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Literary History: The Point Of It All

Hayden White

THE question "What is literary history?" is ambiguous. It can be taken as an occasion for reassessing one's conception of literature or one's conception of history, or both. But it does not ask (à la Kant), "How is literary history possible?" For we know that it is both possible and *not* a science. Hence we have no need of a transcendental deduction of its categories. Phrased as it is, it is bound to bring preconceptions to the surface in the critic asked to reflect on it. Anytime we are asked what a thing *is*, we find ourselves having to constitute it as well as describe it. The danger is that we are inclined to constitute it in the image of ourselves.

The contributions to this issue of *NLH* fall into two general categories: those which assume that literary *history* is a problem and those which assume that the problem is *literary* history. The term "literary history" contains, not one, but two "essentially contested concepts." As scholars we have a stake in the way the terms "literature" and "history" are conceived. These terms not only constitute fields, they provide it with a structure reflecting the way we should like things to be as well as the way we think things are. Most of the essays in this issue are normative as well as analytical, stipulative as well as descriptive. It is difficult, therefore, to conceive any way that they might be aggregated or integrated. But there are two polar conceptualizations of the problem of literary history that might be viewed as extreme cases: Bateson's and Hartman's. For Bateson literary history offers problems of a purely *legal* nature. History is one thing, literature another; the problem, then, is to make sure that the one not be allowed to penetrate into the sphere of authority and influence of the other. Hartman, by contrast, sees the union of literary consciousness with its history as a means of restoring the artist's faith in form itself and of recalling the artist to his vocation as mediator between human consciousness and its objects. For him, the problem is *metaphysical*, or at least metacritical and meta-historical. He envisages a poeticization of history itself.

Between these polar conceptualizations of the problem of literary

history, the other essays can be viewed as strategic and tactical recommendations for the purification of literary criticism. Professor Trimpi, for example, sees historical consciousness as an ally in criticism's endless task of recalling "interpretation" to respect for the "letter" of the text. Like Professor Corstius, he fears the intrusion into the realm of criticism of disciplines and fashions which have only their modishness to commend them. A chaste historical consciousness is for both of them our sole possible bastion against irresponsible manipulation of the texts in response to current interests, needs, or desires. Professor Berry admirably summarizes what they fear: the willed shortening of memory which a beleaguered modern culture promotes in the interest of any experience claiming the status of the new. Professor Söter, in turn, specifies the positive task of a historically self-conscious critical tradition: to promote cultural renewal by reuniting man with his past, the Goethean program, restated by Lukács, of affirming the *specific* against the claims of the *particular* on the one side and the *general* on the other. Here we are on the verge of the lyrical call for a total reconstitution of the vocation of the artist which, in similarly Goethean terms, Hartman makes on behalf of an art that will be both formal and iconoclastic, as mediation between the "social reserve" on the one side and the "chaos of forms" on the other.

These are the general problems, the range of commitment possible in the preliminary consideration of the question, "What is literary history?" What we need in addition to the various postures *before* the problem represented by this range of commitment, is some instruction on how to cut into the universe of literary artifacts in ways that will permit us to remain responsible to historical consciousness and at the same time maintain the sacred quality of the work of art. Three of the essays suggest how we might go about finding such ways, those of Fish, Riffaterre, and Jauss. They begin with a consideration of the work of art in its *situation* as a work of art, the text in context, as it were, context being construed as the reader, the linguistic milieu, and the moral-aesthetic web of the "horizon of expectations" respectively. Fish inquires into the effect of the text on the single reader, conceiving the text as an agency for structuring consciousness, as an active force which "does" things to the reader. Riffaterre expands the notion of the reading community, seeing it as a reflection of a changing linguistic code, through which the text passes as if through an *agon* of possible meanings. Jauss, in turn, seeks to emplot the dynamics of exchange between text and context in broad social and psychological terms. Thus, with these three essays we begin to perceive the possibility of a virtual language of literary history, with a lexical, a grammatical, and a syntactical

dimension. Language becomes the model for the language of literary history, for language in its career as literature.

That language itself should be considered as the model for the constitution of a language of literary studies is both stimulating and slightly intimidating. It has the advantage of removing the discussion of the nature of literature from dependence upon models borrowed from the study of nature or society. The ground is cut from beneath the necessity to choose between positivism and impressionism or between Formalism and Marxism. The life of literature conceived as analogous to the life of language permits thought to conceive it as structure that is both synchronic and diachronic, both continually adequate to its tasks and constantly going beyond itself by its own dialectical necessity. This is the stimulating aspect of the conceptualization of the problem. It is intimidating only because we are aware that there are as many different approaches to the problem of language as there are to the problem of literature. What Fish, Riffaterre, and Jauss provide is the Wittgensteinian counsel: Wait! Back to the rough ground! Look and *see* what is happening when the game of literature is being played.

Fish suggests that we abandon first the prejudice which insists that language is one thing, literature another. All linguistic structures are for him literary structures. He collapses a distinction which has hobbled criticism since the Renaissance, a distinction which was maintained in the interest of a desire for hierarchy in both *theoria* and *praxis*, a desire to believe that the pure could be kept separate from the impure in language as well as in thought. He saves "literature" by grounding it once more in the simplest and humblest of linguistic combinations, the verbal dyad. We must rethink the problem of literature from the ground up, he tells us, ruling out nothing prematurely as a potentially literary effect. He starts with the word in combination with one other word, moves to the phrase, from the phrase to the sentence, from sentence to paragraph, from paragraph to chapter, from chapter to *opus*, from *opus* to *corpus*, and presumably from *corpus* to the body of *corpora* which make up a given cultural endowment. The entire culture is conceived as a text, acting upon the reader of it with different effects depending upon the combinations contained within the language as possible ways of structuring consciousness. Each word appears as an icon which, in the presence of another word, makes up a world of meaning which is nothing but what they "do" to the perceiver of them. Literary history thus appears, insofar as we can infer it from Fish's essay, as a heaving, multilayered linguistic cosmos whose reality is confirmed by its active presence in the mind of the reader.

Riffaterre pauses at the transition from the lexical to the grammatical level. His purpose is to keep the distinction between literary and non-literary linguistic phenomena intact. Unlike Fish, for whom the text is a *Gegenstand*, but an active *Gegenstand*, an obtrusion into the world, an agent, Riffaterre seeks to distinguish between *effective* linguistic agencies and *ineffective* ones. The transition is from the word as agent to the word as agency, if I may be permitted to use a favorite distinction of Kenneth Burke. For Fish, the text as such is never threatened by the reader's limited capacities of linguistic response; it is always precisely what it appears to be. As such, the text becomes a test of the reader's competence: linguistic, semantic, and literary. The reader does not act upon the text; he is acted upon by it. This is why he is forced to postulate an "ideal reader" which of course does not exist in fact even though Fish modestly offers himself as a possible incarnation of such an ideal. What Riffaterre begins with is the assumption that the reader brings with him a linguistic code that significantly limits what the text can do in any given reading of it. For him, the act of reading is a test also, but a test in which the reader and text are matched as equally competent representatives of different linguistic codes. What is encoded under the imperatives of one linguistic protocol as text is decoded under those of another protocol as a reading. The historical problem thus appears at the point where these two protocols clash, and the task of criticism in its historical dimension is to serve as an agency of translation, to provide a meta-code by which what is encodation in one is read as decodation in the other. Literary history thus becomes, as Riffaterre puts it, a "history of words."

Actually, although Fish purports to analyze the relationship between the text and the reader, he is really analyzing the relationship between words and their immediate linguistic context in the literary artifact itself, not between the word and the general cultural context which the reader occupies. His "reader" offers no problems to his theory because he has construed him in such a way that he is always capable of getting from the text everything that is in it. Fish's universe of literary artifacts offers few historical problems because it changes only by incrementation; new texts are added to it from time to time, but they always get the attention they deserve. This is not a criticism of his paper, only an indication of the level on which it works. Its purpose, as I see it, is to re-characterize the universe of literary artifacts on the broadest possible basis. If critics followed out the program that his paper suggests, however, they would provide a dictionary of texts, i.e., descriptions of the texts populating the literary universe. The texts might be arranged either alphabetically or chronologically or any other way, by genre,

size, or whatever. But there would be nothing particularly problematical about them as a *historical* reality.

Like Fish, Riffaterre is concerned with the text as an autonomous structure of internal relationships and with the relationship between the text and the reader. But although Riffaterre's reader is also an ideal reader, he is an ideal reader who changes from time to time and from place to place. The reading competence of Riffaterre's reader is, therefore, a competence for reading a limited range of texts. And the further the reader is in time from the original appearance of the text, the less competent he is to read that text. The linguistic code used in the text remains constant, that which readers bring to it is constantly changing, as language itself changes. What is needed then is a grammar of texts, and he suggests four areas of literary history which might be illuminated by the kind of grammar of texts that "style analysis" can provide. These four areas are: the problem of influence; the problem of the relation of texts to trends and periods; that of successive readings of texts which generate different possible meanings for it; and that of the original significance of texts. It is here that the discussion of the problem of literary history begins to become genuinely historical; for now Fish's autonomous texts begin to be classified into larger units of structures and processes; they are deployed in space and dispersed in time, but reunited as elements of larger orders of an evolutionary development, the key to the understanding of which is language itself.

But Riffaterre's conclusion that, "Literary history should therefore be a history of words," is incompletely earned. For it is not clear how the history of words could be transformed into a theory of *literary* syntax (as against linguistic syntax) which alone can provide the means of characterizing the evolution of literature which he aims at. Thematology yields a kind of domestic or intramural history of literature, providing a continuity across texts that permits us to conceive the whole universe of texts as an internally differentiated *synchronic* structure; and he shows how style analysis can contribute to thematology in such a way as to contribute to the proper characterizations of continuities. His distinctions between "hot" and "cool" elements in a text gets us beyond Fish's method, which appears to suppose that all elements in the text are equally effective in a given reader whether the reader knows it or not. Riffaterre insists that the literary critic's task is to account for the fact that no single reading of a text can possibly do justice to the text's full range of possible meanings. What is "hot" in one linguistic environment is "cool" in another. Only the history of language, which runs alongside of and is a complement to a history of literature, can

account for these shifts of internal textual balance. But his own examples of the ways that the historian might account for shifts keeps attention locked within the confines of purely linguistic phenomena. And in reality his method of style analysis does not help us very much except on two of the four levels of literary history that he distinguishes: that of successive readings of the texts and that of the relation of texts to trends and periods. The problem of the original meaning of the text and the problem of influence are not advanced by his method.

Consider the problem of the text's original meaning. The original meaning, Riffaterre suggests, is the meaning that the text had (or might have had) for its original readers, not the meaning it had (or might have had) for the author. And this meaning is determined by the reconstitution of the linguistic code of its original audience. But the reconstitution of the linguistic code of its original audience only tells what the text might have meant, not to either the author or his audience, but to the historian of language himself. It merely sets another reading of the text alongside other previous readings. But if that is the case, then why not take the author's word about what he intended the text's meaning to be? If it is a matter of choosing between different readers, of which the historian of language happens to be one, why not ground the text's original meaning in the socio-psychological matrix of the author's experience.

So, too, with respect to the problem of influence. Riffaterre admits that the best we can hope for here is greater precision in the delineation of parallels between one writer and another. Perhaps it would be better to drop the whole question of influence as an unfortunate residue of superannuated intellectual loyalties, loyalties that derive from outmoded conceptions of the nature of traditions on the one side and from positivistic notions of writers as atoms banging into one another, like billiard balls, on the other side. Perhaps the concept of "genres and trends" is all we need expect on this level of analysis. Wedded to a theory of successive readings of the sort Riffaterre provides, this concept is ample enough. It raises us from the contemplation of the history of literature in dialectical relationship with language to the conception of literature-language in dialectical relationship with the more general world of socio-cultural *praxis*, in the way that Jauss conceives it.

Jauss parts company with Fish and Riffaterre at the very beginning of his essay, when he denies that a text can "stand by itself" and offer the same face to successive generations. For him, the text must be mined for its secret; and its secret is the "creative act" itself, which it is the literary historian's purpose to relive in its original integrity. The

text is not to be “cracked,” like a code, but restored to its original state as a mysterious presence in a putatively stable linguistic world, a presence which challenges, not only language, but the very modes of perception of that world. This is in the tradition of Vico, who defined historical understanding as the comprehension of the conditions of birth of a thing. To know a thing historically, Vico said, was to know it in its strangeness as a *new* presence in the world. But Jauss’s conception of the ways in which we gain a sense of this original presence of the work of art is not itself mysterious; it does not play upon the idea of the critic’s intuition as an aesthetic *unio mystica*. For him, the work of art is comprehensible precisely because it figures a *way* of knowing which conflicts with the ways of knowing of the generation into which it is projected. What the work of art does is challenge the modes of perception and valuation that have already crystallized into ritualized responses to experience in the artist’s own time. The history of literature thus becomes a part of the more general history of changes in a culture’s aesthetic and ethical endowment. As he puts it, literary history shows how moral casuistries are exposed and transcended.

What does this mean? As a basis for a methodology of literary history, it means that the historian must concentrate on three problems: that of the distance between the epistemological and ethical horizons of the work of art and the horizon of expectation of its potential readers; that of how consciousness closes that distance; and that of the impact that a given work of art might have in helping to transform both the literary past and the present form of canonized consciousness. The question he asks of every work of art is, “What happens as a result of its appearance?” That is to say, how does literature change the society, both at the time of its appearance and at every subsequent time that it is read?

At the bases of these questions we meet a twofold repudiation on Jauss’ part, one having to do with the notion that art is to be understood as a distillation of a tradition, the other having to do with the notion that it is a “reflection” of reality. Both notions, in his view, hinge upon the essentially conservative belief that art is at once new and mysterious and old and familiar. It is rather, he insists, a vicarious form of learning, the place where consciousness tests its modes of constituting reality without the risk which such testings must run in practical life. And as a means of gaining access to this testing ground, Jauss suggests a variation on the Collingwoodian notion of “question and answer.” The work of art is either a question put to reality which demands an answer from the reader, or an answer to a question which the reader himself must provide. It appears at the point where our appre-

hension of the world outstrips our capacities for comprehending it or, conversely, where canonized modes of comprehension have closed off our capacities to entertain new experiences. But where there is no testing of perception or of comprehension, there is no genuine art—only “culinary” reading.

This distinction between the literature that simply affirms the adequacy of canonized forms of comprehension and the literature which brings it under question is central to Jauss’s theory of literary history. It may appear much too rationalistic to many critics, suggesting as it does a ground whereon philosophy, science, and art share a common purpose. It doubtless has its origins in Dilthey’s theory of *Erlebnis* and the forms it takes in the cultural endowment as expressions of impulses that are *at once* cognitive, voluntative, and affective. But it is precisely here that the realms of *theoria* and *praxis* meet to give the specific shape to culture at a given time in its development. Human nature remains the same, but if it is to continue to grow, it can do so only by the setting of new tasks for itself. This setting of the task is not a transcendence of experience but a transcendence of experience as arranged in different hierarchies of significance at different times and places, in response to new experience but in the interest of maintaining a continuity between new experiences in the realm of *praxis* and achieved modes of organizing experience as *theoria*. Poetry does not so much figure a different world from that inherited from the past as figure a new relationship with that world. And it does so by submitting inherited patterns of cognition to the tests of aesthetic and ethical adequacy. The question behind every work of art is not “What is reality?” but rather “What would reality be like if the relationship between consciousness and experience were viewed *like this*?” This question is what makes every genuine work of art a revolutionary gesture.

It is obvious that, with Jauss’s conception of the problem of literary history, we have moved from the lexical and grammatical levels of literary historiography to the syntactical level. The paradigm by appeal to which this syntax of literary life is justified consists of the apprehension of culture as a dialectical exchange between *theoria* and *praxis*. For Jauss there is no hierarchy of literary forms that is not self-constituted. There are no classics *per se*, and tradition exercises no *necessary* control over the relationship which one text bears to another. A “classic” is made by the choices of successive generations to treat it as a valid approach to the problem of relating consciousness to experience. And “tradition” is simply the history of those choices. Each new choice of a work by a new generation retroactively reconstitutes the tradition itself. The choice itself is the historical problem *par*

excellence. And it is solved by identification of the "question" for which the text provides an "answer." When the "question" changes, the hierarchy of the classics is revised accordingly. And the question changes in response to changes in the modes of *praxis* of the generations.

This means that the problems of tradition and influence are conceived differently by Jauss than they are by Riffaterre. Texts do not become "classics" because they are self-decoding, as H. G. Gadamer believes; or because they do not conflict with a set of linguistic codes, as Riffaterre thinks. They seem familiar to us because the question for which they provide answers is in the marrow of the modes of both thinking and acting that make up our civilizational endowment. They are familiar to us because we have chosen them; *we* are a realization of *their* potentialities for conceptualizing a world. When they become "strange" to us, it is a sign of a world grown old. They become strange to us when they address themselves to questions that we no longer find compelling.

This suggests to Jauss that the problem of studying the classics is different from the problem of study new literary works. The problem in the study of classics is to show how strange they must have seemed at the time of their original appearance, how they collided with encoded ways of conceiving the world, its contents, and their relationships. The classics must be "de-familiarized," reconstituted in their original strangeness, distanced from us. This cannot be accomplished by the kind of linguistic decodation which Riffaterre recommends, and this because, far from being familiar to their original audiences, the classic at the time of its first appearance must have appeared as a threat to those audiences' ordered world. This is why the problem of the original meaning of a text must be solved by reference to non-linguistic as well as linguistic phenomena. It is the distance between the horizon of expectation of the original generation and the horizon of the text that must be established, not their intimacy or consonance.

By contrast, the closer we come to our own age, the more we should be inclined to look for the "relevance" of the classic to our own concerns and interests. This relevance resides precisely in the fact that the text has been chosen by successive generations as an answer to the questions that concerned them. This would enliven us to the freedom we have to choose or reject the text as a classic *for us*, in response to the urgency of the questions that *we* feel *we* need answers for. There is nothing tragic in this. We are not bound to the cultural past as we are bound to the genetic past; we have no obligations to any historical artifact other than those we choose to have obligations to. We need not think, as Burke did of the institutions of the country, that we should

approach them with the reverence that we feel in the presence of the wounds of the father. Art sets no limits on what we are permitted to *feel* about art itself. On the contrary, it invites us to repudiate certain parts of the canon in the interests of life itself. The fall of a tradition may signal the fall of a civilization, but it does not signal the fall of art itself or of the life in the service of which every true artist creates.

Here syntax is consumed in semantic considerations. The problem for the literary historian is, in the final analysis, not “What is literary history?” but rather “What is the point of it?” Or possibly: “Why does art *have* a history?” The answer to the last question is not to be found in any conception of literary history as a self-contained, or autonomous, cosmos, removed from life or set over against life as “pure” to “impure.” It would be better to admit, as Geoffrey Hartman recently said, that art can mutilate as well as restore, can destroy as well as create. Or to say with Nietzsche that there is a time to forget, as well as a time to remember. History in general is neither memory nor recollection, but the story of their relationship. The indiscriminate cultivation of *recollection*, the conscious effort to remember everything, is a threat to memory’s power to restore consciousness’s original relationship with its world. Within the limited compass of *literary* history, the task is to cultivate a *selective* memory so that the consciousness of the literary artist will not be swamped by its own prodigious powers of recall.

What, then, *is* the point of literary history? This is the question to which Hartman addresses himself in his essay. He appears to leave nothing unquestioned, naming historical consciousness itself as the principal contributor to the cultural problem of our time and designating modern art as a party in the conspiracy against art itself. Historical consciousness he characterizes as a “peculiarly modern burden.” We have, he implies, cultivated it too successfully.

First, the historians teach us to view everything as having an equal “formal value”; then, they populate consciousness with such a wealth of forms that our power to choose between them is virtually destroyed. Everything, every artifact, literary and non-literary, becomes an object of “interpretation” so that its very ontological status as an object, its thinginess, is dissolved. The consequence is that the modern literary consciousness becomes strung out between choices that are equally killing of both art and civilization, between what Frank Kermode calls “authoritarian traditionalism” on the one side and “hipster anarchism” on the other. In either case, the vision that ought to inspire the artist, that of the “revel of forms” in which meaning and existence are finally united, is eclipsed by a false semblance of its object: nothing but form on the one side, nothing but chaos on the other—no revel at all.

In an article which appeared last spring in *Daedalus*, Hartman argued that “literary history is necessary less for the sake of the intellect than for the sake of literature; it is our ‘historical duty’ because it alone can provide today a sorely needed defense of art.” But, he added, “If literary history is to provide a new defense of art, it must now defend the artist against himself as well as against his other detractors.” It could do this, he said, by helping “to restore his faith in two things: in form and in his historical vocation.”

Hartman’s current essay, it seems to me, should be read as his own contribution to the attempt to restore the artist’s faith in “form” as a non-killing means of mediation. The literary *opus*, Hartman suggests, is to be seen as a product of the artist’s journey out of the “social reserve” into the “chaos of forms” from which he seeks to return with an image of formal coherency that is neither an image of chaos nor of form but of the necessary dialectic between the two. The image thus produced takes its place in what Hartman calls the “reserve of art” as evidence both of the artist’s mediative role in the life of civilization and as a paradigm of the *kind* of formal coherency that a necessarily iconoclastic vision can achieve. On the basis of this conception of the artist’s relationship with society, the “historical role” of the artist as mediator between form and chaos in the life of culture is made possible; on the basis of this conception of the irreducibly *formal* structure of this instrument of mediation, the work of art itself, the artist’s faith in form is to be restored. And literary history written on the basis of these two conceptions, Hartman suggests, could contribute to the revivification of literary art on the one side and to the reunification of the artist with his social role on the other.

The implications of Hartman’s notion of the “historical” component in literary history are profound. In the first place, it is obvious to me that he is advocating the transformation of literary history into a fine art. He suggests that conventional historiography, whether of literature or of anything else, has succeeded too well in accomplishing the task assigned to it in the early 19th century. That task was to render the unfamiliar familiar, the exotic comprehensible, the unknown known. What he envisages is a historiography capable of rendering the past mysterious once more, of distancing it from us so that we can come to it once more as a “reserve of forms”—forms which are usable *because* they are so different from our own modes of ordering experience in practical life. If the function of art is to populate a museum of forms, the function of history is to build walls around it in such a way as to transform it into a temple, not to the gods but to man’s own creative capacities. “History,” Hartman says, “is, as it were, the wake of a mobile

mind falling in and out of love with things it detaches by its attachment." This implies that, in his view, the writing of history is an attachment to things worth loving by their detachment from the present reality. Historical thinking becomes a form of creative disremembering, the provision of a meaning for human life by the figuring of men's capacities for creative forgetting. In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin contrasted historicism to historical materialism in the following way: "Historicism gives the 'eternal' image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past. The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called 'Once upon a time' in historicism's bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history." To write good history takes courage because it is above all a *moral* act, and this is as true of literary history as it is of any other kind.

The present task of literary history, Jauss said, was to wed the insights of Formalism in all its various incarnations with Marxism. The contributions to this issue of *New Literary History* represent different responses to some form of this conceptualization of that task. The basic decision turns upon whether history is talked about in a passive or an active voice. For a long time the fear of critics has been that literature, if studied historically, will become identified with the larger and largely intractable problem of the history of civilization. To resist the impulse to that identification was the purpose of Wellek and Warren in their discussions of literary history in their *Theory of Literature*, and a similar resistance to it has characterized the work of the greatest natural cultural historian of our time, Northrop Frye. Their resistance was understandable; the civilization that we have inherited does not offer much that one would like to see identified with art. But is the threat as great as it necessarily appeared to be a generation ago? What if, as Paul De Man recently suggested, the task were seen not as a purification of art but rather the aestheticization of our conception of civilization? As De Man put it in "Literary History and Literary Modernity" (*Daedalus*, Spring 1970):

The need to revise the foundations of literary history may seem like a desperately vast undertaking; the task appears even more disquieting if we contend that literary history could be paradigmatic for history in general, since man himself, like literature can be defined as an entity capable of putting his own mode of being into question. To become good literary historians, we must remember that what we usually call literary history has little or nothing to do with literature and that what we call literary interpretation—provided only that it is good interpretation—is in fact literary history.

And he concludes with a suggestion which, although it might very well scandalize historians, could in fact serve as a guide to a proper understanding of what is involved in any historiographical enterprise. He says: "If we extend this notion beyond literature, it merely confirms that the bases of historical knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts, even if these texts masquerade in the guise of wars or revolutions."

With this recommendation, the distinction between the text and the context dissolves, not in the interest of a pollution of literature by life, but the reverse, the reconciliation of consciousness with its proper object, man himself.

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