Manès Sperber

THE PUBLIC AND ITS SOUL[1]

No research in the field of aesthetics can avoid the question of the value which every work of art poses as urgently as does every living thing: its *raison d'être*. Traditional aesthetics conceived only an absolute value. That is why it attempted to establish absolute, *eternal* criteria. More modest, the psychologist of the creative person, the philosopher of creativity and the historian of civilizations tend to acknowledge a value which is of relative importance only. Certain works suggest new criteria and survive them. Others, which conform to established criteria, frequently die with them. A work which does not beget, sooner or later, its own public and the sensitivity which recognizes itself in it, would consequently be ephemeral.

The commercial value of an artistic production is determined by the intensity and the duration of the satisfaction that it procures for a sufficiently widespread need. The relation between supply and demand also regulates the market for that curious species of merchandise which paintings, books, songs, etc., represent—but not definitively. The creative work is quite often devoid of "exchange value" because it scarcely encounters a demand before it has stimulated one. It is sought only after it has been found, sometimes a long time after the death of the artist.

Translated by Elaine P. Halperin.

1. Manès Sperber's article parallels his works on the place and function of literature and the arts in contemporary civilization, and contributes to the discussion on mass culture which was begun in Nos. 3 and 5 of *Diogenes* by Dwight Macdonald and D. W. Brogan, and which the editors of this review propose to develop further.

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But an unacknowledged or unknown value is a social absurdity comparable to a wind that does not blow. Solitude itself has no meaning outside of social relationships: if the hermit's retreat is to have any significance, it must be defined by the proximity of the organized communities that he abandons. In the domain of what is known as practical life, the experience of habit provides criteria of evaluation, but in ethics as in aesthetics, the value, when it springs from solitude, is a social phenomenon. Unrecognized, it remains a secret of which nobody is aware and which nobody tries to uncover. The *accursed* artist, whether painter or poet, is unthinkable during a period when art represents society as it wishes to appear, thus lending to the myths of greatness or of piety the semblance of reality. Art becomes a curse when it separates itself from society and opposes it and wishes only to express its own greatness: when it chooses no longer to be a means to anything and wants to be an end in itself.

Now in its beginnings art produces the means which a community utilizes to express the communion of the group in its relations with those magical forces that must either be appeased or seduced; the means necessary to evoke unifying enthusiasm and to fortify courage in the face of danger; to attest loyalty to the past; to exalt gerontocracy; to discover the secrets of mysteries; and finally to protect taboos. Art precedes the artist. Of the latter one demands not originality—that would be sacrilegious—but absolute fidelity in the expression of meanings specified in advance. The ceremonial masks, the ritual dance steps, the words of incantation, the war and hunting songs have to be not beautiful but efficacious; they must correspond, without the slightest variation, to the specifications handed down by oral tradition. One can readily understand why a society that has not developed writing should be particularly rigid in its concept of form: its conscience is nourished by the memory of its elders who insure their own preponderance by seeing to it that the present exactly resembles the past, which they alone can recall. The dogmatization of all forms, each of which is transformed into a symbol, is a necessity in the gerontocracy of primitive peoples. The same is true of the dogmatization of rites in every religion that is organized as a triumphant Church. The symbol, a condensed content, consummates, so to speak, the form. The latter by itself ceases to have meaning except when sanctified by the ceremony that it recalls or suggests more often than it expresses. Primitive peoples therefore look upon their works of art in the same way that the modern oneirocritic takes note of dreams. He knows that each of the elements of which the oneiric tale is composed is nothing by itself, but that it indicates the

presence of a condensed content which the associations to a dream will perhaps reveal.

The transition from the geronto-sorcerer to the artisan-artist doubtless occurs as a result of the division of labor. It is inevitable at a higher level of production, as well as after wars and invasions, following the collision of dogmatized forms which seem mutually exclusive and which must be reconciled. (When the victorious invaders did not exterminate the natives they imposed their laws upon them, but they had to permit the forms of the vanquished to mingle with their own.) Under such circumstances the artisan-artist had to combine elements that were often contradictory, and to "syncretize" rival forms and competing myths. In order to develop a new formal unity out of this diversity, the artist obtained, doubtless tacitly, a relative freedom to create, but not the right to invoke it. He was to think of himself not as the author of the message, but as the messenger or executor of orders from above.

Today, far more clearly than two thousand years ago, we can discern the work of syncretization and of editing that has wrought the Pentateuch or the songs of Homer. We can perceive the conquering gods that joined forces in it, the myths of diverse origins which were reconciled in it. But we will never know the name of the man who first intoned the song of Deborah and we will probably never know the specific role of Homer (or of the two Homers) in the epics which have immortalized him.

Even in a period much closer to us, in a civilization of striking maturity—at the height of the fifth century in Athens—a work like the Athena Parthenos was doubtless at first a divine presence, and, in the eyes of a select minority only, the creation of an artist. Moreover, we know the serious difficulties that Phidias encountered as a consequence of his attempt to leave an imprint of his presence: he was not forgiven for having sculptured his own effigy and that of Pericles on the escutcheon of a goddess. It is likewise improbable that the faithful, gazing at the cathedrals of the Middle Ages, or later, looking at church frescoes, even for an instant would have asked themselves questions on aesthetics or felt the need to know the names of the men whose works never ceased to nourish the ardor of their faith. They sought not to judge a picture but to forget that it was a representation, to discover in it the beings themselves that were portrayed. They were seeking neither art nor beauty but divine efficacy.

Doubtless this public (social and religious) characteristic, which for millennia was peculiar to the plastic arts, explains neither Phidias' genius nor, for example, the absence of artistic talent in Socrates, who, at that same

period, was probably helping his father to produce the Saint-Sulpician statues that line the road to Piraeus. Nor does social aesthetics explain the genius that Aeschylus and Sophocles employed to transform well-known tales into tragedies. But the social circumstances which constrained Phidias to efface himself as over against his works so that once out of his hands they might become sacral, were the same that determined the choice of content and form which the tragedians gave to their theatre. (It is possible that they also wrote plays that did not correspond to the dictates of the times. This must certainly have been true of Euripides.)

Until a short time ago, literature continued to be for everyone except the author himself and a small elite, an acoustical phenomenon. People listened to it but did not read it. A century ago the percentage of illiterates in Great Britain was 32 among men and 48.9 among women. It is assumed that today 40% of the world's population (over ten years of age) know how to read and write. This is doubtless optimistic if one requires of the reader more than the mere ability to identify the letters and painfully build words with them. The reading of a book always represents an unaccustomed effort for the majority of those who, according to the statistics, are not illiterate. The poet-singer and the professional story-teller have been replaced not by books but by the movies, radio, and newspapers. Written words have less appeal than pictures (comic strips, illustrations) and spoken words, which are available even to those who refuse to make any effort. After all, the musician writes his notes for specialists; his music exists for the public only when it is played—therefore in sound. Literature, the art of words, is first song, a composition of groups of rhythmic words, and later theatrical spectacle. It is an art that exists for the consumer solely in public. For a very long time the solitude of the reader alone with a book was the experience of a privileged few.

Homer sang for a public; Sophocles wrote for it. But what about Thucydides? We know why the exile makes himself the historian of a war that he waged as a military leader on the side of his compatriots before looking at it as a man flung into no-man's land, on the side of enemies. But for whom does he write it? For those who, in any case, will be unable to hear his voice because they are still unborn. Death, probably a violent one, prevented him from completing his extraordinary enterprise. Otherwise he might perhaps have revealed more clearly which of the lessons he bequeathed to future generations contained the author's vindication. Since he addressed himself to the future, his text differs from the writings of his contemporaries: he does not wish to be spoken, but *seen*, read. In this sense he

is the first truly modern writer: one solitude that addresses itself to another, unknown and as yet non-existent.

The author who addresses himself to unknown readers is a recent phenomenon and a frequent one since the invention of the printing press. Like the sculptor and the painter who knew in advance the destination of their works, the writer formerly knew for whom he was carrying on a monologue. This is why rhetoric remains invincible until the time when the anonymous reader begins to replace the listeners, when the writer writes only for those who isolate themselves in order to encounter his work.

Nietzsche's dedication, "For everybody and for nobody," characterizes rather well the simultaneity of the two contradictory tendencies. When the artist no longer creates for a specific public which he knows and whose tastes and needs he wishes to satisfy, he conceives of a universal but nonexistent public. The artist therefore works for himself, for himself alone. The abstract art of today, the most subjective ever known, is created for exhibits; it is addressed to everyone without exception and to no one in particular—just like the billboards on our streets.

Cervantes, we are told, recounted the adventures of Don Quixote to his prison companions in order to get his daily soup. But he also showed a knowledge of his readers when he later published his novel; he knew what had made them ready to welcome his gigantic pastiche. Although Rembrandt objected to the bourgeois residents of Amsterdam whom he portrayed in *The Armed Watch,* he nonetheless for a long time regarded them as his public, in other words, his patrons. Lesage wrote stories that people recounted everywhere; they read him in order to have something to talk about. At that time prose fiction gradually took the place of Mother Goose stories, of magical or hagiographical fables; it transformed their heroes without depriving them of their archetypical characteristics and without freeing them from the yoke of fate. This fiction, as successful today as in its beginnings, moves along with the times: it recounts the same conflicts but adapts them to contemporary experience and expresses them in current terms. As a result of a personal, family, or general misfortune, or because of his blindness, the hero is removed from his surroundings, cast out into the unknown, and exposed to either an indifferent or a hostile world. Whether or not this is what he sought, his life becomes one long adventure, consisting of unpredictable discoveries, terrifying or providential encounters, good and evil fortune. The anguish and the immoderate hopes that inspired tales of folklore spring up again in modern fiction and produce affective echoes in a public which the movies have enlarged im-

mensely. This is a literature of oneiric realism. It insinuates itself easily into the unconscious of spectators as well as of readers by catering to longings and desires they dare not avow. Whatever is new in this process attracts, but in order not to disappoint, the same content must reappear each time. Only secondary variations are welcome. In our day the male orphan is changed into a girl who lives in a more picturesque era than our own, in the midst of photogenic cataclysms from which the heroine extricates herself thanks to her overpowering beauty and her forceful wiles.

What the reader expects from this literature is that it enable him to participate in something extraordinary whose authenticity it must, at all times, guarantee: that it offer stories that "are not stories but true accounts of things that really happened." The writer presents himself not as the author but as a transmitting agent. He asserts that his imagination never once intervenes—imagination is only a lie. Usually the reader either does not know the author's name or forgets it quickly and recalls only the title of his book, which he will not remember for long. He will ask the bookseller or the librarian for a "similar story." Again, the movie-goer does not know the name of the director or of the producer. His choice is determined by his desire to see a "similar movie," or certain actors and actresses who always represent the same characters in the same situations. He does not have to make an effort to guess the identification of the hero; after he has seen one or two of these pictures he immediately knows who the hero is. This identification rather resembles a conditioned reflex.

The hunger for something new seems to be the common characteristic of all publics, readers of news items as well as spectators. One can see in it an expression of natural curiosity which, like satiated hunger, reawakens periodically and demands renewed gratification. Renewed, but not new, because these people, although hungry for something new, manifest a phobia against the unfamiliar as soon as it is shown to them. They tolerate in the unfamiliar only little surprises which a new manner of presentation offers them, but not at all the affective content. The story of a crime, love that goes wrong but is finally victorious, an extraordinary exploit in the midst of mortal danger, the sensational billings in a circus, a languorous song—all this attracts them irresistibly, but only if it is adapted to patterns to which they are accustomed. They eat, one might say, only the predigested. For centuries it was necessary to keep the same names for the principal characters of a farce that had made audiences laugh. A change of name or of costume might have been disturbing. The unaccustomed aroused in them a feeling of frustration. The great authors of comedy had

to be very cunning to smuggle their originality in: they preserved the canvas and the characteristic protagonists of traditional farce.

Boccaccio, Cervantes, Swift, Defoe, Dickens, and Mark Twain are the great writers of modern times whose masterpieces have remained the favorites of the larger public everywhere in the world. They created prototypes of which innumerable versions have since reappeared yearly. The authors of these new versions are scarcely aware of this imitation (*épigonisme*) because what they describe doubtless corresponds all too frequently to their own dreams (as well as—a fortunate coincidence—to the demands of the market). Not the industrial revolution nor political upheaval, nor two world wars—nothing has altered the public's taste or its dreams. The crystallized prototypes and the glowing destinies in the works of the great writers continue to entrance a public that is Sancho Panza himself: it knows all there is to know about Don Quixote and yet never hesitates to take off again and again with the errant knight on new adventures that are essentially always the same.

Zola, Gorki and Upton Sinclair wrested a part of this popular public from its dreams and immunized it against the seduction of escapism. The proletarian in their novels was not an isolated hero nor a converted Don Quixote, nor a seduced Sancho Panza, but a creature who represented a mass composed of people like himself. *Germinal, La Mère*, and *Jimmy Higgins* are typical books in which a new, non-literary reader sought awareness, the reasons for his social being, the courage to struggle in the midst of an exalted solidarity.

He found in them "real life," his own misery, the usual happenings of ordinary life rather than unusual individual adventures—he discovered himself, as his own experience showed him to be.

This fiction which stemmed from the factual reporting of news and which purported to be a historical novel of the present, shaped the reader's manner of seeing and thinking; for half a century it has exerted upon innumerable readers a far deeper political influence than tracts aimed at indoctrination and propaganda. Moreover, it determined the nature of most of the war stories written after 1918, along with the procession of writers who, in Russia and elsewhere, had between 1918 and 1934 treated as revolutionary the theme of the *Pilgrim's Progress*. This trend seemed to give promise of a great future. Nothing came of it. Soviet literature was systematically destroyed by the servitude that was imposed upon it in the name of a false aesthetics commonly called "socialist realism." Communist literature everywhere else followed its example. Furthermore, populism

seems to draw away from the proletarian reader. The new public which was formed at the beginning of the century has not been regenerated; the stories and movies that satisfy the oneiric need once again engage their enthusiasm.

The heroes of fiction in the middle of our century are great criminals, shrewd politicians, the technological scientists of "science-fiction" and, more than all these, women, orphans of the storm of our times. It is noteworthy that the champions whose exploits and private lives seem to impassion the masses lose all their *charisma* when they are transposed into literature or the cinema. And despite the adulation that this century until now has bestowed upon "men of destiny"—the Hitlers, Mussolinis and Stalins—these "idols" do not inspire any following in fiction. In these years of "planetary wars" and world victories, the public does not rely on the assurance that the dream of success is a reasonable one, except in the case of women's destinies: of Theodora, Katherina, Scarlett, Amber, Caroline, Désirée and so many others. Goddesses, singularly resembling the mediocre stars of technicolor CinemaScope, mount, invincible, to the empty heavens.

No, this is not a question of the phenomenon that Malraux characterizes as *metamorphosis*, a dialectical phenomenon thanks to which the permanence of art asserts itself. Social aesthetics, examining the arts from the point of view of the consumer, not of the creative person, discovers that during the millennia of which we have some knowledge, taste has sometimes changed, but only for what is, in the narrowest sense of the word, the form of expression—for the *jargon* and not for the content. Surely it would be a mistake to underestimate the importance of such a change and to neglect its relation to social changes, infra- or supra-structural, to use a Marxist term. There is doubtless a difference between a Catholic propaganda novel and an orthodox Communist one: the principles of selection used by the sincere falsifiers of reality are philosophically the opposite of each other. The ideal reader of the one as of the other—his mental age is not twelve but thirteen years—finds in it evil personified: the sinner (doer of sacrilege) or the counter-revolutionary (the saboteur, the wanton viper), and goodness become man: the practicing, virtuous believer, the Party member, the dedicated revolutionary. The Manichean duel is the content of all this fiction; and the public, knowing in advance the outcome, awaits it none the less expectantly each time, seeking enjoyment and bolstering of faith. (Think of the repetitive dream that accompanies the youthful years—the

stereotype of the scenario does not, in this case either, diminish in any way the tension of expectancy.)

In the modern mystery story and in the tales of great adventure moral Manicheanism seems in a way weakened—the goodness of the good people and the triumph of virtue less clear than before. The reader nowadays concedes that in desperate situations innocence should be capable of resorting to wiles which were formerly the appanage of the wicked. The latter remain a threat at all times. Yet one wants innocence to be more the persecutor than the persecuted, to act in "preventive, legitimate self-defense." The public's willingness to acknowledge virtue's right to be as violent and as brutal as the wicked is not explicable solely by the propaganda which, during wars, glorifies killing, but also by a growing impatience with the slow unfolding of the epic. Here, the influence of the movies and television is probably greater than that of the newspapers and radio: sixty or, at the most, one hundred minutes are enough to make the spectator a direct witness of a drama which unfolds with great speed and whose end and climax very often coincide. A public educated on movies has less and less patience with the epic and finds it hard to excuse the *anticlimax* which a true novel is never able to avoid entirely. Due to its special violence—a continuous explosion of time immeasurably condensed—screen fiction is in greater harmony with the oneiric essence than any other presentation of imagined reality. In the movies humanity finally encounters what it has always been seeking in legends, myths, épopées, in the theatre, and in traditional epic poems: the possibility of participating in the life of others by identifying with that life, of vicariously experiencing adventures and suffering, and finally, of surviving multiple death. The magic of movies in technicolor proves that the public was right in demanding that true fiction be real fiction: that it present the past ("the stories") not as a memory but as the incarnation of the present. The sex appeal of the movie star who plays the part of Cleopatra convinces the spectator, in seducing him, that this Egyptian queen really existed and that she seduced great men. Fiction that is merely true can only succeed in "deceiving," whereas real fiction first seduces. And of all victims those of seduction are the only ones who feel victorious.

There is a rumor that literature is dying, that the novel is already dead. Nothing of the kind is true. Doubtless, a certain kind of fiction is losing its public because the latter is absorbing it only in the form of a screen dramatization. Consequently, what is happening is a displacement, not a disap-

pearance. *Joint consumption*, a social phenomenon of great importance, becomes once again the customary manner in which the public encounters fiction. (Television does not impede this evolution, it merely adds a variation: the fact that people watch it separately does not prevent joint consumption—a same date, a same time is given to everybody.) The result is that a growing number of novels are written and published for the sole purpose of possible screen adaptation.

We are not discussing here true literature. Its readers are relatively and absolutely more numerous than ever. For the past one hundred years, however, its social function has been as poorly defined as that of the plastic arts. The dramatic poems of Sophocles, of Shakespeare, of Racine and Schiller, the comedies of Aristophanes, Molière, and Goldoni, the novels of Cervantes, Richardson, Fielding, Jane Austen, Thackeray, Scott, Dickens, Balzac, and Dumas, all are addressed to a public that one might say is an established one. But the novels of Benjamin Constant, of Stendhal, Dostoevski, Joyce, Proust, and Kafka are destined for the special reader who seeks in fiction not adventure but the meeting of consciences, not the dream but the awakening. It is a literature that utilizes fiction as a moralist does the fable and a sinner the parable. In the midst of a civilization of gigantic agglomerations and of masses organized into an immense public whose taste grows more and more imperious, this literature which challenges everything is merely a statement of man's solitude. Since, generally speaking, it serves neither a religion nor a cause, it must claim to be everything itself: a religion without a God, a cause without a purpose, therefore an end in itself. This claim is rarely expressed and often denied (by Dostoevski among others), but it does not alter the alternative: such a literature is, from the point of view of a social aesthetics, either a secular Gospel without a message of hope, or nothing. The vogue of private diaries, of collections of letters, and the mania for monographs reveal the tendency of artists to establish themselves as the unique elite of a society whose hierarchy seems to be permanently weakened.

Let us imagine a Phidias returned to wreak his revenge: he would either disown or destroy Athena Parthenos and would preserve only his self-portrait sculptured on the escutcheon. The photograph of the effigy, immeasurably enlarged, would give us the face of a man who had known how to create gods.

Whether God is dead or not, the public—which is to say, almost everyone—needs gods for the cultivation of its soul. The study of these needs and of this care of the soul is one of the primary tasks of a social aesthetics.