of this book, I argued that the framework-myth of "perspective" consistently exaggerates a difficulty into an impossibility. In chapter 4 I attacked the framework-myth of language, the most sacred of all, by showing that although it may be difficult to convey exactly the same meaning through different linguistic forms, it is not impossible to do so. Of course, it is all too possible that paradigms, languages, and ideologies do determine the results of inquiry. The Myth of the Framework

simply exaggerates a common occurrence into a universally necessary one.

But ideology is far more likely to determine the results of inquiry when the inquirer assumes that it must do so. If one paradigm cannot talk to another, if different languages cannot convey identical meanings, then no attempt need be made to discover a truth common to several diverse frameworks, that is, the truth of the case. But if ideology, not truth, determines the results of inquiry, why undertake inquiry at all? It is then just a charade in the service of ideology. Why not compose Whig and Tory histories? Why not make interpretation a tour de force, an interesting charade? But if this underlying skepticism is itself quite wrong, and if it does not pave the royal road to humanistic value, perhaps the humanities contribute something more valuable than exercises founded on a skepticism embraced by both the producers and consumers of humanistic scholarship.

Literary study is at present the most skeptical and decadent branch of humanistic study, for a number of causes, among which an important one is its anxiety-ridden insistence, more emphatic than in any other field, on distinguishing itself from natural science. If poetry is the antipodes to science, then knowledge of poetry must be the antipodes to scientific knowledge; so runs the nonsequitur. Humanistic knowledge is different from the kind of knowledge sought in the "hard" sciences, or the "exact" sciences. Unlike these, the humanities are soft and inexact, virtues which bring them closer to "life." The humanities seek a knowledge that is not neutral like that of science, but infused with value. But such contrasts are, bluntly, false. Value is the motivation of inquiry in all disciplines, not the special preserve of the humanities. And exactitude of knowledge is a variable in all fields. To recognize the result of an inquiry as an inexact approximation is to achieve exactness of knowledge. Despite the Myth of the Framework, a cognitive element exists in all humanistic study. And despite the century-old distinction between humanistic and scientific inquiry, the cognitive elements in both have exactly the same character.

The attempt to formulate a satisfactory theoretical distinction between the cognitive element in the humanities and in the

natural sciences has an interesting and predominantly German history. Whether the debate (conducted mainly by neo-Kantians toward the end of the nineteenth century) was influenced by the appropriate neutrality of the word *Wissenschaft* still remains an unanswered question. (The closest English equivalent to *Wissenschaft* is the word "discipline," which is not close enough.) In any case, it became convenient to conduct the debate by distinguishing the *Geisteswissenschaften* or *Kulturwissenschaften* on the one side from the *Naturwissenschaften* on the other. And the purpose of the distinction was to defend the autonomous character of knowledge in the humanities against the intellectual imperialism of natural science. For if humane knowledge tried to compete with science on its own, positivistic grounds, then the humanities would belie their native character and turn into mere pseudoscience.

In the first volume of his *Introduction to the Humane Sciences* (1883), Wilhelm Dilthey attempted to set forth coherent theoretical foundations for the *Geisteswissenschaften*, just as William Whewell had done for the natural sciences in his *History of the Inductive Sciences* (1837) and John Stuart Mill had done in his *System of Logic* (1843). Dilthey's attempt, however, was strikingly influenced by these two books, and his epistemological models were dependent upon those of natural science. The main distinctions he drew between the two great domains pertained to their subject matter rather than their methodology.

This view was sharply challenged by Wilhelm Windelband eleven years later in his famous lecture on "History and Natural Science." He proposed that the division of knowledge into natural and humane sciences was justified not merely by their different subject matters, but also and more fundamentally "by the formal character of their different epistemological goals," for "the one seeks *general* laws, while the other seeks *particular* historical facts." Natural science, therefore, is *nomothetic*, or legislative, while humane knowledge is *idiographic*, or unique and individual. Subsumption under general laws in the natural sciences is *Erklären*, but the aim of humane studies is *Verstehen*, understanding the particular in its uniqueness. Windelband's for-

mulation took hold and it still remains the dominant conception of humanists.

The ensuing discussion comprised Dilthey's answer, *Naturwissenschaften und Geisteswissenschaften* (1895), and a book by Heinrich Rickert, *Kulturwissenschaften und Naturwissenschaften* (1899). The debate is still instructive, not for what it resolved, but for what it failed to resolve. In replying to Windelband, Dilthey was surely right to insist that generalizing and particularizing aims are common to both domains; hence Windelband was wrong. But Dilthey's counterdistinction was not more adequate or definitive—namely, the distinction between the internal and the external sciences. All the distinctions brought forward in the debate were useful as indications of preponderant tendencies in the natural sciences and the humanities, but as adequate subsumptive generalizations, they were and are total failures.

The debate about the nature of the humanities did not stop with Dilthey and Windelband, nor did the theory of science stop with Whewell and Mill, but I shall venture to suggest that at least one element of scientific theory is by now widely accepted and is identical with a widely held theory of cognitive inquiry in the humanities. The progress of knowledge and its consolidation are governed by the critical testing of hypotheses with reference to evidence and logic. If we look at any field of inquiry, we discover that it can be described as a congeries of hypotheses, some of them well accepted and others in rivalry with alternative hypotheses. We also discover a large body of evidence relevant to those hypotheses and potentially relevant to others not yet conceived. Under this conception, all inquiry is a process directed toward increasing the probability of learning the truth. This probability is, of course, increased whenever supportive evidence is increased. On the other hand, when hypotheses are called into doubt by the discovery of unfavorable evidence, then some adjustment is made, or some rival hypothesis accepted, or the whole issue is thrown into doubt. But in all these latter cases, the direction is still toward increased probability of truth, since the very instability imposed by unfavorable evidence reduces

confidence in previously accepted hypotheses and to that extent reduces the probability of error. Knowledge in all fields thus turns out to be a process rather than a static system, and the direction of the process is toward increased probability of learning the truth.

Now this is a very abstract and simplified model for inquiry, but it is the *kind* of model that every serious inquirer assumes. Furthermore, it is an accurate model to the extent that it is widely assumed. For I have referred not only to the logical relationship between evidence, hypothesis, and probability, but also to a communal enterprise that exists only to the extent that this logical relationship remains the paradigm (or ideology!) for the members of a community of inquirers. On the simplest level, the members of a community cannot even maintain an increasing body of evidence unless past evidence is stored and is brought to bear, when relevant, on hypotheses presently entertained. Nor can the model be accurate if unfavorable evidence is suppressed by a conspiracy of the inquiring community. Nor is the model descriptive if no one bothers to bring unfavorable evidence to bear upon a hypothesis to which it is relevant. Thus in a special sense, there *is* a sociology of knowledge on which inquiry depends, on which all *scientia* depends. And to the extent that this sense of the communal enterprise collapses, so does the discipline itself collapse as a discipline. Hence, this communal concept of inquiry is a stable and permanent paradigm that transcends the meaning given to paradigm in Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

Now it is perfectly true that not all the individual members in a discipline preserve a selfless devotion to the communal enterprise. The inspiring description of such devotion in Max Weber's *Wissenschaft als Beruf* remains one of Weber's ideal types. The spirit of advocacy and the spirit of vanity are almost never completely absent in any individual endeavor. And this, no doubt, will complicate any accurate *description* of a discipline. But healthy and progressive disciplines do exist. Somehow, even if partly through counter advocacy and counter vanity, past evidence is borne upon present hypotheses, and unfavorable evidence is sought in order to test hypotheses. A sense of

the community exists precisely because a sense of the discipline exists. The process of knowledge occurs *on the level of the discipline*. Despite individual eccentricities, brilliant guesses accompanied by brilliant perversities, the direction of knowledge goes forward at the level of the discipline. The probability of truth does in fact increase even in the humanities, so long as the sense of the inquiring community persists and inferences are drawn at the level of the discipline.

The communal aspect of knowledge insures that widespread skepticism will bring into existence the historical grounds for skepticism in a discipline. If there is a decline in commitment to the critical testing of hypotheses against all the known relevant evidence, and if the consolidation and discovery of evidence are neglected, then the process of knowledge ceases, and skepticism regarding the actuality of that process is entirely warranted. But the converse is also true: Commitment to the logic of inquiry and to the communal nature of a discipline guarantees an actual process of knowledge, and this holds for every subject of inquiry, including every subject in the humanities.

The communal conception of a discipline is widely assumed in the humanities, but also widely undercut by the humanists' emphasis on rhetoric. Obviously, the consolidated knowledge within a discipline has nothing directly to do with rhetoric. On the other hand, the communal acceptance of hypotheses has much to do with persuasion, and persuasion in doubtful matters requires attention to rhetoric. Furthermore, the goals of humanists often comprise aims that go beyond the aim of knowledge, such as taking aesthetic pleasure in discourse or persuading readers to adopt value preferences that can be related to the cognition of a subject matter. Thus the perennial questions arise: Is Clio science or muse? Is literary criticism an art or a science? The importance of rhetoric makes these appear to be difficult questions in the humanities, but in fact they are not. Obviously, rhetoric can subserve both knowledge and intellectual chicanery; rhetoric can make the worse appear the better reason. But when a discipline is viewed as a communal enterprise, the hypotheses it tests are not bound to any single expression of them.

(See chapter 4, p. 73.) Hypotheses have to be communicated as well as tested, but *what* is communicated (that is, propositions) must be used, tested, and expressed by others in a different form. If this condition is not met, the hypothesis is not really subject to criticism at the level of the discipline and has nothing to do with knowledge. It is therefore essential to distinguish hypotheses and evidence from the rhetoric used to convey them. The *writing* of history is an art, or can be, but history is not an art; it is a discipline, which is to say *scientia*. The same is true implicitly of literary studies, though one sometimes despairs that this concept can be widely accepted nowadays.

What I have just said implies that I identify the health of the humanities with their cognitive self-confidence. That is true, but it is only half the story. The health of a discipline as a discipline is entirely dependent upon the devoted allegiance of its members to the logic of inquiry. But the health of the humanities is also dependent upon their axiological self-confidence, their sense that they are pursuing *valuable* inquiry. It is just as important to distinguish these two kinds of health as it is to promote both. Indeed, I think we can have both only if we are capable of making this distinction. We humanists sometimes blur the distinction between value and knowledge just as we sometimes blur the one between rhetoric and knowledge. It is just as easy to know rigorously what is not worth knowing as it is to express with eloquent persuasiveness what is in fact nonsense. As I observed in chapter 6, some recent debates in literary theory have centered on whether the knowledge of a literary work can be separated from a judgment of its value, as though it were somehow impossible for two critics to understand meaning with equal accuracy and yet esteem it quite differently. But, of course, they can do this. The humanist's urge to conflate valuation and knowledge can be explained, but the explanation would be a digression from the issue at hand—which is the central importance of avoiding this confusion.

Why is it important? Without this confusion, we can redirect attention to the fact that a cognitive element inheres potentially in every field of the humanities, that the logic of this cognitive

process is the same for all subject matters, and that this process of knowledge can be followed out on subjects of intense value or on subjects whose value will probably be very low, both now and in the future. The distinction between knowledge and value is important, therefore, to protect the integrity of inquiry in the humanities so that inquiry itself is not repudiated simply because some of its subject matters may have become trivial. The distinction is important, too, because it encourages a choice of those subject matters that are not trivial and whose potential or actual value is high.

This has come to be well understood in the natural sciences, where decisions about the probable value of inquiry involve immense allocations of money and human talent, both of which are limited. It is perfectly true that the future value of any inquiry is an unknown, and this is the most powerful argument for total freedom of inquiry. On the other hand, if we were not able to make shrewd predictions about the future value of an inquiry, we could not award the research grants available in the humanities. And, in a sense, each humanist awards himself his own research grant when he decides what professional projects he will pursue in the time available to him. The logical integrity of inquiry is a machine of fatalism, but the choice of inquiry is potentially free and need not be determined by a drift in the currents of intellectual fashion. This is why a demand that humanists make an accounting is a potential source of axiological health for the humanities.

Of course, the demand could be barbaric—especially when made by ideologues. Clearly, many aspects, valuable aspects, of humanistic knowledge do not bear even indirectly on racism or social justice. The demand for the immediate relevance of every aspect of humanistic inquiry is just as mindless and self-defeating as the demand for immediate applicability in the natural sciences. Yet surely the immediacy of problems (such as the decline of writing ability) does not *disqualify* them as subjects of inquiry, and the concept of "pure" research is overrated if no one can predict how such research could possibly be valuable. If the prediction cannot be made, then the likelihood that the inquiry

will ever be valuable is clearly reduced, even though it may in fact turn out to be of great moment. No one will inhibit a humanist (since he does not need a big laboratory) from pursuing whatever happens to interest him. But if he cannot foresee potential value in his work, according to whatever value scheme he honors, then he should not be surprised if his work turns out to have small value.

The value of interpretation lies in its *application*—to recall from chapter 2 the old hermeneutic distinction between *interpretatio* and *applicatio*. The job of criticism is both to illuminate meaning (when necessary) and to indicate some valuable application of meaning, some special charm or use or wisdom for the present time. Ultimately, then, the aim of interpretation is to form a reliable basis for application. The value of knowledge is realized in its application, and there alone, even when the application resides in the spiritual exaltation of a pure contemplation of meaning. Exaltation is not a trivial value.

In chapter 8 I proposed that literary criticism since the nineteenth century has sometimes gone wrong by fusing and confusing literature-in-itself with literature as value-for-persons. A prevailing tendency since Schiller and Coleridge, for instance, has been to insist that aesthetical terms like *form*, *richness*, *complex unity*, and *being interesting* are more adequate to criticism than the older, timeworn principle that literature should please or instruct, and, at its best, do both. Now, of the aesthetical terms mentioned above, the only one that directly connects literary value with value-for-persons is that of Henry James—*being interesting*. James's celebrated essay "The Art of Fiction" is significant in assuming from the start that fiction justifies itself not just by being well done and reflecting a fine sensibility, but also by being interesting and true. That is another way of saying that fiction should please and instruct. If a critic like Wayne Booth objects that the unreliable narrator in James's fiction makes its instruction ineffective, that objection, whether or not one judges it to be correct, is in perfect accord with the aims that James set

for fiction. Literature should please and instruct. That old formula is more adequate to the character of literary value than many another up-to-date critical formulation.

James's excellent essay reaffirms that the value of fiction largely depends upon its truth—its human truth. Besides pleasing, fiction and poetry ought to yield some kind of truth. Many modern defenders of literature rightly claim for literature a kind of truth not usually found in other modes of discourse—vivid truths about human nature and emotion, about the forms of human desire and the forms of resistance to human desire. Literature instructs still by being true. Fiction has value beyond the pleasure it gives, only because it presents something that is not fiction. One of the chief values of fiction lies in the *knowledge* that it yields.

But fiction yields this knowledge only when it presents itself under its true colors. The recent critical doctrine of criticism-as-fiction or -poetry is a libel on good fiction or poetry. Fiction which presents itself in the guise of scholarly textual commentary is a deception that yields no reliable knowledge. No English or American adherent to this French theory has yet produced a textual commentary under a fair-labeling statute, with a disclaimer stating: "This criticism is a work of fiction; any resemblance between its interpretations and the author's meanings are purely coincidental." That would certainly reduce sales. And if the name of the original text maker (Keats, Racine, etc.) were omitted as a coauthor of the interpreted meanings, sales would drop still lower. Nobody is instructed by fictions which are merely fictions.

Like fiction and poetry, the humanities have greatest value when they aim at knowledge. The knowledge they provide is greatest when humanists accept both the cognitive and valuative sides of humanistic study, without confusing them. Only when humanists conceive one of their separate aims as *scientia*, a communal and progressive cognitive enterprise, can the humanities have much value. Poets and fiction writers have generally admired literary scholars more than literary critics, on the

assumption that scholars give what all the best writers give—permanently useful knowledge. On the other hand, evaluative criticism can be of great importance at a particular time, more valuable, in that historical context, than pure *scientia*. Yet, without *scientia*, humanistic evaluation is empty and pointless. That which humanists recover, understand, and preserve needs to be preserved intact. To be useful, humanistic study, like any other study, needs to be believed.

Notes

Chapter 1

1. "Objective Interpretation," *PMLA* 75 (September 1960): 463-79.
2. Reprinted in B. Lang and F. Williams, eds., *Marxism and Art*, trans. F. Williams (New York, 1972), pp. 249-50.
3. See chapter 2, pp. 30-31.
4. "For his part Heidegger made it clear that for him the stumbling blocks in Husserl's philosophy consisted in the transcendental reduction as 'bracketing of Being,' in the 'reduction' of man to pure consciousness, and finally, in the 'reduction' of Being into Being-object-for." J. J. Kockelmans, *Phenomenology* (New York, 1967), p. 274. See also Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1960).
5. *Validity*, pp. 24-25.

Chapter 2

1. Relativism in Heidegger and Gadamer is mainly historical relativism. A key phrase in Gadamer is "the historicity of understanding." See *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen, 1960), a learned work that reinterprets the tradition of Schleiermacher in Heideggerian terms.
2. August Boeckh, *Encyclopädie und Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaften* (Leipzig, 1877), pp. 11-12.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
4. Except for Humpty Dumpty in *Alice in Wonderland*, no semantic theorist I know of has been a pure intuitionist, nor do I know of any important theorist who has been a pure positivist. I describe the pure positions for the sake of clarity and also, more to the point, to show why a choice between them is logically required at some stage, even in an eclectic theory.
5. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).
6. J. R. Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

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