The Logic of Vanity Fair: Alternatives to Historicism in the Study of Fashions, Style and Taste

I. THE PROBLEM SITUATION

IN THE spring of 1936 I attended the meeting of Prof. von Hayek's London Seminar in which Karl Popper (not yet Sir Karl) presented the arguments which he later published under the title *The Poverty of Historicism.*[1] This deadly analysis of all forms of social determinism derived its urgency from the menace of totalitarian philosophies which nobody at that time could forget for a moment. But it also had a bearing on my own field, the history of art and of civilization. Indeed, one of Popper's main opponents had a foot in both camps, that of political utopianism and of historical holism; I am referring to Karl Mannheim, whose early studies on the sociology of art and of style[2] had made a considerable impression on those students of the subject who were eager to refine their methods and to substantiate the intuition that works of art do not emerge in isolation but are linked with others and with their time by many elusive threads. From my student days in Vienna I had shared this concern, but I had become increasingly sceptical of the solutions offered by Neo-Hegelian *Geistesgeschichte* and Neo-Marxist Sociologism.[3] This scepticism was not very popular with some continental colleagues, proud of being in the possession of a key that revealed the 'essence' of past ages. On the other hand, it may have seemed exaggerated to my new English friends, who found the whole issue remote.

Today, after thirty years, it is perhaps less the 'poverty of historicism' that needs pointing out, than the need for an alternative. The solutions offered by historicist theories are rarely taken very seriously in academic art history, but nothing very interesting has taken their place.[4] In contrast to the situation in my student days the prevailing mood is a desire for facts, a hope to get on with the business of cataloguing items without much interference from theorizers. No one acquainted with Popper's methodology need be told why this positivist attitude must be self-defeating. Not even a chronicle of art, let alone a history of styles, could ever be based on the collecting of uninterpreted data. This being so, the theories of previous generations are not so much discarded as taken as read. They often form the unexamined framework

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of teaching and research. Thus what we need is new and better theories that can be tested against the historical material as far as such tests are ever possible.

Such alternatives cannot be pulled out of a hat. But I have at least tried in my book on *Art and Illusion*[5] to explore the limited problem of the history of pictorial representation and to find more convincing reasons for the existence of period styles than the Hegelian 'spirit of the age'. I referred in its Introduction to a passage from the *Poverty of Historicism* which I should like to quote once more in slightly extended form:

> ... I have not the slightest sympathy with these 'spirits'; neither with their idealistic prototypes nor with their dialectical and materialistic incarnations, and I am in full sympathy with those who treat them with contempt. And yet I feel that they indicate, at least, the existence of a vacuum, of a place which it is the task of sociology to fill with something more sensible ... there is room for a more detailed analysis of the *logic of situations*.... Beyond this logic of situations, or perhaps as part of it, we need something like an analysis of social movements. We need studies, based on methodological individualism, of the social institutions through which ideas may spread and captivate individuals ... our individualistic and institutionalist models of such collective entities as nations, or governments, or markets, will have to be supplemented by models of political situations as well as of social movements such as scientific and industrial progress.[6]

The fourteenth chapter of the *Open Society and Its Enemies*, entitled *The Autonomy of Sociology*, explains a little more fully what Popper had in mind when he speaks of these models. It is here that he endorses Marx's opposition to 'psychologism' and analyses in some detail the reasons that lead him to reject the 'plausible doctrine that all laws of social life must be ultimately reducible to the psychological laws of human nature'.[7]

Art and Illusion was mainly concerned with such psychological laws. It did not (or only marginally) concern itself with the genuinely sociological problem of the unintended social repercussions of intentional human actions. A simple illustration of such a problem is taken by Popper from economics:

> If a man wishes to buy a house, we can safely assume that he does not wish to raise the market price of houses. But the very fact that he appears on the market as a buyer will tend to raise the market price.[8]

It is the purpose of this paper to apply the tool of situational logic to some recurrent problems of the history of fashion, style and taste.[9] If I have subsumed these in my title under the name of Vanity Fair it was not to

'debunk' art. It is true that today the element of fashion in the alternations of movements stares the historian in the face.[10] 'Pop' today and 'Op' tomorrow —they justify the joke in the *New Yorker* of the long-haired man's remark at the cocktail party 'I don't know anything about art, but I know what is "in".' Needless to say, this assimilation of art to fashion should not tempt us to think less highly of the great artists of the past or of today. It only makes it easier to recognize the poverty of those historicist philosophies which scrutinize all manifestations of style as the expression of the innermost essence of the 'age'—ours, or another.

II. COMPETITION AND INFLATION

The latest version of historicism current in the critical jargon of the press seeks for the sources of changing style and taste somewhere in the dark recesses of the Collective Unconscious. It may be all the more profitable, therefore, to start this investigation by testing the opposite approach, advocated by Popper where he recommends

> what may be called the method of logical or rational construction, or perhaps the 'zero method' ... the method of constructing a model on the assumption of complete rationality (and perhaps also on the assumption of the possession of complete information) on the part of the individuals concerned, and of estimating the deviation of the actual behaviour of people from the model behaviour, using the latter as a kind of zero-coordinate.[11]

Popper was thinking in the first instance of economic behaviour and the type of deviation from rationality represented by the 'Money Illusion', people's preference for a larger wage packet, even if it does not buy more than the smaller one. Now this model of inflation extends beyond the problems of money values to all tokens of value recognized in society, including fashion, language and art. The way, in fact, in which competition leads to unintended consequences is of prime concern to the student of fashion. All we need for an abstract model of such movements is the assumption that departure from a norm will arouse attention. Given the desire of a member of this group to focus attention on himself, the rational means for that purpose are therefore at hand.

There are closed societies where this game is institutionalized and almost ritualized, and where the auction for attention is confined to a particular area such as the number of heads hunted, or some other token of prowess. The

ruinous expenditure on Potlatch feasts among the American Indians, the prestige attached to the possession of many heads of cattle regardless of the danger of overgrazing in certain African societies illustrates the departure from rational behaviour that Popper has in mind. These competitions have brought the societies concerned to the brink of destruction, and yet it is hard to see how the individual, caught up in the situation, can avoid these unintended consequences of his bid without forgoing the necessary prestige. We are only too familiar with a similar threat summed up in the word 'escalation'.

What characterizes the situation on Vanity Fair is rather the fluidity of the game of 'watch me' that may be characteristic of Open Societies. For here there is no predicting what departure from norm will become a focus of attention. There are the notorious 'crazes' that sweep a school, of collecting cigarette cards or stamps, the performance of daring dos, or the flaunting of provocations, that are as remarkable for their intensity as for their volatility.[12] Satirists have inveighed against what they call the Follies of Fashion; but the folly of the game does not preclude rationality on the part of the players. For fashion can be described in terms of a rarity game. At one time it may be the display of rare lace that arouses attention and competition, at another a daring décolleté, the height of the coiffure or the width of the crinoline.[13] At various times competition has driven fashion to notoriously foolish 'excesses'—though what we call an excess here is harder to tell. Whatever rationalization we may be able to produce for our habit of shaving, to bearded nations or periods this fashion must surely look as unnatural and excessive as the wearing of powdered wigs looks to us. In all these matters some departure from the norm of apparel and appearance must at first have drawn attention for its rarity. If a game of display was in progress the choice in front of the other players was obviously whether to dismiss this particular move as an unprofitable eccentricity that should be allowed to remain one, or to emulate and top it. Once the battle is joined it lies in the logic of the situation that the particular departure from the norm must be trumped if attention is to be kept up.

As long as these games of 'one-upmanship' are played within a small section of people who have nothing better to do than outdo each other, fluctuations are bound to be rapid, so rapid perhaps that the rest of society will not be caught up in these superficial ripples. But occasionally the game catches on and reaches a critical size where all join in. Whether we have our hair cut or put on a tie, whether we drink tea or go skiing, we all join in the game of 'follow my leader'. Given time and sufficient documentation, each of these social fashions could of course be traced in its spread from the habits of a

few to the custom of the majority. It would be tempting to attribute this spread of imitation to psychological causes, to man's desire to identify with leader- or father-figures. No doubt such a tendency exists and sometimes accounts for the wish of young people to model themselves on the idols of the screen in their 'set'. But within the context of this section it is more relevant to point out that even conformism is partly rooted in the logic of the situation. We have looked at fashion as a 'rarity game' played by some in order to attract attention. But there is usually also an opposite team, whose aim is to avoid attention. At first of course this team has an easy time. It just refuses to join in. Often, as we have seen, this refusal will do the trick and will leave only the players exposed to the gaze they covet. But the more members of that society imitate the move in order to attract attention, the more its original purpose will be defeated. Leaders of fashion will have to think up a new gimmick. But the opponents of the fashion will discover to their chagrin that now it is they who are conspicuous in the rarity game, they attract unwelcome attention by their refusal to fall in. In most cases there will be a point when even the diehards, the last-ditchers, will give in. They, too, will powder their hair or wear a wig, will shave off their beards or put on a black tie to avoid being stared at.

It is true that by this time fashion will generally have been shorn of its most impracticable extreme. The waves will have been somewhat levelled, but it is still a fact that a move made by a fop to impress his fellow-fops may start a trend that imposes itself on society.

That there is a competitive element in art which aims at drawing attention to the artist or his patron needs no lengthy demonstration. The following figures about the height of French Gothic cathedrals speak for themselves.

> In 1163 Notre Dame de Paris began its record construction to result in a vault 114 feet 8 inches from the floor. Chartres surpassed Paris in 1194, eventually reaching 119 feet 9 inches. In 1212 Rheims started to rise to 124 feet 3 inches, and in 1221 Amiens reached 138 feet 9 inches. This drive to break the record reached its climax in 1247 with the project to vault the choir of Beauvais 157 feet 3 inches above the floor—only to have the vaults collapse in 1284.[14]

The figures strongly suggest a game of 'watch me'—each city must have known what the previous record had been. They also remind us of the important fact that competition in art is not necessarily a 'bad thing'. There are beautiful structures on Vanity Fair which were stimulated by the desire to outdo the neighbour and there are great achievements in art which certainly were stimulated by the desire of artists to vie with their peers and to do even

better than the best of them.[15] It is again part of the logic of the situation that where standards are high they may become even higher. After all not even all the excesses of fashion are unbecoming, whatever moralists may say; and, if tradition attributes a natural 'chic' to the Parisian woman, this is precisely because she has learned to care about her looks. Once more we are up against the limits of prediction. For it is clear that competition for attention can lead to the unintended consequence of simply lowering the value of what you have been doing before. This is particularly so where methods of emphasis are concerned, and emphasis is after all a special case of soliciting attention. Decoration is a frequent victim of such inflation. It is well known that within the tradition of Gothic ornament this need to outdo previous work in the admired feature of intricacy gradually led to the 'excesses' of the flamboyant Gothic style, much as the Renaissance tradition was driven—if that is the word—towards the 'excesses' of Baroque and Rococo exuberance in ornament.

In the nineteenth century attempts were made to explain these regularities in psychological terms, that is through the blunting of sensibilities in repetition, the fatigue aroused by forms that are seen so often that they are no longer noticed so that a stronger stimulus is required.[16] There is no need to deny that such psychological tendencies may exist. The instance of the drug addict who needs more and more of the stimulant for its effect to be noticeable provides an illustration. But even in this instance there may be a logical element that forms the background to this tragedy. The habit creates a level of expectation, a fresh norm, but the desire is for 'more'.

However that may be, there are many instances of inflation outside the field of art which illustrate the purely situational element. Take the case of titles and decorations. No one has felt fatigue at receiving a rare honour in a stable society; but once inflation sets in, the whole system is running downhill. The fuss made in England when the 'Beatles' received a decoration sprang from fear of such a precedent.

Hitler's war witnessed a particularly rapid inflation of this kind. At its start the German decoration for bravery was still the Iron Cross. Soon it was topped by the Iron Cross with Swords, which had to yield pride of place to the Iron Cross with Swords and Oakleaves, which was finally outshone by the Iron Cross with Swords and Diamonds. Every new move, of course, pushed the recipient of the previous top award down the ladder and probably made the next wonder what more additions were in store for his successor.

The example sums up the dilemma that is involved in all striving for extra emphasis. It thus serves to introduce the crucial problem of this kind—that of the corruption of language. In this corruption, I believe, both elements

we saw at work and a few more can be discerned. If we use Bühler's terminology[17] distinguishing between the functions of symptom, signal and symbol, we may assign the ordinary influence of fashion primarily to the first function of drawing attention to the speaker. Affectations of every kind in the use of rare words fall under this category. We have all witnessed certain expressions becoming 'okay words', being adopted by increasing numbers till they are either replaced by others or become part of the ordinary vocabulary. The turnover of words is rapid in all urban speech. In the Rome of Horace the rights and wrongs of coining words must have been much debated:

> If it should be necessary to refer to recondite things by recent terms ... permission will be granted if it is done with modesty.... It has ever been permitted and always will be to issue a word stamped with the mint mark of the day. As the woods change their leaves when the year declines and the earlier ones fall, so the old age of words comes to an end and those newborn bloom and thrive like youngsters ... all man-made things will perish, nor will the honour and splendour of language endure. Many will be reborn that have fallen, and those words will fall in their turn which are now honoured, if Usage so wants it, the arbiter judge and norm of speech ...[18]

In this drift of language, of course, the fashion element of 'showing off' plays only a minor part. The signal function, too, can be corroded, witness the fable of the boy who cried 'wolf' once too often. His fate, however cruel, concerns the student of situational logic less than that of the other shepherd boys whose signals he had rendered ineffective. How could they convince the villagers that their cry for help was not a hoax?

Inflationary debasement usually takes its departure from that need for increasing emphasis which we saw at work in the story of the iron crosses. Here the process of inflation really has more than a superficial resemblance to the debasement of currency. Words originally coined as the rarest tokens of exceptional emphasis rapidly sink down to the small change of the advertiser and of schoolboys' slang. It matters little here whether we class the advertisements of 'unprecedented offers', of 'gigantic successes' and 'tremendous sensations' as signals trying to outshout each other and blunting their own effect in the process, or as descriptions. In either case they are the victims of their own erosion neatly illustrated by the true instance of a toothpaste that is sold in three containers—'large', 'jumbo', and 'mammoth' size. 'Large' has come to mean the smallest. And yet one thing is sure. In such an environment it is pointless to try and shout even louder. The only chance for the judicious is negative emphasis, an attempt to return to the original gold standard.[19]

If we decide to call only a large thing 'large' we may re-establish a level where communication is again possible.

Popper has often stressed the responsibility of the individual to maintain the standards of clarity in language which, as a social institution, is as vulnerable as any to the seeds of corruption.[20] What makes it so vulnerable is the fact that, strictly speaking, the introduction of any new word or meaning subtly affects the whole instrument of language.[21]

Any such word will inevitably introduce an alternative, and thus increase the range of choice for the speaker of the language. To use one word (even the old one) thus implies rejecting another, and our appreciation of any statement will be affected by this novel element. When the word automobile received a competitor in the word car the earlier term did not change its meaning, but in England its use began to sound a little precious and affected. When barbers became hairdressers, and ratcatchers rodent operatives, the earlier word began by contrast to sound a trifle vulgar. One of the reasons why it is so hard to know a language well enough to appreciate style is precisely that we must always be able to assess the connotations of the writer's choice between existing alternatives. It is not enough to look up the German word 'Haupt' in the dictionary and find there that it means 'head'. We must also know that the more frequent word for head in German is 'Kopf' and that 'Haupt' is therefore poetic diction or elevated language. The degree to which we feel it to be a justified or a stilted word must depend on long familiarity with usages of every kind. But this familiarity will let us down when we do not know the region, the period or the set of the speaker. As new words come into use, they leave eddies of uncertainties behind and threaten that feeling for nuance on which civilized speech so largely depends. No wonder that some of the greatest lovers of language have also been the most intense haters of neologisms. Every new coinage somehow debases the value of the old mintings. However, it is easier to preach purism than to enforce it; and so we frequently find the purist or classicist in language on the side of authoritarianism.

Nobody has explored the links between fear of change and authoritarianism more convincingly than Popper. From the time when Plato inveighed against change in music, there has been indeed a tendency of conservativism in language and art to ally itself to restrictive governments. The cry, 'this lowers the tone', 'this should be forbidden', may not be commendable, but it is understandable when we find our language threatened. Academies under royal tutelage were the outcome of this desire to arrest the flux of language and of art. They had a case; but the price they wished to exact for the stabilization of currency was too high—as it so often is.

We find the same in all attempts to stem the tide of fashion and competition in a free society, the anti-luxury laws of medieval cities, which make such curious reading, the restriction on building heights or other items of 'conspicuous waste'. These, it seems, can be curbed only at the cost of a police state.

Granted the 'poverty' of historicism where it proclaims immutable laws of history, situational logic and the zero method may thus indeed fill something of the void which Popper's formidable axe has created in the study of movements and trends.

The study of language offers itself as the best testing ground. We need only return to those subtle students of speech, the ancient writers and orators, to find a storehouse of illuminating examples of inflation and its consequences. Discussing the pleasure of novelty and change in oratory Quintilian diagnoses its source correctly:

> Novelty and change are pleasing in oratory and the unexpected gives more delight. Hence we have exceeded all bounds and have exhausted the charm of the effect by too much straining after it (*est enim grata in eloquendo novitas et emutatio, et magis inopinata delectant. Ideoque iam in his amisimus modum et gratiam rei nimia captatione consumpsimus*).[22]

Quintilian wrote at a time when the introduction of verbal fireworks was a much-discussed problem in the art of rhetorics. Some teachers were so disgusted with this so-called Asiatic fashion that they advocated a return to Attic purity.[23] The extremists among these critics did, in Quintilian's words, 'shrink from and shun all pleasing effects in their language and approve of nothing except the plain, the simple and the unstrained'. He compares them to people who are so afraid of falling that they are always lying on the ground. Is a good epigram such a crime? he asks—True, the ancients did not use this device. But from what time on do you call an orator 'ancient'? Even Demosthenes introduced innovations. How could we approve of Cicero if we think there should be no change from Cato and the Gracchi? Before these, however, speech was even simpler.

> As for me, I regard these highlights of speech as something like the eyes of eloquence. I would not like the body to be full of eyes, however, for then the other parts of the body would cease to function. If I really had to choose I should prefer the roughness of ancient speech to the new licence. However, there is a kind of middle way here as well as in the style of life....[24]

There is an even more telling passage in which Quintilian comments on

the similarity between language and fashion with urbanity and wit and draws his own conclusion.

Writing more than one hundred years after Cicero, he still considered Cicero the model orator. He was ready to concede, however, that Cicero's critics had a case in one respect. A few more 'epigrams' than the master used might even increase the pleasure a speech could give.

> This is not impossible even without interfering with the argument and the authority of our pronouncement, provided these highlights are used sparingly and not continuously, when they destroy their own effect. But having conceded so much, let nobody press me further. I give in to the times in not wearing a shaggy toga, but not in wearing one of silk; in having my hair cut, but not in arranging it in tiers and locks. . . .[25]

Do tempori, I give in to the times, I yield to fashion. In this pregnant phrase Quintilian has posed the problem of any individual caught up in the situation created by the 'age'. Of course he did not have to yield. He could have refused to insert 'epigrams' in his speeches, worn a shaggy toga and left his hair uncut. But he was afraid that this course of action would have made him even more conspicuous; he feared the charge of affectation more than any other, and so he chose the 'middle road', not running after every innovation but not resisting those that had become generally current. It was a rational course to take.

III. POLARIZING ISSUES IN ART

Quintilian's problem, the problem of change and of the self-consciousness to which it can give rise may be a problem of 'Open Societies'. Not that the closed societies of tribal cultures never witness alterations of style. But, generally speaking, these alterations are gradual and imperceptible, they do not give rise to discussion and do not force the individual to take sides. Where Custom is King and standards are uniform, innovation will generally be frowned upon, and if togas are worn shaggy by one generation, they will continue to be so worn, at least new styles will not be introduced with a flourish.

It is precisely any departure from the accepted norms of tradition that can turn into an 'issue'. We are all familiar with the dilemmas posed by the logic of certain situations. We would not mind, maybe, on a cold day asking the dustman in to join us for lunch; we are certainly not held back from this charitable act by the same kind of social tradition that would make such an

idea unthinkable to a Brahmin. What may hold us back is rather the knowledge that, having done it once, we would have to do it again even when we have no time or inclination. A failure to call him in a second time would make him wonder whether he had made some blunder. If, to avoid this unintended impression, we call him once more, we are on the way towards a tradition which becomes increasingly hard to break, for not to ask him now becomes a withdrawal.

To some extent we all constantly act like the timid civil servant who would like to do a certain thing but refrains for fear of creating a precedent. The trouble is that this fear is often quite justified within the logic of his situation. If you depart from the norm in one case, however deserving—for instance in admitting a student to the University without the required paper qualification —you make it correspondingly harder for yourself and your successor to apply the existing rules. No wonder that such concessions are so often accompanied by the request not to talk about it to anyone. The knowledge of a rule broken is the knowledge of it being breakable. What is worse, the knowledge that you did relent once makes any future refusal to relent look doubly harsh. Where there was no alternative, there could be no complaint. Where one has been shown to exist, the complaint is only too justified.

At this point a psychological consideration comes in—an expectation unfulfilled seems to register more violently than one fulfilled. This special weight attached to the negative instance may well be connected with the survival value of negative tests which Popper has taught us to see.

There are many idiomatic expressions referring to the danger of creating a situation from which there is therefore no easy way out. 'Where would we get to?' asks the reluctant bureaucrat, 'we cannot have that'. 'Once you start it, you are in for it.' German (or Austrian) parlance is even more explicit: 'Fang' dir nichts an, du kannst dir das nicht einführen" ('Do not start things, it must not become an institution').

The 'it' which is to be avoided is always in such cases the emergence of a new tradition which will exact the repetition of an act or a favour which was intended to be taken in its own right.

The link between this problem and that of inflation is obvious. What was to make an effect as an exception becomes a norm and has to be outbid if the effect is to remain. Start writing to someone once at Christmas and he will be expecting that card and get worried or annoyed if it fails to come. The same might be true if you wrote every month, every week or every day. It is the relation to the norm that matters, not the actual frequency of writing.

Our reactions to art are particularly closely bound up with the fulfilment and denial of expectations.[26] Hence the relevance of norms and the dangers

of inflation discussed in the last section. But however much this consideration may support the case for classicism and conservativism in art, new moves will be made and precedents will be set which alter the situation irretrievably.

It is not surprising, therefore, that such moves can arouse real passions both on the part of those who wish to preserve the norm as on that of the innovators who want to establish a new tradition. The historian of art concerned with the changing styles of Open Societies is familiar with typical situations of this kind. A banner is raised and the world of art is ranged for or against the 'revolution'.

The hostility and mutual contempt with which these warring camps look at each other sometimes recall the fervours of religious wars. For a French classicist it was an outrage which stamped the perpetrator a barbarian to break the Aristotelian Unities of place, time and plot in a play. To the admirers of Shakespeare, determined to break this bastion of conservatism, the Aristotelian Unities were as the red rag to the bull. For a champion of Ideal Beauty in painting the '*naturalisti*' who followed Caravaggio[27] were dangerous subversives; the Spanish writer of the seventeenth century who called Caravaggio the anti-Christ of art[28] did not try to be funny. In Vienna, towards the end of the last century, the followers of Wagner and of Brahms were irreconcilable. When Hugo Wolf heard somebody at a party praise Brahms he sat down on the keyboard with the words 'That is how I play Brahms.'[29]

All these and similar battles in the arts were fought for or against certain principles which I propose to call 'polarizing issues'. Not every challenge to tradition becomes such an issue. Some remain unnoticed or are shrugged off, others may be so successful that they rout the opposing party before it can make a stand. If we can believe historians of literature this is what happened when Cervantes published *Don Quixote*, that deadly satire of Amadis of Gaul and similar Romances of Chivalry. It certainly might have happened that the literary world had been split for and against Amadis. But it appears that this literary survival of a medieval tradition was killed outright, and that no further imitation of the Amadis novels came out after *Don Quixote*, but plenty of continuations and imitations of Cervantes. A new bandwagon was rolling on Vanity Fair.

There certainly is an aspect of all stylistic history that can be described in terms of such triumphs, whether with or without a preceding fight. The spread of the Renaissance was the submission of Europe to the banner of '*all'antica*'. The victory of Neoclassicism was the triumph of the standard of 'noble simplicity' championed by Winckelmann over the playful complexity of the Rococo fashion. Classicism in its turn, of course, succumbed to the bandwagon of Romanticism flying the flag of variety and originality, only to

be trumped by Realism and Impressionism enlisting the support of 'scientific truth'.

What should interest the historian who tries to track down these changes is to observe the polarizing issues in *statu nascendi*. The type of documentation I have in mind is exemplified by a passage in the memoirs of an English painter who mixed with the avant-garde in Paris before the First World War. It need not be taken as gospel truth to remain a neat illustration of the Vanity Fair aspect of stylistic change:

> When I used to visit Paris at the beginning of the present century my artist friends in the Latin Quarter would explain that what seemed strange to me in their pictures was due to my own slovenly habits of vision. If I suggested that shadows were grey and not purple they would say, 'That is because you do not use your eyes'; and when we were walking along the boulevards ... I discovered that they were right and I wrong...
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> But ten or a dozen years later I found that the young artists of Paris had totally altered their attitude towards art. All references to vision were impatiently brushed aside with the remark, 'Yes, yes; but the important thing is not to paint what you see, but to paint what you feel'....
>
> My friends spoke little of things seen; but they were full of ideas, full of theories. A new phrase was an inspiration, a new word a joy. One day a painter I knew accompanied a friend of his, a student of science, to the Sorbonne and there heard a lecture on mineralogy. He returned from an improving afternoon with a new word—*crystallization*. It was a magic word, destined to become a talisman of modern painting. Some nights later while sitting with some friends in the Closerie des Lilas, on the Boulevard Saint-Michel, I incautiously let drop a confession that I admired the work of Velazquez. 'Velazquez!' said the most advanced of our party promptly, 'but he has no crystallization!' ... a new theory of art was being constructed, based on the idea of the crystal being the *primitive form* of all things. Velazquez, I was given to understand, was a Secondary Painter because he employed rounded—that is to say secondary—forms. A Primary Painter, I was told, would preserve sharpness in the edges of his planes and accentuate the angles of his volumes.[30]

The author is not unprejudiced and his suggestion that it was this chance encounter with a word that led the young painters to Cézanne need not be taken seriously. On the contrary, it was their desire to find an alternative to Impressionism that led them to discover Cézanne and sent them in search of a fresh theory and a fresh slogan.[31] And yet this little snapshot from Vanity Fair seems to me more illuminating than many a more pretentious history

of modern art which describes the rise of Cubism as a symptom of a New Age.

I believe that here, too, the historian's first concern should be with what Popper calls the logic of the situation. Popper called for 'individualistic and institutionalist models'[32] which allow us to look at such a situation in purely sociological rather than psychological terms. I believe that an almost ideal model of such a 'polarizing issue' lies at hand. It is to be found in Jonathan Swift's famous account of the war between Lilliput and Blefuscu.

> It began upon the following occasion. It is allowed on all hands, that the primitive way of breaking eggs before we eat them, was upon the larger end: but his present Majesty's grandfather, while he was a boy, going to eat an egg, and breaking it according to the ancient practice, happened to cut one of his fingers. Whereupon the Emperor his father published an edict, commanding all his subjects, upon great penalties, to break the smaller end of their eggs. The people so highly resented this law, that our histories tell us there have been six rebellions raised on that account; wherein one Emperor lost his life, and another his crown. These civil commotions were constantly fomented by the monarchs of Blefuscu; and when they were quelled, the exiles always fled for refuge to that empire. It is computed, that eleven thousand persons have, at several times, suffered death, rather than submit to break their eggs at the smaller end. Many hundred large volumes have been published upon this controversy: but the books of the Big-Endians have been long forbidden, and the whole party rendered incapable by law of holding employments. During the course of these troubles, the Emperors of Blefuscu did frequently expostulate by their ambassadors, accusing us of making a schism in religion, by offending against a fundamental doctrine of our great prophet Lustrog, in the fifty-fourth chapter of the Blundecral (which is their Alcoran). This, however, is thought to be a mere strain upon the text: for the words are these; *that all true believers shall break their eggs at the convenient end:* and which is the convenient end, seems, in my humble opinion, to be left to every man's conscience, or at least in the power of the Chief Magistrate to determine.
>
> Now the Big-Endian exiles have found so much credit in the Emperor of Blefuscu's court, and so much private assistance and encouragement from their party here at home, that a bloody war has been carried on between the two empires for six-and-thirty moons with various success; during which time we have lost forty capital ships, and a much greater number of smaller vessels, together with thirty thousand of our best seamen and

soldiers; and the damage received by the enemy is reckoned to be somewhat greater than ours.[33]

Swift no doubt intended his story as a parable of human folly, a castigation of stupidity explicable in psychological terms. But he has done more. He has devised a convincing caricature of a social situation with a logic of its own. For the purpose of our analysis we can disregard the story of terror and persecution Swift unfolds. For even without these outward means of compulsion the situation allows of no easy escape. It is not only the foolish Lilliputian who is caught up in this quarrel over eggs. Even the most intelligent of his countrymen who wants to eat a boiled egg has to open it somehow—and try as he may, he cannot empty his action of significance. If he opens it at one end he will either show himself to be pro-Lilliput or pro-Blefuscu and if he laboriously opens it at the side to display his neutrality he will have been compelled by a foolish situation to perform a foolish act. The same applies if he decides to give up boiled eggs altogether, which is a poor solution, particularly if he likes them. Moreover, there may be social situations such as communal breakfasts in which the withdrawal would be interpreted as an act of disloyalty by both sides. His best hope, maybe, would be to act the madman and thus to deprive his actions of any social significance, but the need for such a desperate course only underlines the power of a situation from which there is no opting out.

Of course, we must be careful, lest this analysis prove too much. If it were quite correct, polarizing issues could never loosen their grip, and the war over the eggs would be doomed to last for ever. Perhaps it is here that psychology comes in; for people do get tired of issues, particularly if a new excitement diverts attention from the old one. It would not be true, moreover, that the wise Lilliputian could not contribute to this breaking of the deadlock, particularly if he had the talent of a Jonathan Swift in showing up the ludicrous side of such quarrels. But attend to it in one way or another he must, if he is caught up in his society.

There are historians who will deny the relevance of the issue. The story of the eggs, they will argue, was a mere pretext, an irrelevant frill in the long chronicle of strife between Blefuscu and Lilliput. Their *real* dispute was over issues of power, not over the ludicrous myth told to the populace. Though the secret archives of both islands appear to be irretrievably lost, we must grant a certain plausibility to this hypothesis. Had the Blefuscudians not hated the Lilliputians they would not have made an issue of the enemy King's decree, by aiding and abetting its opponents. But this is precisely what our analysis would have led us to expect anyhow. The existence of this hostility

does not prove that there was not also an autonomous social situation deriving from the polarizing issue of where to open the egg. Moreover no amount of investigation of the conflict of interests between the two islands would allow us to predict that this particular issue would arise, let alone which side would favour which solution. What could be predicted is only that, if there was any issue, the camps would be likely to divide along party lines.

Actually Swift tells another story earlier in the same chapter, about the internal politics of Lilliput, which confirms this interpretation. The two opposing parties—modelled of course on the Whigs and Tories, or cavaliers and roundheads—are marked by a badge of allegiance that cannot but be fortuitous in its absurdity:

> For above seventy moons past there have been two struggling parties in this empire, under the names of Tramechsan and Slamecksan, from the high and low heels on their shoes, by which they distinguish themselves. It is alleged indeed, that the high-heels are most agreeable to our ancient constitution: but however this be, his Majesty has determined to make use of only low heels in the administration of the government, and all offices in the gift of the Crown, as you cannot but observe; and particularly, that his Majesty's Imperial heels are lower at least by a *drurr* than any of his court; (*drurr* is a measure about the fourteenth part of an inch). The animosities between these two parties run so high, that they will neither eat nor drink, nor talk with each other. We compute the *Tramecksan*, or High-Heels, to exceed us in number; but the power is wholly on our side. We apprehend his Imperial Highness, the Heir to the Crown, to have some tendency towards the High-Heels; at least we can plainly discover one of his heels higher than the other, which gives him a hobble in his gait.

It will be noticed that the two stories do not duplicate each other entirely. In foreign politics, as with the opening of eggs, there is only the stark choice between two alternatives, in internal politics there is a spectrum extending between the two extremes. But this gradualness of transition does not materially change the logic of the situation. A Lilliputian ordering a pair of shoes will still be presented by the cobbler with the awkward and inescapable question how many *drurrs* he wants his heels to be. Even if, like Quintilian, he opts for the middle way, he has to place himself somewhere along the scale.

We need not go far to find an application of these models in the field of art. The most conspicuous polarizing issue in contemporary painting is a case in point. I refer to the issue of 'abstraction'. Whether he wants to or not, the

artist today is compelled to attend to this issue. He is of course quite free to shun exercises in what is called 'nonobjective' painting; but he cannot avoid the result that the representational paintings he produces in this situation will be 'non-nonobjective'. He might long for the lost age of innocence, where to paint an apple and a jug meant precisely painting an apple and a jug. But while the polarizing issue looms over him, this innocence is not to be had. Painting a still life becomes, among other things, an affirmation in a situation not of his making. And, though he can preach against the artificiality of the issue, even this will only increase the attention he has to pay to it. Again, it is easy to ascribe the resulting tension to underlying conflicts of power. For, by and large, we find that the geographical distribution of the most vocal partisans pro and con abstract art coincides with the cold war frontiers. There are exceptions, but they confirm the rule. It is of political rather than artistic interest that abstract art is cultivated in Poland and Yugoslavia as an affirmation of independence from the party line that still enforces 'social realism' in Russia and in China. But, though the polarizing issue has been thus drawn into the political arena, it would still be misleading to identify the two. There is no intrinsic reason why Communists should side against abstract art rather than for it. However much they may at present rationalize their hostility in terms of Marxist aesthetics, the fact remains that, at an earlier phase, it was in Soviet Russia that extreme abstract experiments were launched (by Malevich), to be promptly denounced by the Right as '*Kulturbolschewismus*'.

Of course, the fact that the constellation of parties in such an issue can be fortuitous does not mean that it must always be fortuitous, even less that it must be felt to be fortuitous. Reasons can be given for the switch of Soviet art policy from modernism to socialist realism no less than for the official backing 'experimental' art is receiving on the other side of the iron curtain.

It may have been hard to predict which party in Lilliput would wear the high heels, but it is quite intelligible that it was the middle-class party in the English Civil War which had no use for the long hair of the cavaliers and became the 'roundheads' just as their extremist successors in France became the '*sans culottes*'.

It is for this kind of intelligibility that the Hegelian looks in the formation of styles. He wants to identify Gothic elegance with courtly artistocracy and the realistic reaction with the hardheaded middle class. He is sure that the frivolity of the Rococo expressed the decadence of the doomed aristocracy and the severity of Neoclassicism the ideals of the classes which triumphed in the French Revolution. The historian can be forgiven if the crudity and triviality of such interpretations provoke his scepticism;[34] but, though the

Hegelian and Marxist theories of determinism are as fallacious here as in other fields, there is no harm in conceding that even in artistic preferences the dice will sometimes be loaded. There are occasionally elements in an artistic issue that will become fused with a social or political tension.

One style of church buildings was felt to be appropriate for Protestants, another for Catholics, and, though the idea of a Jesuit style used for propagandist purposes has been exploded,[35] the fact remains that the very austerity of the Protestant camp in matters of art created an issue that made the Catholic camp all the more eager to exploit the effects of images and lavish ornament.

It is even possible that the young men of 1912 who rallied round the slogan of crystallization were dimly attracted by the glamour of a scientific term and by some unformulated identification of such hard and cold forms with an antiromantic bias in other spheres of life. In other words, it is possible that the polarized issue becomes a symbol or a metaphor for issues which are less articulate. Possible, but not necessary. Hence it is better at this point to break off this particular trend of thought, lest we are led from a logic of situations into the swamps of psychological speculations.

IV. ART AND TECHNICAL PROGRESS

In language and in art we feel entitled to deplore innovations that turn into issues (though this will not help us much); in other fields we do not, for some innovations may be real improvements that save lives and diminish suffering, in others (and I refer to science) they may bring us nearer to the truth we wish to find. Given these aims (about which there can be little quarrel) it is often easy to say which departure from tradition will be adopted in a rational society. The history of technological progress and of scientific advance is thus to some extent the history of rational choices within an open society. Once bronze was shown to cut better than stones, iron better than bronze and steel better than iron, these alternatives had only to be invented and presented for rational men to use them for their cutting tools.[36] Similarly, Popper has discussed the progress of science, and has asked what social conditions would stop or impede such progress—for instance a ban on free inquiry.[37] The refusal of certain societies to adopt technical improvements is an equally topical problem, for it has turned out to be far from easy to introduce, for instance, better methods of farming in the so-called underdeveloped countries. The reasons have been frequently discussed. To quote the words of a recent broadcast:

> They have not passed the first intellectual hurdle, the great innovation which is acceptance of the idea of innovation itself. The annual agricultural round is part of a whole pattern of existence, and it is often religiously sanctioned. The seeds have to be blessed this way; the ploughing should not begin until after a certain saint's festival; only men may prune the olive trees; only women may gather the olives—and so on. Deviation means anxiety about the possibly fearful consequences. And it is not impossible to appreciate this point of view even for a product of a scientific Western culture. A fertility rite usually does look much more impressive than a dressing of ammonium sulphate, besides usually being more fun.[38]

The detailed analysis of any such situation in which improvements are resisted might be an excellent way to test the capacity of Popper's 'zero method' to lead cultural studies out of its reliance on organicistic holism. To put it briefly, any tool or action that serves a great multiplicity of purposes will be much harder to change and therefore to improve than anything that serves only one particular aim. A cutting tool, as we have seen, can certainly be improved by sharpening and hardening the cutting edge. A knife that one also wishes to use as a paper-knife should not be too sharp, for, if it is, it tends to slash the pages. Improvement in one respect makes it useless in another. If this is true of such simple and perfectly rational aims, the situation becomes more acute where some of the purposes are strongly charged with emotions. We are told that for a time Picasso never shaved without drawing lines in the lather and turning his face into the mask of a clown. As long as this habit lasted he would not have been a likely customer for an electric razor, however much the new device may be superior to the older ones. There can, of course, be few technological improvements that do not disrupt some habit and threaten some aspects of a way of life.

In many cases, therefore, technological change is at first confined to strictly utilitarian functions, while other spheres even in our society tend to respond more slowly or resist them altogether. The ceremony of Knighting is still performed by the Queen with the technologically obsolete sword, not with the butt of an automatic rifle. Candles are still lit in church, and cumbersome seals are still appended to important documents, though one could think of many means of achieving their purpose more easily and more lastingly.

But this special aura that for us surrounds the technically obsolete and the archaic, the judge's wig, the don's gown and the guardsman's gala uniform, only serve to confirm the influence which an increase in alternatives

has on the gamut of expressive symbols. It was the invention of paper that made vellum look solemn.

Some idea of progress (as a possibility rather than as an impersonal force) is inseparable from the Open Society. Its members must believe that things and institutions can be discussed and improved. Its champions, therefore, can be forgiven when they look with exasperation at their opponents, who fight for the status quo at any price. For good or ill this issue of 'progress' has become the dominant problem of Western Society ever since the Enlightenment proclaimed its faith in the perfectibility of man and society. The French Revolution notoriously consolidated this issue in the 'polarization' of politics with the 'radicals' on the left, the 'reactionaries' on the right. And just as eggs and heels in Lilliput were turned into issues, with the camps aligned according to these dominant tensions, so art has been caught up in the political problem of the nineteenth century and become 'polarized' in progressivist and conservative schools. It is not surprising that even the advocacy of technical innovations in art was seen as a symptom of radicalism and that a resistance to such innovations tended to brand the critic as a stick-in-the-mud. What is more surprising is rather that the fit is far from perfect.[39] Artists of the 'avant-garde' (such as Degas and Cézanne) were sometimes found on the political right while their medievalizing opponents (such as William Morris) were on the political left.

The poverty of the kind of historicism that applies the idea of progress to art has often been castigated but never been exorcized. Maybe the logic of situations and the zero method can help here, too, to clarify this all-important matter.

What we call 'art' in primitive societies is obviously so deeply embedded in the ritual and life of the community that its multiple purpose makes change very precarious. Painting and carving for instance may have a magic or religious as well as a decorative and prestige function. The age of these traditions is often felt to be the guarantee of their value and efficacy; and since no rational criteria can exist to decide which image is more efficacious such changes as occur must be due to accidental 'mutations'.

But this ritualistic conception of painting and sculpture may be losing its grip in a society that is exposed to many influences from outside. The travelling merchant may come home with tales of images seen elsewhere that surpassed, in his judgement, anything his native craftsmen had ever done. In stressing this role of culture clash in the emergence of Open Societies I am of course following Popper's lead.[40] Where art is thus prized loose from its multiple allegiances, the question of standards can come up with new force.

I have tried to argue elsewhere that in the first Open Society, that of

Greece, a technological and even scientific element did indeed enter art, as can always happen where one rational purpose is regarded as overriding. I have suggested the hypothesis that for the Greeks this aim was the representation of a sacred story as it might actually have looked to an eyewitness.[41]

Granted a specific demand of this kind, technical progress towards its achievement is certainly possible.[42] The stylistic changes in Greek art from the archaic representations of the sixth century to the illusionistic illustrations of the third constitute the most famous advance of this kind, which was recapitulated in the Renaissance development from Giotto to Leonardo da Vinci. It is true that, in postulating such an underlying purpose that would explain the successive innovations of these styles, we are using our hindsight. We cannot prove that the sculptors of the Temple of Aegina wanted to render the human figure as naturalistically as did their successors on the Parthenon pediments, nor can we give evidence to show that Giotto would have admired Leonardo. All we can demonstrate is that naturalistic inventions spread with the same rapidity as did other technical innovations. The mastery of the nude in Greek art impressed sculptors as far as Afghanistan and Gandhara; the invention of perspective in Florence conquered France and Germany within a century.

Even in a case like this the disruptive effect of this improvement on other functions of art was very serious indeed. The illusion of depth threatened the decorative unity of painting that displayed its lucid pictograph on a ground of gold. The mastery of the nude in Greek art led away from that simplicity and grandeur of form we admire in Egyptian statuary.

Speaking more generally, the technical innovations threatened the artist's tasks of creating a rich and satisfying order with his well-tried elements.[43] It is in this way that progress creates a polarizing issue in art, for it presents the painter or sculptor with a choice of priorities. Are you ready—for instance—to risk disruption for the sake of this increase in naturalism or would you rather confine your art to the traditional game? Art is not a game; but there are important elements these two pleasures share—in both activities there are rules and there is mastery. The mastery is achieved within the rules through years of practice that explores the possible initial moves and their potentialities for further achievements. This mastery depends to no small extent on the exact knowledge of means. The weight and size of tennis balls is fixed and so are the dimensions of the court and of the net. It is within these fixed conventions that the champion develops his capacity to calculate and predict. Of course, a good player may take some change in these conventions in his stride; but the idea of 'improving' tennis by giving his balls more bounce or his racket a boosting device would strike him as silly.

The champion's fans, in their turn, who flock to Wimbledon would certainly stare in incomprehension if it were suggested to them that times had changed and that they should learn to appreciate a new game. If one struck their fancy and they wanted to understand its finer points, well and good; but where was their obligation to do so?

If art were nothing but a game this comparison would completely dispose of all historicist arguments in criticism. Neither players nor connoisseurs are interested in changing rules, let alone games. It is possible that only in such situations art can blossom to real refinement. The Chinese scholar looking at a painting on silk of some bamboo stems shares with the connoisseur of games something of this developed pleasure in *finesse*. The suggestion that this art could be improved by changing tools or media he would probably dismiss as barbaric.

But, for good or ill, as we have seen, art as it is functioning in our society is not only a game of this kind. It derives from its functions a technical component that is intrinsically unstable and shares with language the drift towards inflation. These two sources of instability may well belong together. At any rate, each of them can result in that disturbance I have called a 'polarizing issue'. What appears as an improvement to one side, may be felt as a disruption by the other. But once the initiative is with the innovator, the defence of the status quo becomes increasingly difficult. When more and more artists have gone over to more naturalistic methods, the old game will acquire a precious or a musty look. More and more gifted artists will be attracted by the challenge of the new one, and the old playgrounds will be increasingly deserted of players and spectators. The game may survive for a time as an archaizing ritual played by defiant outsiders who may have all the right arguments but meet with no response. Their decision to keep up their little cult will impress their contemporaries as preciousness and affectation. When this moment comes, one of two equally undesirable things may happen according to the logic of Vanity Fair—either the game dies out, or the preciousness will attract the snobs and will bring the game back into fashion, but with very different social overtones. And, whether we want to or not, we cannot easily disregard these overtones.

V. SOCIAL TESTING AND THE PLASTICITY OF TASTE

During the last few years of the nineteenth century the polarizing issue in architecture was the question of the use of iron. Was the Eiffel Tower to be accepted as a work of architecture or was it just a feat of engineering? More

was involved in this dispute than a mere verbal quarrel. The architects felt that the integrity of their art was threatened by the new material. Perhaps their attitude becomes more understandable if we look at it in the light of the first section. For architecture as an art also works with accents of emphasis. A high tower, a vault of wide span are the high-points of the architect's vocabulary. We still marvel at the lofty vaults built by the Romans and by the cathedral builders. These famous buildings established the scale within which the tradition of architecture worked. Now the use of iron threatened this scale and upset the whole hierarchy of values. Any railway station could boast of a wider span than the most monumental of classical interiors. No wonder that architects tried to resist this dislocation, which upset their whole game. Let the engineers construct what they liked, but let architecture retain its established vocabulary.

In this situation before the turn of the century, a German critic and historian wrote a passage that seems to me to sum up the most important problem which concerns us:

> It is not much use to dismiss the impression (made by iron constructions) as inferior. After all, it looks as if the majority of people and a large section of the architects were increasingly accepting these impressions as satisfying. If the others, who are trained in the theory of art, continue to disapprove, this may easily bring them into an opposition to the progress of the world, in which they will certainly be the losers. The question therefore is not how to mould iron to make it conform to our taste, but the much more important one, how to mould our taste to make it conform with iron?[44]

At first blush this looks a cynical pronouncement. 'Jump on the band-wagon and learn to like it.' Indeed, when I once quoted it to a group of architects, they became downright abusive. Not that they disliked iron, but they were rightly suspicious of the relativism this advice seemed to imply. It appears to challenge the belief in objective solutions which are 'liked', because they are good. It undermines the idea of art as an autonomous realm realizing values which are and remain independent of technical change. As an admirer of Popper's social philosophy my immediate reaction to this pronouncement was equally hostile. It seemed to me the embodiment of historicist opportunism. Moreover, I remembered an important passage in the *Poverty of Historicism* in which Popper takes issue with Mannheim in a related context. Mannheim had suggested that the political problem was to organize human impulses in such a way that they will direct their energy to

the right strategic points and thus lead to the transformation of society in the desired direction. Popper points out to the

> well-meaning Utopian that this programme implies an admission of failure ... for ... the demand that we 'mould' these men and women to fit into his new society ... clearly removes any possibility of testing the success or failure of the new society. For those who do not like living in it only admit thereby that they are not yet fit to live in it; that their 'human impulses' need further 'organizing'. But without the possibility of tests, any claim that a 'scientific' method is being employed evaporates. The holistic approach is incompatible with a truly scientific method.[45]

As an admirer of Popper's methodology, however, I have also learned from him that one must be critical of one's own reactions. Maybe there is something in the German critic's formulation that we can and sometimes must mould our taste. If it is, this would prove to be a source of weakness in art, but it may not be uninstructive to probe this possibility.

Clearly, architecture is one of those multiple-purpose activities in which the artistic aim is only one of many. If the use of iron allows us to house many people better, it would be criminal to reject it for aesthetic reasons. We still have a right to regret the passing of the timber age and of the beautiful stone buildings of the pre-industrial era; but our regrets are irrelevant to the architect working today. But should we not rather accept this change as a necessary evil, should we not face the fact that art had to be sacrificed to efficiency and hygiene? Not, surely, if we are architects. To an architect the new material does present a challenge, and an exciting one; he must try to subdue it into order and beauty, to create a new game that can be played with iron, and the greater the problem, the more he will perhaps come to 'like it'. He must discover the potential of the new material, and when he has found it, we too may see the point and 'like it', provided we share in his adventure. Thus the plasticity of our aesthetic reaction, which the critic's pronouncement implied, may be a fact, although a disturbing one. Is all taste acquired taste?

These questions may lose some of their sting if we return to the difference between the problems of technology and science on the one hand, and those of art on the other. In technology progress can be specified once aims are stated; in science the aim is implicit in the search for truth. If there were something corresponding in art, it should be the creation of something we can 'like'. There have, indeed, been attempts to describe art in some such terms as a technology for the achieving of certain pleasures, the creation of that 'aesthetic experience' about which we read so much.[46] One would

like this to be true; for, if it were, our spontaneous reactions to works of art would be the sole and safe criterion of their excellence. I would still defend the position that Mozart has found means of giving real pleasure to human beings which are as objectively suited to this purpose as are aeroplanes for flying, that Fra Angelico has discovered ways of expressing devotion or Rembrandt of hinting at mysteries anybody can learn to see because they are 'there'.

And yet we know from history and from our own experience that there were and are large groups of people who never 'liked' Mozart, Fra Angelico or Rembrandt, and who totally failed to appreciate their miraculous achievements.

It is perhaps important at this point to stress that a belief in the objectivity of artistic standards is not necessarily refuted by the undoubted subjectivity of likes and dislikes. Clearly those who do not like a game will not become good judges of players, and those who do not want to touch wine for whatever reason will not become connoisseurs of vintages. With most people, at least, liking is a preliminary condition of appreciation. Only if certain types of art hold a promise of pleasure for them will they make the effort of attending to the individual work. They may find they like ballet and dislike opera, enjoy eighteenth-century music but avoid the Romantics, or prefer Chinese to Indian art. Naturally, they would not claim to be able to distinguish excellence from mediocrity in the products of art forms or schools that 'leave them cold'. The professional critic, it is true, can attempt to surmount this subjective reaction. He may, on occasion, be able to appreciate artistic achievement in an artist or period that does not much appeal to him. He may for instance find Rubens not very sympathetic but come to admire his verve, skill and imagination. Or he may fail to respond to Poussin and still learn to understand what his champions see in him.

And yet it may be argued that this 'cold' appreciation of what we really do not like is a poor substitute for the experience a work of art can give us. This experience is bound up with love. There is an element of initial yielding in this response that can perhaps be compared with what psychoanalysts call transference. It includes a willingness to suspend criticism and to surrender to the work of art in exploring its complexities and its *finesse*. If we try to be merely unprejudiced in our approach we shall never find out what the work can offer us.

We know from Popper, moreover, that this demand for unprejudiced objectivity represents altogether an impossible and erroneous methodological position. The objectivity of science does not rest on scientists being free of preconceived views and theories, but on their readiness to test them and to

listen to arguments leading to their refutation. But, if I am right that, as far as the testing of artistic excellence is concerned, such a critical attitude may impede the test, it becomes clearer why dogmatism and subjectivism are so prevalent in artistic matters. In this respect artistic creeds are indeed closer to religion than to science. The awe and consolation connected with religious experience also depends on such an initial readiness on the part of the worshipper and this readiness he mostly derives from tradition. In growing into the group he learns what to revere and what to abhor, and, whenever he is doubtful, he will anxiously look to other members to see whether he adores the right thing and performs the right ritual. The places of worship of rival sects may not only leave him cold, but appear to him as abominations. But the only test he has to distinguish between the holy and the unholy is the reaction of his group.

It is the probing of this reaction that I propose here to call 'social testing'. It need not take the form of a formulated question—we soon learn to feel how our actions or utterances are 'taken' by those around us. It is well to remember, moreover, that this kind of 'social testing' is the rule rather than the exception not only where religious beliefs are concerned, but also in matters of behaviour and even of ordinary beliefs. The child will try out an opinion and search the face of his mother or, later, of his companions to find out whether he has said something silly. In most cases, in fact, there is little else he could do to form his opinions. It is through social testing that most of us have arrived at the opinion that there are no witches; just as our ancestors arrived at theirs, that there are. Even the rationalist, as Popper has pointed out, must take a lot on trust in what passes for knowledge.[47] He only differs from the dogmatist in his awareness of limits, his own and those of others. He is ready at least in principle to test any opinion and to ask for credentials other than social ones.

It is here, of course, that the difference between scientific beliefs and artistic taste is crucial. For, in art there are no credentials that could be probed in the same systematic way. Debates about artistic merit, though I do not consider them empty, tend to be laborious and inconclusive. What wonder, therefore, that there are few areas where 'social testing' plays a greater part than in aesthetic judgements? The adolescent soon learns that the group can be a dreadful spoilsport if he confesses to liking something that has fallen under a taboo. Imagine a young Spaniard in the first decade of the seventeenth century meeting his friends after a longish absence abroad and mentioning casually that Romances of Chivalry are his favourite reading. Suddenly he finds himself the centre of mocking attention; he is called Don Quixote, or the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance, and may never live

this down. It would need a strong character in a similar situation to stick up for Amadis of Gaul and to discourse on its artistic merits which, after all, had recently been apparent to everyone. Even if our imaginary victim tried, the defence would die on his lips. He would find in his heart that maybe Amadis was all a lot of nonsense and that he was silly to have been taken in by that bombast.

The more seriously art is taken by any group, the more adept will it be in such brainwashing; for to enjoy the wrong thing in such a circle is like worshipping false gods; you fail in the test of admission to the group if your taste is found wanting. In the light of these solid facts it is curious to reflect on Kant's opinion that the aesthetic judgement is entirely 'disinterested', entirely free, grounded only in the conviction of what every developed human being would enjoy. One wonders whether that was true even of the Sage of Koenigsberg. Whether not even he was influenced in his preferences by his group and by its ideas of 'good taste'. He probably never observed the nexus between aesthetic and social appeal, because he lived in a relatively closed milieu and because he was not very much involved in artistic matters. Had he been, he might have had occasion to see the pathetic desire of the socially insecure to 'like' the 'right thing', and the feeling of anxiety that can arise in a situation where an unlabelled and unconnected work of art is displayed that does not seem to fit any pre-existent aesthetic pigeonhole. Contrary to Kant's opinion, it sometimes looks in such situations as if the expression 'I like it' really implied, 'I believe that is the kind of thing my group accepts as good. Since I like my group, I like it, too.'

Here are the roots of the unholy alliance between snobbery and art that no observer of our social scene can have missed. There is every reason to combat the attitudinizing to which it leads; but not everything is snobbery that is sometimes branded with this stigma.

Much has been written and talked, for instance, about the way art lovers have been known to enthuse about forgeries, which they then discarded contemptuously, once the fraud had been exposed. The suspicion is always voiced that this transformation of liking into disliking reveals the first as mere sham and the outcome of snobbery. It is an understandable suspicion and one which may not be totally off the mark in many cases, but, in so far as it implies that hidden postulate of an entirely unprejudiced appreciation, it is mistaken. We are never uninfluenced by our previous experience and expectations. We cannot approach all works of art without a theory, nor can we set out independently to test every reputation. There is just no time, nor, perhaps the fund of emotional response, to enter into every encounter with a work of art with such a mixture of readiness and critical detachment. Tradition,

even where it is not accepted dogmatically, presents a tremendous economy. It is something to be told that among the countless items in our heritage the works of Homer, Shakespeare or Rembrandt have given much enjoyment to those who surrendered to their magic. If I am told, therefore, that a drawing is by Rembrandt, I shall approach it with the expectation of finding a masterpiece. I shall look for the signs of mastery to which I have responded before in Rembrandt and will surrender myself to the promised pleasure. This means no more than that I have learned to have confidence in Rembrandt and that I take his lines on trust even where I may find them at first a little puzzling. Can I be blamed if my enjoyment turns into embarrassment and disgust on finding that my trust has been betrayed?

Take the case of 'Ossian's' poems, which were hailed with such enthusiasm in the eighteenth century not only by snobs but by people who cannot be accused of ignorance of poetry—Goethe, for instance. Surely it does make a difference to our attitude whether we read them as the genuine creations of a primitive and heroic tribe or whether we know them to be little more than a literary fraud concocted by a sophisticated antiquarian. The uncritical acceptance of this fraud, incidentally, is instructive within the present context. It was perpetrated within a situation created by a polarizing issue. Reaction against the dominance of the classical dogma in poetry was the overriding problem of poetry, particularly in the non-Latin countries which resented the pretensions of the French to be the guardians of the one and only classical standard. The rejection, by this standard, of Shakespeare as 'barbarian' naturally invited the retort that, maybe, the French were not barbaric enough? Rousseau had provided enough ammunition for such an attack. And was not Homer, the expression of an heroic age, still ignorant of rules and polite conventions? Were not folk songs pure poetry? It was this debate that explains not only the forgery of a large body of barbaric poetry from the wilds of Scotland but also its reception. Ossian was a godsend, a confirmation of the theory that the anticlassicist camp was in the process of formulating. Moreover, it bolstered the self-respect and self-confidence of those nations that could not boast of a Roman lineage. What wonder that the champions of this movement 'liked' Ossian and failed to notice the false notes of inflated pathos and overemphasis that strike us today as obviously jarring?

Such are the perils and pleasures of Vanity Fair. The classicists who had been conditioned to respond to Virgil, Racine and Poussin never explored the alternative traditions, for they were 'put off'—as the excellent idiom has it—by certain external irregularities. And, though some of them might have had the satisfaction of not having 'fallen for' the Ossian fraud, they might have paid for it in not appreciating Shakespeare either.

We have here come back to the problem of polarizing issues from another angle.[48] The situation tends to create self-confirming aesthetic theories. Each side in such a dispute will tend to look first at the badge on any work of art that comes its way. How does it stand with regard to the dominant dispute? If they find signs that it comes from the 'right camp', they will receive it with a warm glow which in itself will be pleasurable to experience and will be productive of more pleasure as the work unfolds its qualities. A work of art would have to be very poor indeed not to be 'likeable' in such favourable conditions. If, on the other hand, the work comes in the hated wrappings of the hostile camp, the partisan art lover will scarcely bother to cut the strings and have a look. In this climate of opinion even a good work will be likely to wither and die. It is true that history records enjoyable exceptions to this rule. Hugo Wolf, who treated Brahms with such contempt, was heard to mutter at a first performance of a Brahms symphony: 'Hell, I like it.' (*Teufel, mir gfallts.*)[49] What was said of the influence of the planets also applies to social pressures—'they incline, but do not compel'.

If this analysis has been correct, the situation in aesthetics is not dissimilar to the one in ethics. In both areas of value the standards of the group influence our decisions, in both they become internalized in the voice of the conscience or what psychoanalysts call the superego. There is an anxious creature hidden in us that asks 'may I do this', or 'may I like this?' Yet in one respect there is surely a great difference between ethics and aesthetics. Where moral issues are concerned we must obviously battle against conformism and preserve our critical independence in the face of social pressures as far as is humanly possible. For ethics is not part of Vanity Fair.

Art, too, is important; and those of us who believe that it is must certainly do their best to remain as honest in their own reactions as Hugo Wolf could be. They must try what they can to ignore their fond prejudices and to see the possibilities of achievement on the other side of the fence. A distaste for the devotional art of nineteenth-century pseudo-Gothic should not prevent us from looking at such church furnishings and glass with a certain awareness that our rejection of this kind of product is socially conditioned; nor should our readiness to admire children's art make us incapable of remembering adult standards. But there clearly is a limit to this process of self-criticism in matters of taste, and it may well be that we may have to accept this social element in our reactions as the price we pay for untroubled enjoyment. Hugo Wolf's—as we have seen—was not untroubled. We may have to admit, in other words, that something of this enjoyment belongs to the pleasures of the Fair. I do not think (to repeat) that such an admission would have to destroy our belief in standards. Nor is it necessarily good for

art to be set up on a pedestal high above the market place. *Ernst ist das Leben, heiter ist die Kunst.*[50] Too much moral solemnity may kill it.

VI. HISTORICISM AND THE SITUATION IN MUSIC

I have left the problem of music to the last, not only because it lies largely outside my competence, but also because music presents a special case. It is a game and an art that relies on the listener's memory for what has gone before, for only this recollection will allow him to build up expectations, and experience delight at the transformation and elaboration the composer introduces. Small wonder that for the less musical a work gains in beauty on several hearings and that for many familiarity is a condition of complete enjoyment. If not familiarity with the individual work (which is the ideal case) then at least familiarity with the composer's idiom which allows the listener to 'follow' more easily, even though he may not know the name and function of the various conventions which he has learned to recognize. But if music is in this respect a special case, it is also one that for this very reason shows the mechanism of self-reinforcement particularly clearly at work. Few music lovers want to attend to a work of which they do not know and like the idiom; fewer would want to give it a second hearing. Hence it is the constant complaint of professional critics that the public boycott new music, that they only flock to hear what these critics contemptuously dismiss as the 'old war horses', such as Beethoven's symphonies or Handel's 'Messiah', and that the presence of an unknown work by a modern composer on the programme means the risk of financial failure.

As one who still likes Beethoven symphonies and is likely to stay away when a modern work is announced, I must confirm the existence of this situation, though I resent the critic's tone. If he hears these symphonies too often, this is an occupational hazard which is pretty irrelevant to the general argument. Moreover, the argument he generally uses or at least implies is pure historicism of the brand Popper should have disposed of for good and all. We are told that we must 'go with the times', that each age has its own idiom or style, and that Beethoven, who may have been all very well for the early nineteenth century, has nothing to offer to the second half of the twentieth.

In conversation Popper has often drawn my attention to the devastating effect that Wagner's Hegelian futurism has had in this respect on the theory of music. It is Wagner who is largely responsible for this 'polarizing issue' of musical thought in the last century. It was he who wedded the historicist belief in progress and evolution, which so preoccupied the nineteenth century,

to the genius worship of the Romantics and turned himself into the exemplar of the genius who is spurned by the multitudes but worshipped by the elect. I remember an old lady in Vienna who was born in the 'fifties of the last century telling me how Wagner's writings and prophecies had impressed her and her friends in their youth and how she had become a 'Wagnerian' before having had an opportunity of hearing any of his music. She still remembered how shocked and bemused she felt when *The Valkyrie* was at last performed in Vienna and the prelude contained no recognizable tune. Were the critics who attacked Wagner perhaps right after all, or was she possibly a philistine herself? It is an unpleasant situation to be in, and as far as I know she quickly climbed out of it. Being disposed to like Wagner, she looked for the features she could like and so she could again feel happy in the company of those brilliant people she respected and loved. Brainwashing in art is quite possible; and if one makes the effort one can no doubt make oneself like something that one did not care for before. We conservatives in music (and I know I can include Popper here) find it hard to get rid of the suspicion that many critics and other partisans of serialism have undergone a similar forced conversion. They were first converted to historicism and futurism, to the Hegelian creed of the march of the mind to its predetermined goal, and then considered it their duty to side with contemporary experiments. The more their self-respect depended on their liking what they approved of, the more they invested in efforts at appreciation. If they now had to confess that really, after all this effort made for extraneous reasons, they found the game not worth the candle, they would feel traitors to their cause. I have spelt out this suspicion of the antihistoricist in music, but I admit that it is both libellous and self-reinforcing. I cannot disprove the claim that people really like Schoenberg; in fact the evidence is that some really do. What would be open to me is to taste and test a serialist piece by Schoenberg myself more seriously and more earnestly. But here my suspicion stands in the way. Not that I have never tried to listen; but by and large such efforts as I have made flagged after a time when I was 'put off' by a specially ugly sound or a particularly historicist defence. Popper, I know, has made great efforts in his youth, when he was well acquainted with Schoenberg's circle, and has still found his suspicion confirmed that the moving ideology behind these innovations was historicism. Maybe his and other people's personal accounts have 'brainwashed' me in my turn and made it harder for me to see (or rather hear) the other side of the issue. Theoretically I must grant the possibility that, despite the historicist nonsense talked by Schoenberg's champions, there are fascinations in the serialist game which long effort and familiarity would reveal. And I must concede it to my opponents that I do not make the

effort because I am dogmatically convinced that Mozart will be more worthwhile every time. At the same time I must admit that one of the unintended consequences of my dogmatism is in fact a worsening of the situation for composers writing now. For, if my arguments in this paper hold, it is not only the historicist creed that prevents them from writing now in Mozart's or Beethoven's idiom. They may curse or at least deplore the changes Wagner or Schoenberg introduced into the language of music, but they cannot wholly undo them. To be sure, it is open to anyone today to write in a classical or preclassical idiom, and I hope I am not betraying any secret if I mention that Popper has taken this course, writing fugues in the strict style of Bach. I do not know whether he would do so if he were a professional composer rather than a philosopher. At any rate, whether he would or not, he could not prevent his choice from meaning something different to what it meant in Bach's time. Not that Johann Sebastian himself was a vanguard or fashionable composer. On the contrary. He was certainly somewhat out of touch with latest developments. But he did not try to write like Lassus or Palestrina.

I cannot write fugues in any case; but I am not sure that, if I could, I would not be swayed by the consideration summed up in the Latin proverb 'si duo faciunt idem, non est idem'. In other words I would find it a problem how far to 'give in to the times'.

It is this logic of the situation that makes artists and critics so susceptible to the historicist's message. If the past cannot be retrieved, why not enjoy the drift to the future? The Hegelian theories they like to appeal to are, from this point of view, little more than what psychoanalysts call rationalizations. They provide a grand excuse for what Quintilian did with a shrug of his shoulders. They neither have his wisdom nor his humility to use his argument; for to 'make concessions' is the worst sin in their code, 'to be committed or engaged' the greatest virtue.

It is here, I think, that the nonhistoricist could help to break the deadlock by pointing out that life consists in making concessions and that situations in art may occasionally exact them, not, indeed, as virtues but neither as terrible vices.

All artists must be opportunists if we mean by 'opportunism' the desire to be liked, to be heard and considered, especially by their friends and their friends' friends. It is in this way that the polarization of opinion will generally react on the artist who is reluctant for his work to appear in a garb that will 'put off' his friends. The difference here between the genuine artist and the mere time-server is not, therefore, that the one forges ahead regardless of anyone, while the other wants to please the right people. It is that for the

real artist concessions will be mainly matters of avoidance. He will instinctively turn away from methods or styles that have come to sound hackneyed or unpromising; but he will leave all these considerations aside once he has found his problem and has started to wrestle with his material. In other words, the real artist will obviously do his best in a situation in which the plasticity of taste and the corruptibility of his medium will have deprived him of any firm standards except those provided by his artistic conscience. He will neither eat out his heart in nostalgia, nor set his sights on a future which may never come, but will use the material at hand. As a painter who was himself critical of abstract painting and had succumbed once said to me—one must go where the fighting is! Rationalization or not, it is hard to see how this reaction can be wholly avoided in the situation in which artists find themselves. Even after the hoped-for demise of historicist creeds the whirligig of fashion will turn on Vanity Fair. It lies in the logic of the situation, as I have tried to show, that those arts which are no longer anchored in practical functions will be most easily drawn into this giddy movement. This is one of the unintended consequences of that emancipation from utilitarian ties for which so many great artists strove. No wonder artists today tend not only to be historicists but also romantics longing for a return to the shelter of a closed society, past or future. But if that is the choice, the fair is preferable to the barrack square.

The results to which I have come in this paper are a little distasteful to my own inclinations and prejudices. I certainly would not want them to provide ammunition for those who talk of the 'inevitability' of any particular development in modern art, nor would I want to cheer the trimmers and opportunists on their way to success. I would therefore not have ventured to draw such dangerous conclusions from the flimsy premises of Vanity Fair if I did not hope that they may provoke Sir Karl Popper to a critical reaction that will restore the independence of art from social pressures and vindicate the objectivity of its values.[51]

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