Editorial

The Vision Thing by H. Floris Cohen

As famously observed by George H. W. Bush, the most recent one-term American president, the "vision thing" is something a president would be well advised to make do without. As the new and definitely one-term editor of *Isis*, I beg to disagree. In their own, infinitely less influential, way, editors are decision makers, too, and decision makers should have some vision, however dim, of a partly other, better, future state of whatever it is they are making decisions about.

Not that there is any urgent need to wish to alter the state of *Isis* for the better. Thanks to my predecessor, Bernie Lightman, and his able team, we in Utrecht have received *Isis* in excellent health, with issues full of interesting and importantly novel content arriving in members' mailboxes in or very nearly in the month printed on the cover—a record hard to improve much more. *Isis* is further widely regarded as the leading journal in the field, not only in terms of its impact factor—whatever that may be worth— but also *qua* reputation. Again, to keep *Isis* leading is (as it were) part of the job description, not something extra. So, whatever prospects I may see for an even better future for *Isis*, my vision thing is definitely marginal to the accumulated accomplishment of my nine predecessors.

One does not, for the first time since George Sarton fled Belgium in the fall of 1914, appoint an editor born and located in Europe without at least some consequences for the journal's profile. I have made no secret of my intentions in this regard, and it is a wonderful coincidence that our current president, Angela Creager, and I concur entirely on the need to find a new balance for HSS's native Janus face as both American and international. I hope that more scholars from non-Anglophone nations will feel free to submit manuscripts and take part in current debates. I can assure them that I keep my mind wide open for high-quality arguments that may find expression in ways more or less subtly different from what has become the standard presentation model in the Anglophone world of scholarship. Further, large resources for the history of science reside in continental Europe on this side of the Urals— but also in Asia, in the Middle East, in Latin America, and in Africa. As the English language is becoming ever more global and, in the Anglo-Saxon world, the command of other languages keeps diminishing accordingly, access to such sources is more and more reserved for those who master the languages, dead or alive, in which they have been written. *Isis* intends to welcome high-quality studies that make capable and interesting use of them. Something similar is true of the literature already in existence—much excellent work by able historians of science lies hidden in languages other than English or has made its way into the English-speaking world only in translations that are too often less than satisfactory. In the same vein, Ad Maas and Eric Jorink (so kindly lent out to *Isis* for book reviewing purposes by the Museum Boerhaave and the Huygens Institute, respectively) have made it their policy

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to emphasize repeatedly how open we are to commissioning reviews of books not written in English.

A striving for "balance" marks my policies in several more respects. From the start, building on George Sarton's ecumenical vision, *Isis* has covered not only all regions of the globe (at least in principle) but likewise all periods in which science or some earlier variety thereof has been pursued. The center of gravity has surely shifted over time in the direction of the present day; nonetheless, contributions centered on any time period at all remain as welcome as ever. Most often an issue of *Isis* contains three articles, and I would prefer such an issue to feature (when feasible) one article treating a subject from the period from World War I to the present day, one from the period between Waterloo and Sarajevo, and one from all preceding eons (popularly known as "early science")— unless, of course, some bold individual oversteps these boundaries born from our habits of periodization and follows a topic over larger chunks or even the whole of the history of science!

Twice in the preceding paragraphs I casually used the term "quality." That is surely a much-disputed category, often held to be immune to definition or even to reasoned discourse. Did not "Phaedrus" embark over long stretches of Robert M. Pirsig's world-famous novel *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974) on an ultimately vain search for the nature of "quality"? Are not quality judgments inherently subjective, in the sense of colored by the fleeting moods, the sentiments, the prejudices, the upbringing, the environment of the individual who is judging the quality of something? Are not quality judgments then doomed to remain wholly subjective expressions of sheer individual taste? Or do they overcome mere subjectivity and lend themselves at least to some extent to reasonable discussion, oriented not so much toward the subject doing the judging as, rather, toward the object being judged? In my view they do.

In the first place, some objects of judgments of quality appear to elicit a unanimous sense of "good" or "poor" or "moderately good" on the basis of little more than just our intuition—as, for instance, when anyone other than a completely tone-deaf person listens to a piece of music played first by a well-meaning amateur and then by a thoroughgoing professional. That intuitive judgment can be enhanced by expertise—the more you know about the ramifications of the object at hand, the better you are able to articulate what specific properties of the object moved you to your judgment of quality. To be sure, there are all kinds of complications here. Experts may go thoroughly wrong, particularly when passing judgment on something quite out of the ordinary (as happened so glaringly in the case of the dozen publishing houses that turned down a manuscript by an unknown author that featured a boarding-school boy named Harry Potter). Expert knowledge may also go far to influence the nonexpert's judgment, as when someone in the audience initially finds the piece played boring but hastily readjusts his judgment on learning that it was composed by Bach.

Now what does this mean for judgments of quality in the case of writings by and for scholars? Forty years of assessing scholarly products should suffice to prompt some second-order reflection. In my case, this has led me to distinguish six specific criteria that apparently I follow, by and large intuitively, when forming my judgments. At this point, let me make a disclaimer: it is perfectly possible to pass judgment on something that is far beyond one's own capacities, so the six criteria that I shall now briefly set forth are not necessarily ones that I am capable of satisfying in my own writing.

My first and primary criterion, then, is whether an author displays a well-developed capacity for *independent thinking*. No parroting of fashionable views; no unreflective

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conformity to perceived disciplinary standards; but also: no undue diffidence. Lynn White once wrote very insightfully: “For an historian it is better to be wrong than to be timid.” He also wrote, specifically about Joseph Needham (the great pioneer of cross-culturally comparative history of science, particularly in the case of China): “He is able to ask large questions because there is in him no trace of the vanity that quails at the prospect that someone may think his answers wrong.” The scholar who first introduced me to the history of science, R. Hooykaas, is another case in point. As a chemistry teacher in the 1930s, he broke independently with the reigning “roots seeking” style of doing history of science, and he found out—again, without benefit of example or instruction—something that is nowadays a truism: that modern science did not emerge in one ongoing conflict with organized religion but was, rather, inspired by it in many a significant case.

A second criterion that I quickly found to play a role in the ongoing process of quality judgment in my own mind is best compared with a *fugue*. I always hope when I read a piece that it is composed the way a fugue is: directed and guided by themes and countersubjects, artfully intertwined, enveloped in a game full of relevant details that are kept together by one leading thought. And, just as in music, it is best if the structure is not expressed by anything other than itself—present, not imposed.

My third criterion is the presence or absence of *ideas*. Not, of course, ideas as such, as abstract entities, but, rather, ideas that (as in the best text interpretations) enter into a symbiosis with factual material in such a way as to form together a compelling unity. Such ideas call forth—and keep calling forth—the empirical facts that alone can give them body and reality, but they are also, in their turn, supported by those experiential data, or illustrated by them, or at first or even second glance contradicted by them. The facts of the matter anchor the idea in the real world, whereas the idea charges the facts so that they attain a new, unexpected meaning.

A fourth criterion is *balancing*, by which I mean a more nuanced approach than the binary “either/or” oppositions on which—on close inspection—so much scholarly reasoning turns out to be based.

My fifth criterion concerns *scholarly language*. I plead for a writing style that is neither unduly colloquial nor stuffy, pedantic, or full of avoidable jargon; it should be clearly wrought, as accessible as possible, and it should eschew any ongoing demonstration of the author’s incredibly vast learning.

The sixth criterion, which binds the preceding five together, is *bezieling*—a Dutch word with no real equivalent in English, best thought of as a blend of spark, spirit, inspiration, passion, vital energy. By this I mean that you can sense that in producing the work the author has undergone an exhausting wrestling match with her- or himself, has delved in her or his own depths and has now emerged victorious— or so the author hopes.

How is all this related to the primary marker of scholarly quality nowadays, the “impact factor”? Why do I share so many colleagues’ revulsion at the very term? Do I not believe that, in the end, impact is what counts? Certainly, scholarly excellence that never leaves the mind of the scholar is not worth much—if nobody cares, or is even given a chance to care, what is the use? Nor am I much opposed to quantification. On the contrary: I am all in favor of quantifying those things that lend themselves to being quantified; I even once wrote a book entitled *Quantifying Music*. Why, then, does the impact factor give me the creeps?

Not unambiguous creeps, to be sure. In the fall of 2013 I read through the briefing book in preparation for my first-time attendance at the semiannual meeting of the Executive Committee of the HSS. I could not help casting a glance at a set of tables that

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the University of Chicago Press officers had prepared for us that compared the impact factors of various journals in the field. I found, to my relief—a relief mixed with some irritation at myself, to be sure—that, yes, *Isis* really is the leading journal in our field; we (I was already thinking in terms of "we") have a far higher impact factor than "they." My world had not collapsed; everything is as it should be. But is it?

My biggest concern with the impact factor is not even that it is liable to various forms of deception, such as the gratuitous addition of minimally active authors or the formation of mutual citation circles, to name just two well-known tactics. Something deeper feels wrong with it. All too easily, people, especially younger people, tend to internalize it. It is always easy mentally (or even in actual practice) to turn what began as a means into an end. My brief service as editor has already confirmed my hunch that, yes, the current practice of making some measurable quantity stand in for inherently qualitative quality is subterraneously disfiguring people's own thinking about what science and scholarship really are about and are for, which is something more, and better, than the harvesting of ever more citations.

Still, my biggest problem is with the short-term focus. To be sure, those comparative impact factor tables that I consulted with such annoyed relief came in two varieties: one counted citations over the past two years, another over the past five. That is definitely an improvement. But is it long enough?

For most scholars in the humanities—and certainly in the history of science—books count more than articles. When the new *Isis* drops into their physical or electronic mailbox, most readers go straight to the book reviews. And how often in our work do we fail to cite books, and indeed articles, that were published more than a measly two or even five years ago but that still have things to tell us that are truly important to the discipline? When writing about seventeenth-century conceptions of the world as made up of tiny particles, I came across excellent analyses of numerous works by numerous period authors—figures I had never encountered in much later work—in a two-volume *Geschichte der Atomistik* published by Kurd Lasswitz in 1890. We are here near the heart of the paradox that, at the very moment when electronic tools are opening up the entire past to us—myriad documents from the very invention of script onward, reproductions of pictures in their endless variety over time, and hosts of genuine or easily restored material relics—the very manner in which these electronic tools are being employed seems to doom us to considering only the short term of flash capital movements across the globe, of corporate gain calculated for the next month, and, in the world of scholarship, of adopting a star system of fleeting fashion and an apparently ingrained lack of memory for anything that happened more than, at most, a decade ago.

Am I, then, one of those elderly cultural pessimists who, ever since Plato, have confidently foreseen the imminent downfall of civilization? No, or at least not quite. For *Isis*, too, the world of the digital is in many ways an enrichment. We at the *Isis* office are using the electronic *HSS Newsletter* to keep members regularly abreast of what goes on in faraway Utrecht; we are close to eliminating all remaining paperwork by switching to a genuinely user-friendly electronic submission and tracking system called Editorial Manager; we are seriously pondering Open Access and the numerous complications thereof; we shall review websites and perhaps also e-books not incidentally but routinely; we are experimenting with *Isis* tweets and with putting *Isis* on Facebook; and so on and so forth. In the same vein, I shall never let my sentiments about the impact factor and the H-index, closely linked products of the new digital world, work to the detriment of those

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authors who, given the stage of their careers, are obliged to treat these reigning measures of "quality" as an environmental given that they are individually powerless to alter.

There is one more ingredient of what I hope to achieve with *Isis* in the course of my editorship. Eleven years ago, when he became the editor, Bernie Lightman ingeniously invented "Focus," the remarkably popular section of *Isis* that is available in Open Access and that has proven so well suited for classroom usage. The primary aim of the Focus section in years to come will be to serve as a platform for a large plurality of historically informed ideas about where our discipline is, or should be, heading. Here I think in particular of the following categories:

- *How-to* (methodological issues—for instance, the formation and handling of concepts in history of science writing, or explanation in the history of science, or comparative history of science writing, or what working with translated sources means for historians of science);
- *At the crossroads*: work between history of science and some neighboring discipline (e.g., the sciences, or the history of the humanities, or the history of the social and behavioral sciences, or the history of knowledge);
- *Looking back + What next?* (i.e., long-term retrospective inquiries, carried out with the express purpose of looking forward by way of addressing, for example, what we can learn from the history of the history of science, or what pre-1800 science and natural philosophy mean to students of later periods, or how to make up the balance after thirty years of practicing "contextual" history of science, or how careers have been made in history of science, or how large-scale and small-scale history of science writing are related to each other).

In addition to the Focus sections, and to appear in irregular alternation with them, I intend to set up a similar section entitled "Viewpoint." Viewpoint sections will be composed of a position paper on some timely topic, followed by a diversity of brief, thought-provoking comments on that paper. I further hope to resurrect in a somewhat altered format the "Second Look" series that *Isis* published in the 1990s during the editorship of Ron Numbers. Under this heading, a classic book in the history of science will be revisited, starting with an overview of all the reviews that were published when it first came out. This opening essay will then be followed by several retrospective but also forward-looking remarks by some of the original reviewers as well as by some early career scholars who have never known the book other than as a classic. As with possible subjects for Focus sections, so too for Viewpoint and Second Look treatments I invite every historian of science, young or old, female or male, inhabitant of the Anglo-Saxon world or not—in short, of any stripe whatever—to come forward with proposals for suitable topics by means of a message to IsisJournal@uu.nl.

It is now time to grant that, in spite of our different ideas about the significance of "the vision thing," and also in spite of the near-infinite power difference, an editor does after all have one thing in common with George H. W. Bush and everybody else in his line of work: on the decisions that the *Isis* editor and his associated book review editors routinely make may depend entire careers. We are all fallible, we all make mistakes; and the very thought of being—who knows?—at any moment in the act of committing some inevitably consequential blunder can easily come to feel like a crushing burden, leading in the end to wholesale editorial paralysis. Luckily, there is a hedge against that risk. All responsibility for my decisions

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is and remains of course mine, yet I find it a comforting thought that I am served and, to varying well-described limits, also overseen by our Executive Committee, by our Committee on Publications, and by our Advisory Editors Board. I have now worked with each of these bodies enough to say with complete conviction that HSS may be proud to have such kindly welcoming and, above all, such competent officers, so dedicated to contributing to our collective wisdom and to the best attainable future for our common journal *Isis*.

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