

VII

Music Discomposed

I

It is a widespread opinion that aesthetics, as we think of it, became a subject, and acquired its name, just over two hundred years ago; which would make it the youngest of the principal branches of philosophy. Nothing further seems to be agreed about it, not even whether it is one subject, nor if so, what it should include, nor whether it has the right name, nor what the name should be taken to mean, nor whether given its problems, philosophers are particularly suited to venture them. Various reasons for these doubts suggest themselves: (1) The problems of composers, painters, poets, novelists, sculptors, architects . . . are internal to the procedures of each, and nothing general enough to apply to all could be of interest to any. One cannot, I think, or ought not, miss the truth of that claim, even while one feels that its truth needs correct placement. There *are* people recognizable as artists, and all produce works which we acknowledge, in some sense, to call for and warrant certain kinds of experience. (2) There is an established activity and a recognizable class of persons whose established task it is to discuss the arts, namely the criticism and the critics of literature, painting, music. . . . This fact faces two ways: One way, it suggests that there *is* something importantly common to the arts, namely, that they all require, or tolerate, such an activity; and that itself may incite philosophical reflection. Another way, it suggests that only someone competent as a critic of art is competent to speak of art at all, at least from the point of

view of the experience which goes into it or which is to be found in it, so that an aesthetician incapable of producing criticism is simply incapable of recognizing and relevantly describing the objects of his discourse. (3) It is not clear what the data of the subject shall be. The enterprise of epistemologists, however paradoxical its conclusions have been, begins and continues with examples and procedures common to all men; and moral philosophers of every taste agree in appealing to the experience, the concepts, and the conflicts all men share. But upon what, or whom, does the aesthetician focus? On the artist? On the work he produces? On what the artist says about his work? On what critics say about it? On the audience it acquires?

One familiar resolution of these questions has been to commend the artist's remarks, and his audience's responses, to the attention of psychologists or sociologists, confining philosophy's attention to "the object itself." The plausibility of this resolution has strong sources. There is the distinction established in the philosophy of science according to which the philosopher's concern is confined to the "context of justification" of a theory, its "context of discovery" yielding, at best, to history and psychology. There is the decisive accomplishment, in literary criticism, of the New Critics, whose formalist program called for, and depended upon, minute attention concentrated on the poem itself. There is, finally, the realization on the part of anyone who knows what art is that many of the responses directed to works of art are irrelevant to them as art and that the artist's intention is *always* irrelevant—it no more counts toward the success or failure of a work of art that the artist intended something other than is *there*, than it counts, when the referee is counting over a boxer, that the boxer had intended to duck.

I cannot accept such a resolution, for three main sorts of reasons: (1) The fact that the criticism of art may, and even must, be formal (in the sense suggested) implies nothing whatever about what the content of aesthetics may or must be. Kant's aesthetics is, I take it, supposed to be formal, but that does not deter Kant from introducing intention (anyway, "purposiveness") and a certain kind of response ("disinterested pleasure") in determining the grounds on which anything is to count as art. And such books as *The Birth of Tragedy* and *What Is Art?* rely fundamentally on characterizing the experience of the artist and of his audience, and I am more sure that Nietzsche (for all his reputedly unsound philology) and Tolstoy (for all his late

craziness) know what art is than I know what philosophy or psychology are, or ought to be. (2) The denial of the relevance of the artist's intention is likely not to record the simple, fundamental fact that what an artist meant cannot alter what he has or has not accomplished, but to imply a philosophical *theory* according to which the artist's intention is something in his mind while the work of art is something out of his mind, and so the closest connection there could be between them is one of causation, about which, to be sure, only a psychologist or biographer could care. But I am far less sure that any such philosophical theory is correct than I am that when I experience a work of art I feel that I am *meant* to notice one thing and not another, that the placement of a note or rhyme or line has a *purpose*, and that certain works are perfectly realized, or contrived, or meretricious. . . . (3) Nothing could be commoner among critics of art than to ask *why* the thing is as it is, and characteristically to put this question, for example, in the form "Why does Shakespeare follow the murder of Duncan with a scene which begins with the sound of knocking?", or "Why does Beethoven put in a bar of rest in the last line of the fourth Bagatelle (Op. 126)?" The best critic is the one who knows best where to ask this question, and how to get an answer; but surely he doesn't feel it necessary, or desirable even were it possible, to get in touch with the artist to find out the answer. The philosopher may, because of his theory, explain that such questions are misleadingly phrased, and that they really refer to the object itself, not to Shakespeare or Beethoven. But who is misled, and about what? An alternative procedure, and I think sounder, would be to accept the critic's question as perfectly appropriate—as, so to speak, a philosophical datum—and then to look for a philosophical explanation which can accommodate that fact. Of course, not just *any* critic's response can be so taken. And this suggests a further methodological principle in philosophizing about art. It seems obvious enough that in setting out to speak about the arts one begins with a rough canon of the objects to be spoken about. It seems to me equally necessary, in appealing to the criticism of art for philosophical data, that one begin with a rough canon of criticism which is not then repudiated in the philosophy to follow.

Confusion prescribes caution, even if the confusion is private and of one's own making. Accordingly, I restrict my discussion here primarily to one art, music; and within that art primarily to one

period, since the second World War; and within that period to some characteristic remarks made by theorists of music about the *avant garde* composers who regard themselves as the natural successors to the work of Schoenberg's greatest pupil, Anton Webern. Though narrow in resource, however, my motives will seem extremely pretentious, because I am going to raise a number of large questions about art and philosophy and ways they bear on one another. Let me therefore say plainly that I do not suppose myself to have *shown* anything at all; that what I set down I mean merely as suggestions; and that I am often not sure that they are philosophically relevant. They are the result, at best, of a clash between what I felt missing in the philosophical procedures I have some confidence in, and what I feel present and significant in some recent art.

II

I believe it is true to say that modernist art—roughly, the art of one's own generation—has not become a problem for the philosophy contemporary with it (in England and America anyway); and perhaps that is typical of the aesthetics of any period. I do not wish to insist upon a particular significance in that fact, but I am inclined to believe that there is decisive significance in it. For example, it mars the picture according to which aesthetics stands to art or to criticism as the philosophy of, say, physics stands to physics; for no one, I take it, could claim competence at the philosophy of physics who was not immediately concerned with the physics current in his time. One may reply that this is merely a function of the differences between science and art—the one progressing, outmoding, or summarizing its past, the other not. I would not find that reply very satisfactory, for two related reasons: (1) It obscures more than it reveals. It is not clear what it is about science which allows it to “progress” or, put another way, what it is which is called “progress” in science (for example, it does not progress evenly);¹ moreover, the succession of styles of art, though doubtless it will not simply constitute progress, nevertheless seems not to be mere succession either. Art critics and historians (not to mention artists) will often say that the art of one generation has

¹ See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

"solved a problem" inherited from its parent generation; and it seems right to say that there is progress during *certain* stretches of art and with respect to certain developments within them (say the developments leading up to the establishment of sonata form, or to the control of perspective, or to the novel of the nineteenth century). Moreover, the succession of art styles is *irreversible*, which may be as important a component of the concept of progress as the component of superiority. And a new style not merely replaces an older one, it may change the significance of any earlier style; I do not think this is merely a matter of changing taste but a matter also of changing the *look*, as it were, of past art, changing the ways it can be described, outmoding some, bringing some to new light—one may even want to say, it can change what the past *is*, however against the grain that sounds. A generation or so ago, "Debussy" referred to music of a certain ethereal mood, satisfying a taste for refined sweetness or poignance; today it refers to solutions for avoiding tonality: I find I waver between thinking of that as a word altering its meaning and thinking of it as referring to an altered object. (2) Critics, on whom the philosopher may rely for his data, *are* typically concerned with the art of their time, and what they find it relevant to say about the art of any period will be molded by that concern. If I do not share those concerns, do I understand what the critic means? Virtually every writer I have read on the subject of non-tonal music will at some point, whether he likes it or not, compare this music explicitly with tonal music; a critic like Georg Lukacs will begin a book by comparing (unfavorably) Bourgeois Modernism with the Bourgeois Realism of the nineteenth century; Clement Greenberg will write, "From Giotto to Courbet, the painter's first task had been to hollow out an illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat surface. . . . This spatial illusion or rather the sense of it, is what we may miss [in Modernism] even more than we do the images that used to fill it." Now, do I understand these comparisons if I do not share their experience of the modern? I do not mean merely that I shall not then understand what they say about modern art; I mean that I shall not then understand what they see in traditional art: I feel I am *missing* something about art altogether, something, moreover, which an earlier critic could not give me.

III

The writing I have begun studying, and upon which I base my observations, occurs largely in two sets of professional periodicals: *Die Reihe*, whose first issue appeared in 1955; and *Perspectives of New Music*, starting in 1962.² Both were created in direct response to "the general problems relating to the composition of music in our time," as the prefatory note to *Die Reihe*'s first number puts it. Opening these periodicals, and allowing time to adapt to the cross-glare of new terms, symbols invented for the occasion, graphs, charts, some equations . . . several general characteristics begin to emerge as fairly common to their contents. There is, first, an obsession with *new-ness* itself, every other article taking some position about whether the novelty of the new music is radical, or less than it seems, whether it is aberrant or irreversible, whether it is the end of music as an art, or a reconception which will bring it new life. None, that I recall, raises the issue as a problem to be investigated, but as the cause of hope or despair or fury or elation. It is characteristic to find, in one and the same article, analyses of the most intimidating technicality and arcane apparatus, combined or ended with a mild or protracted cough of philosophy (e.g., "The new music aspires to Being, not to Becoming"). If criticism has as its impulse and excuse the opening of access between the artist and his audience, giving voice to the legitimate claims of both, then there is small criticism in these pages—although there is a continuous reference to the *fact* that artist and audience are out of touch, and a frequent willingness to assign blame to one or the other of them. One is reminded that while the history of literary criticism is a part of the history of literature, and while the history of visual art is written by theorists and connoisseurs of art for whom an effort at accurate phenomenology can be as natural as the deciphering of iconography, histories of music contain virtually no criticism or assessment of their objects, but concentrate on details of its notation or its instruments or the occasions of its performance. The serious attempt to articulate a *response* to a piece of music, where more than reverie, has characteristically stimulated mathe-

² *Die Reihe*, Theodore Presser Co., Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, in association with Universal Edition. *Perspectives of New Music*, Princeton University Press.

matics or metaphysics—as though music has never quite become one of the facts of life, but shunts between an overwhelming directness and an overweening mystery. Is this because music, as we know it, is the newest of the great arts and just has not had the time to learn how to criticize itself; or because it inherently resists verbal transcriptions? (Both have been said, as both are said in accounting for the lack of a canon of criticism about the cinema.) Whatever the cause, the absence of humane music criticism (of course there are isolated instances) seems particularly striking against the fact that music has, among the arts, the most, perhaps the only, systematic and precise vocabulary for the description and analysis of its objects. Somehow that possession must itself be a liability; as though one now undertook to criticize a poem or novel armed with complete control of medieval rhetoric but ignorant of the modes of criticism developed in the past two centuries.

A final general fact about the writing in these periodicals is its concentration on the composer and his problems; a great many of the articles are produced by composers themselves, sometimes directly about, sometimes indirectly, their own music. Professor Paul Oskar Kristeller, in his review of the writing about the arts produced from Plato to Kant, notices in his final reflections that such writing has typically proceeded, and its categories and style thereby formed, from the spectator's or amateur's point of view.³ Does the presence of these new journals of music indicate that the artist is, some place, finally getting the attention he deserves? But one can scarcely imagine a serious journal contributed to by major poets, novelists, or painters devoted to the problems of the making of poems and novels and paintings, nor that any such artist would find it useful if somehow it appeared. It might even be regarded by them as unseemly to wash these problems in public, and at best it distracts from the job of getting on with real work. Magazines are for interviews or for publishing one's work and having others write about it. Why is it not regarded as unseemly or distracting by composers? Perhaps it is. Then what necessity overrides a more usual artistic reticence? Perhaps it is an awareness that the problems composers face now are no longer merely private but are the problems of their art in general, "the general problems relating to the composition of music in our time."

³ "The Modern System of the Arts," reprinted in *Renaissance Thought II* (New York, 1965), p. 225.

(This is likely to seem at once unmentionably obvious to composers and unintelligible to spectators, which is itself perhaps a measure of the problems of composition in our time.) This further suggests, as in the case of ordinary learned journals, the emergence of a new universal style or mode of procedure, implying an unparalleled dispersal of those who must inescapably be affected by one another's work. Painting still grows, as it always has, in particular cities; apprenticeship and imitation are still parts of its daily life. Writers do not share the severe burden of modernism which serious musicians and painters and sculptors have recognized for generations: a writer can still work with the words we all share, more or less, and have to share; he still, therefore, has an audience with the chance of responding to the way *he* can share the words more than more or less. My impression is that serious composers have, and feel they have, all but lost their audience, and that the essential reason for this (apart, for example, from the economics and politics of getting performances) has to do with crises in the internal, and apparently irreversible, developments within their own artistic procedures. This is what I meant by "the burden of modernism": the procedures and problems it now seems necessary to composers to employ and confront to make a work of art at all *themselves* insure that their work will not be comprehensible to an audience.

This comes closer to registering the dissonant and unresolved emotion in the pages to which I refer. They are prompted by efforts to communicate with an audience lost, and to compose an artistic community in disarray—efforts which only the art itself can accomplish. So the very existence of such periodicals suggests that they cannot succeed.

But here a difference of animus in these two periodicals becomes essential. *Die Reihe* began first, with an issue on electronic music, and its general tone is one of self-congratulation and eagerness for the future, whether it contains art and composers and performers or not. *Perspectives* began publication seven years later (and lean years or fat, seven years in our period may contain an artistic generation); and for a variety of reasons its tone is different. It is committed to much of the same music, shares some of the same writers, but the American publication is quite old world in its frequent concern with tradition and the artist and the performer, and in its absence of belief that progress is assured by having *more* sounds and rhythms,

etc., available for exploitation. Whatever the exact pattern of rancors and rites in these pages, the sense of conflict is unmistakable, and the air is of men fighting for their artistic lives. Perhaps, then, their theories and analyses are not addressed to an audience of spectators, but as has been suggested about their music itself, to one another. The communications often include artistic manifestos, with declarations of freedom and promises for the future. But unlike other manifestos, they are not meant to be personal; they do not take a position against an establishment, for they represent the establishment; a young composer, therefore, seems confronted not by one or another group of artists but by one or another official philosophy, and his artistic future may therefore seem to depend not on finding his own conviction but on choosing the right doctrine. Sometimes they sound like the dispassionate analyses and reports assembled in professional scientific and academic journals. But unlike those journals they are not organs of professional societies with fairly clear requirements for membership and universally shared criteria for establishing competence, even eminence, within them. One comes to realize that these professionals themselves do not quite know who is and who is not rightly included among their peers, whose work counts and whose does not. No wonder then, that we outsiders do not know. And one result clearly communicated by these periodicals is that there is no obvious way to find out.

What they suggest is that the possibility of fraudulence, and the experience of fraudulence, is endemic in the experience of contemporary music; that its full impact, even its immediate relevance, depends upon a willingness to trust the object, knowing that the time spent with its difficulties may be betrayed. I do not see how anyone who has experienced modern art can have avoided such experiences, and not just in the case of music. Is Pop Art art? Are canvases with a few stripes or chevrons on them art? Are the novels of Raymond Roussel or Alain Robbe-Grillet? Are art movies? A familiar answer is that time will tell. But my question is: *What* will time tell? That certain departures in art-like pursuits have become established (among certain audiences, in textbooks, on walls, in college courses); that *someone* is treating them with the respect due, we feel, to art; that one no longer has the right to question their status? But in waiting for time to tell that, we miss what the present tells—that the dangers of fraudulence, and of trust, are essential

to the experience of art. If anything in this paper should count as a thesis, that is my thesis. And it is meant quite generally. Contemporary music is only the clearest case of something common to modernism as a whole, and modernism only makes explicit and bare what has always been true of art. (That is almost a definition of modernism, not to say its purpose.) Aesthetics has so far been the aesthetics of the classics, which is as if we investigated the problem of other minds by using as examples our experience of *great men* or *dead men*. In emphasizing the experiences of fraudulence and trust as essential to the experience of art, I am in effect claiming that the answer to the question "What is art?" will in part be an answer which explains why it is we treat certain objects, or how we *can* treat certain objects, in ways normally reserved for treating persons.

Both Tolstoy's *What Is Art?* and Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* begin from an experience of the fraudulence of the art of their time. However obscure Nietzsche's invocation of Apollo and Dionysus and however simplistic Tolstoy's appeal to the artist's sincerity and the audience's "infection," their use of these concepts is to specify the genuine in art in opposition to specific modes of fraudulence, and their meaning is a function of that opposition. Moreover, they agree closely on what those modes of fraudulence are: in particular, a debased Naturalism's heaping up of random realistic detail, and a debased Romanticism's substitution of the stimulation and exacerbation of feeling in place of its artistic control and release; and in both, the constant search for "effects."

IV

How can fraudulent art be exposed? Not, as in the case of a forgery or counterfeit, by comparing it with the genuine article, for there is no genuine article of the right kind. Perhaps it helps to say: If we call it a matter of comparing something with the genuine article, we have to add (1) that what counts as the genuine article, is not *given*, but itself requires critical determination; and (2) that what needs to be exposed is not that a work is a *copy*. (That of course *may* be an issue, and that *may* be an issue of forgery. Showing fraudulence is more like showing something is imitation—not: *an* imitation. The emphasis is not on copying a *particular* object, as

in forgery and counterfeit, but on producing *the effect* of the genuine, or having some of its properties.) Again, unlike the cases of forgery and counterfeit, there is no one feature, or definite set of features, which may be described in technical handbooks, and no specific tests by which its fraudulence can be detected and exposed. Other frauds and imposters, like forgers and counterfeiters, admit *clear* outcomes, conclude in dramatic discoveries—the imposter is unmasked at the ball, you find the counterfeiters working over their press, the forger is caught signing another man's name, or he confesses. There are no such proofs possible for the assertion that the art accepted by a public is fraudulent; the artist himself may not know; and the critic may be shown up, not merely as incompetent, nor unjust in accusing the wrong man, but as taking others in (or out); that is, as an imposter.

The only exposure of false art lies in recognizing something about the object itself, but something whose recognition requires exactly the same capacity as recognizing the genuine article. It is a capacity not insured by understanding the language in which it is composed, and yet we may not understand what is said; nor insured by the healthy functioning of the senses, though we may be told we do not *see* or that we fail to *hear* something; nor insured by the aptness of our logical powers, though what we may have missed was the object's consistency or the way one thing followed from another. We may have missed its tone, or neglected an allusion or a cross current, or failed to see its point altogether; or the object may not have established its tone, or buried the allusion too far, or be confused in its point. You often do not know which is on trial, the object or the viewer: modern art did not invent this dilemma, it merely insists upon it. The critic will have to *get* us to see, or hear or realize or notice; help us to appreciate the tone; convey the current; point to a connection; show how to take the thing in. . . . What this getting, helping, conveying, and pointing consist in will be shown in the specific ways the critic accomplishes them, or fails to accomplish them. Sometimes you can say he is exposing an object to us (in its fraudulence, or genuineness); sometimes you can say he is exposing us to the object. (The latter is, one should add, not always a matter of noticing fine differences by exercising taste; sometimes it is a matter of admitting the lowest common emotion.) Accordingly, the critic's anger is sometimes directed at an object, sometimes at its audience, often at both. But sometimes, one supposes, it is produced

by the frustrations inherent in his profession. He is part detective, part lawyer, part judge, in a country in which crimes and deeds of glory look alike, and in which the public not only, therefore, confuses one with the other, but does not know that one or the other has been committed; not because the news has not got out, but because what counts as the one or the other cannot be defined until it happens; and when it has happened there is no sure way he can get the news out; and no way at all without risking something like a glory or a crime of his own.

One line of investigation here would be to ask: Why does the assertion "You have to *hear* it!" mean what it does? Why is its sense conveyed with a word which emphasizes the function of a sense organ, and in the form of an imperative? The combination is itself striking. One cannot be commanded to hear a sound, though one can be commanded to listen to it, or for it. Perhaps the question is: How does it happen that the *achievement* or *result* of using a sense organ comes to be thought of as the *activity* of that organ—as though the aesthetic experience had the form not merely of a continuous effort (e.g., listening) but of a continuous achievement (e.g., hearing).

Why—on pain of what—must I hear it; what consequence befalls me if I don't? One answer might be: Well, then I wouldn't hear it—which at least says that there is no point to the hearing beyond itself; it is worth doing in itself. Another answer might be: Then I wouldn't *know* it (what it is about, what it is, what's happening, what is *there*). And what that seems to say is that works of art are objects of the sort that can only be *known in sensing*. It is not, as in the case of ordinary material objects, that I know *because* I see, or that seeing is *how* I know (as opposed, for example, to being told, or figuring it out). It is rather, one may wish to say, that *what* I know is what I see; or even: seeing *feels* like knowing. ("Seeing the point" conveys this sense, but in ordinary cases of seeing the point, once it's seen it's known, or understood; about works of art one may wish to say that they require a continuous seeing of the point.) Or one may even say: In such cases, knowing functions like an organ of sense. (The religious, or mystical, resonance of this phrase, while not deliberate, is welcome. For religious experience is subject to distrust on the same grounds as aesthetic experience is: by those to whom it is foreign, on the ground that its claims must be false; by those to whom it is familiar, on the ground that its quality must be tested.)

Another way one might try to capture the idea is by saying: Such objects are only *known by feeling*, or *in feeling*. This is not the same as saying that the object expresses feeling, or that the aesthetic response consists in a feeling of some sort. Those are, or may be, bits of a theory about the aesthetic experience and its object; whereas what I am trying to describe, or the descriptions I am trying to hit on, would at best serve as data for a theory. What the expression "known by feeling" suggests are facts (or experiences) such as these: (1) What I know, when I've *seen* or *heard* something is, one may wish to say, not a matter of *merely* knowing it. But what more is it? Well, as the words say, it is a matter of *seeing* it. But one could also say that it is not a matter of *merely* seeing it. But what more is it? Perhaps "merely knowing" should be compared with "not really knowing": "You don't really know what it's like to be a Negro"; "You don't really know how your remark made her feel"; "You don't really know what I mean when I say that Schnabel's slow movements give the impression not of slowness but of infinite length." You merely say the words. The issue in each case is: What would *express* this knowledge? It is not that my knowledge will be real, or more than *mere* knowledge, when I acquire a particular feeling, or come to see something. For the issue can also be said to be: What would express the acquisition of that feeling, or show that you have seen the thing? And the answer might be that I now *know* something I didn't know before. (2) "Knowing by feeling" is not like "knowing by touching"; that is, it is not a case of providing the *basis* for a claim to know. But one could say that feeling functions as a touchstone: the mark left on the stone is out of the sight of others, but the result is one of knowledge, or has the form of knowledge—it is directed to an object, the object has been tested, the result is one of conviction. This seems to me to suggest why one is anxious to communicate the experience of such objects. It is not merely that I want to tell you how it is with me, how I feel, in order to find sympathy or to be left alone, or for any other of the reasons for which one reveals one's feelings. It's rather that I want to tell you something I've seen, or heard, or realized, or come to understand, for the reasons for which *such* things are communicated (because it is news, about a world we share, or could). Only I find that I can't *tell* you; and that makes it all the more urgent to tell you. I want to tell you because the knowledge, unshared, is a burden—not, perhaps, the way having a secret

can be a burden, or being misunderstood; a little more like the way, perhaps, not being believed is a burden, or not being trusted. It matters that others know what I see, in a way it does not matter whether they know my tastes. It matters, there is a burden, because unless I can tell what I know, there is a suggestion (and to myself as well) that I do *not* know. But I *do*—what I see is *that* (pointing to the object). But for that to communicate, you have to see it too. Describing one's experience of art is itself a form of art; the burden of describing it is like the burden of producing it. Art is often praised because it brings men together. But it also separates them.

The list of figures whose art Tolstoy dismisses as fraudulent or irrelevant or bad, is, of course, unacceptably crazy: most of Beethoven, all of Brahms and Wagner; Michelangelo, Renoir; the Greek dramatists, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, Ibsen, Tolstoy. . . . But the sanity of his procedure is this: it confronts the fact that we often do not find, and have never found, works we would include in a canon of works of art to be of importance or relevance to us. And the implication is that apart from this we cannot know that they are art, or what makes them art. One could say: objects so canonized do not exist for us. This strikes Tolstoy as crazy—as though we were to say we know that there are other minds because other people have told us there are.

V

But I was discussing some writing now current about the new music. Perhaps I can say more clearly why it leads, or has led me, to these various considerations by looking at three concepts which recur in it over and over—the concepts of composition, improvisation, and chance.

The reason for their currency can be put, roughly, this way. The innovations of Schoenberg (and Bartok and Stravinsky) were necessitated by a crisis of composition growing out of the increasing chromaticism of the nineteenth century which finally overwhelmed efforts to organize music within the established assumptions of tonality. Schoenberg's solution was the development of the twelve-tone system which, in effect, sought to overcome this destructiveness of chromaticism by accepting it totally, searching for ways to organize

a rigidly recurring total chromatic in its own terms. History aside, what is essential is that no assumption is any longer to be made about how compositional centers or junctures could be established—e.g., by establishing the “dominant” of a key—and the problem was one of discovering what, in such a situation, could be heard as serving the structural functions tonality used to provide. Schoenberg’s twelve-tone “rows” and the operations upon them which constitute his system, were orderings and operations upon pitches (or, more exactly, upon the familiar twelve classes of pitches). About 1950, composers were led to consider that variables of musical material other than its pitches could also be subjected to serial ordering and its Schoenbergian transformations—variables of rhythm, duration, density, timbre, dynamics, and so on. But now, given initial series of pitches, rhythms, timbres, dynamics, etc., together with a plot of the transformations each is to undergo, and a piece is written or, rather, determined; it is, so it is said, totally organized. What remains is simply to translate the rules into the notes and values they determine and see what we’ve got. Whether what such procedures produce is music or not, they certainly produced philosophy. And it is characteristic of this philosophy to appeal to the concepts of composition, chance, and improvisation.

The motives or necessities for these concepts are not always the same. In the writing of John Cage, chance is explicitly meant to *replace* traditional notions of art and composition; the radical ceding of the composer’s control of his material is seen to provide a profounder freedom and perception than mere art, for all its searches, had found. In the defense of “total organization,” on the contrary, chance and improvisation are meant to *preserve* the concepts of art and composition for music; to explain how, although the composer exercises choice only over the initial conditions of his work, the determinism to which he then yields his power itself creates the spontaneity and surprise associated with the experience of art; and either (a) because it produces combinations which are unforeseen, or (b) because it includes directions which leave the performer free to choose, i.e., to improvise. It is scarcely unusual for an awareness of determinism to stir philosophical speculation about the possibilities of freedom and choice and responsibility. But whereas the more usual motivation has been to preserve responsibility in the face of deter-

minism, these new views wish to preserve choice by foregoing responsibility (for everything but the act of "choosing").

Let us listen to one such view, from Ernst Krenek, who was for years a faithful disciple of Schoenberg and who has emerged as an important spokesman for total organization.

Generally and traditionally "inspiration" is held in great respect as the most distinguished source of the creative process in art. It should be remembered that inspiration by definition is closely related to chance, for it is the very thing that cannot be controlled, manufactured or premeditated in any way. It is what falls into the mind (according to the German term *Einfall*) unsolicited, unprepared, unrehearsed, coming from nowhere. This obviously answers the definition of chance as "the absence of any known reason why an event should turn out one way rather than another." Actually the composer has come to distrust his inspiration because it is not really as innocent as it was supposed to be, but rather conditioned by a tremendous body of recollection, tradition, training, and experience. In order to avoid the dictations of such ghosts, he prefers to set up an impersonal mechanism which will furnish, according to premeditated patterns, unpredictable situations . . . the creative act takes place in an area in which it has so far been entirely unsuspected, namely in setting up the serial statements. . . . What happens afterwards is predetermined by the selection of the mechanism, but not premeditated except as an unconscious result of the predetermined operations. The unexpected happens by necessity. The surprise is built in. ("Extents and Limits of Serial Techniques," *Musical Quarterly*, XLVI, 1960, pp. 228-229.)

This is not serious, but it is meant; and it is symptomatic—the way it is symptomatic that early in Krenek's paper he suggests that the twelve-tone technique "appears to be a special, or limiting, case of serial music, similar to an interpretation of Newtonian mechanics as a limiting expression of the Special Theory of Relativity, which in turn has been explained as a limiting expression of that General Theory." (Note the scientific caution of "appears to be.") The vision of our entire body of recollection, tradition, training, and experience as so many ghosts *could* be serious. It was serious, in their various ways, for Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, Emerson, Ibsen, Freud, and for most of the major poets and novelists of the past hundred years. It is not merely a modern problem; it is, one could say, the problem

of modernism, the attempt in every work to do what has never been done, because what is known is known to be insufficient, or worse. It is an old theme of tragedy that we will be responsible for our actions beyond anything we bargain for, and it is the prudence of morality to have provided us with excuses and virtues against that time. Krenek turns this theme into the comedy of making choices whose consequences we accept as the very embodiment of our will and sensibility although we cannot, in principle, see our responsibility in them. He says that "the composer has come to distrust his inspiration," but he obviously does not mean what those words convey—that the composer (like, say, Luther or Lincoln) is gripped by an idea which is causing him an agony of doubt. What in fact Krenek has come to distrust is the composer's capacity to feel any idea as his own. In denying tradition, Krenek is a Romantic, but with no respect or hope for the individual's resources; and in the reliance on rules, he is a Classicist, but with no respect or hope for his culture's inventory of conventions.

It is less my wish here to detail the failings or to trace the symptoms in such philosophizing as Krenek's, than it is to note simply that theorizing of this kind is characteristic of the writing about new music—alternating, as was suggested, with purely technical accounts of the procedures used in producing the work. For this fact in itself suggests (1) that such works cannot be *criticized*, as traditional art is criticized, but must be defended, or rejected, as art altogether; and (2) that such work would not exist but for the philosophy. That, in turn, suggests that the activity going into the production, or consumption, of such products cannot be satisfied by the art it yields, but only in a philosophy which seems to give justification and importance to the activity of producing it. I am not suggesting that such activity is in fact unimportant, nor that it can in no way be justified, but only that such philosophizing as Krenek's does not justify it and must not be used to protect it against aesthetic assessment. (Cage's theorizing, which I find often quite charming, is exempt from such strictures, because he clearly believes that the work it produces is no more important than the theory is, and that it is not justified by the theory, but, as it were, illustrates the theory. That his work is performed as music—rather than a kind of paratheater or parareligious exercise—is only another sign of the confusions of the age. I do not speak of his music explicitly meant to accompany the dance.)

I have suggested that it is significant not only *that* philosophy should occur in these ways, but also that it should take the content it has. I want now to ask why it is that the concepts of chance and improvisation should occur at all in discussing composition; what might they be used to explain?

VI

What is composition, what is it to compose? It seems all right to say, "It is to make something, an object of a particular sort." The question then is, "What sort?" One direction of reply would be, "An object of art." And what we need to know is just what an object of art is. Suppose we give a minimal answer: "It is an object in which human beings will or can take an interest, one which will or can absorb or involve them." But we can be absorbed by lots of things people make: toys, puzzles, riddles, scandals. . . . Still, something is said, because not *everything* people make is an object of this sort. It is a problem, an artistic problem—an experimental problem, one could say—to discover what will have the capacity to absorb us the way art does. Could someone be interested and become absorbed in a pin, or a crumpled handkerchief? Suppose someone did. Shall we say, "It's a matter of taste"? We might dismiss him as mad (or suppose he is pretending), or, alternatively, ask ourselves what he can possibly be *seeing in* it. That these *are* our alternatives is what I wish to emphasize. The situation demands an explanation, the way watching someone listening intently to Mozart, or working a puzzle, or, for that matter, watching a game of baseball, does not. The forced choice between the two responses—"He's mad" (or pretending, or on some drug, etc.) or else "What's in it?"—are the imperative choices we have when confronted with a new development in art. (A revolutionary development in science is different: not because the new move can initially be proved to be valid—perhaps it can't, in the way we suppose that happens—but because it is easier, for the professional community, to spot cranks and frauds in science than in art; and because if what the innovator does is valid, then it is *eo ipso* valid for the rest of the professional community, *in their own work*, and as it stands, as well.) But objects of art not merely interest and absorb, they move us; we are not merely involved with them, but concerned

with them, and care about them; we treat them in special ways, invest them with a value which normal people otherwise reserve only for other people—and with the same kind of scorn and outrage. They *mean* something to us, not just the way statements do, but the way people do. People devote their lives, sometimes sacrifice them, to producing such objects just in order that they will have such consequences; and we do not think they are mad for doing so. We approach such objects not merely because they are interesting in themselves, but because they are felt as made by someone—and so we use such categories as intention, personal style, feeling, dishonesty, authority, inventiveness, profundity, meretriciousness, etc., in speaking of them. The category of intention is as inescapable (or escapable with the same consequences) in speaking of objects of art as in speaking of what human beings say and do: without it, we would not understand what they are. They are, in a word, not works of nature but of *art* (i.e., of act, talent, skill). Only the concept of intention does not function, as elsewhere, as a term of excuse or justification. We follow the progress of a piece the way we follow what someone is saying or doing. Not, however, to see how it will come out, nor to learn something specific, but to see what *it* says, to see what someone has been able to make out of these materials. A work of art does not express some particular intention (as statements do), nor achieve particular goals (the way technological skill and moral action do), but, one may say, celebrates the fact that men can intend their lives at all (if you like, that they are free to choose), and that their actions are coherent and effective at all in the scene of indifferent nature and determined society. This is what I understand Kant to have seen when he said of works of art that they embody “purposiveness without purpose.”

Such remarks are what occur to me in speaking of compositions as objects *composed*. The concepts of chance and of improvisation have natural roles in such a view: the capacities for improvising and for taking and seizing chances are virtues common to the activity leading to a composition. It suggests itself, in fact, that these are two of the virtues necessary to act coherently and successfully at all. I use “virtue” in what I take to be Plato’s and Aristotle’s sense: a capacity by virtue of which one is able to act successfully, to follow the distance from an impulse and intention through to its realization. Courage and temperance are virtues because human actions move precariously from desire and intention into the world, and one’s course

of action will meet dangers or distractions which, apart from courage and temperance, will thwart their realization. A world in which you could get what you want merely by wishing would not only contain no beggars, but no human activity. The success of an action is threatened in other familiar ways: by the lack of preparation or foresight; by the failure of the most convenient resources, natural or social, for implementing the action (a weapon, a bridge, a shelter, an extra pair of hands); and by a lack of knowledge about the best course to take, or way to proceed. To survive the former threats will require ingenuity and resourcefulness, the capacity for improvisation; to overcome the last will demand the willingness and capacity to take and to seize chances.

Within the world of art one makes one's own dangers, takes one's own chances—and one speaks of its objects at such moments in terms of tension, problem, imbalance, necessity, shock, surprise. . . . And within this world one takes and exploits these chances, finding, through danger, an unsuspected security—and so one speaks of fulfillment, calm, release, sublimity, vision. . . . Within it, also, the means of achieving one's purposes cannot lie at hand, ready-made. The means themselves have inevitably to be fashioned for *that* danger, and for *that* release—and so one speaks of inventiveness, resourcefulness, or else of imitativeness, obviousness, academicism. The *way* one escapes or succeeds is, in art, as important as the success itself; indeed, the way constitutes the success—and so the means that are fashioned are spoken of as masterful, elegant, subtle, profound. . . .

I said: in art, the chances you take are your own. But of course you are inviting others to take them with you. And since they are, nevertheless, your own, and your invitation is based not on power or authority, but on attraction and promise, your invitation incurs the most exacting of obligations: that *every* risk must be shown worthwhile, and every infliction of tension lead to a resolution, and every demand on attention and passion be satisfied—that risks those who trust you can't have known they would take, will be found to yield value they can't have known existed. The creation of art, being human conduct which affects others, has the commitments any conduct has. It escapes morality; not, however, in escaping commitment, but in being free to choose only those commitments it wishes to incur. In this way art plays with one of man's fates, the fate of being accountable for everything you do and are, intended or not. It frees

us to sing and dance, gives us actions to perform whose consequences, commitments, and liabilities are discharged in the act itself. The price for freedom in this choice of commitment and accountability is that of an exactitude in meeting those commitments and discharging those accounts which no mere morality can impose. You cede the possibilities of excuse, explanation, or justification for your failures; and the cost of failure is not remorse and recompense, but the loss of coherence altogether.

The concept of improvisation, unlike the concept of chance, is one which has established and familiar uses in the practice of music theorists and historians. An ethnomusicologist will have recourse to the concept as a way of accounting for the creation-cum-performance of the music of cultures, or classes, which have no functionaries we would think of as composers, and no objects we would think of as embodying the intention to art; and within the realm of composed (written) music, improvisation is, until recent times, recognized as explicitly called for at certain sharply marked incidents of a performance—in the awarding of cadenzas, in the opportunities of ornamentation, in the realization of figured bass. In such uses, the concept has little explanatory power, but seems merely to name events which one knows, as matters of historical fact (that is, as facts independent of anything a critic would have to discover by an analysis or interpretation of the musical material as an aesthetic phenomenon), not to have been composed.

My use of the concept is far more general. I mean it to refer to certain qualities of music generally. Perhaps what I am getting at can be brought out this way. In listening to a great deal of music, particularly to the time of Beethoven, it would, I want to suggest, be possible to imagine that it was being improvised. Its mere complexity, or a certain kind of complexity, would be no obstacle. (Bach, we are told, was capable of improvising double fugues on any given subjects.) I do not suggest that a chorus or a symphony orchestra can be imagined to be improvising its music; on the contrary, a group improvisation itself has a particular *sound*. On the other hand I do not wish to restrict the sense of improvisation to the performance of one player either. It may help to say: One can hear, in the music in question, how the composition is *related* to, or could grow in familiar ways, from a process of improvisation; as though the parts meted out by the composer were re-enactments, or dramatizations,

of successes his improvisations had discovered—given the finish and permanence the occasion deserves and the public demands, but containing essentially only such discoveries. If this could be granted, a further suggestion becomes possible. Somewhere in the development of Beethoven, this ceases to be imaginable. (I do not include *all* music after Beethoven. Chopin and Liszt clearly seem improvisatory, in the sense intended; so do Brahms Intermezzi, but not Brahms Symphonies; early Stravinsky, perhaps, but not recent Stravinsky.)

Why might such a phenomenon occur? It is, obviously enough, within contexts fully defined by shared formulas that the possibility of full, explicit improvisation traditionally exists—whether one thinks of the great epics of literature (whose “oral-formulaic” character is established), or of ancient Chinese painting, or of Eastern music, or of the theater of the Commedia dell’Arte, or jazz. If it seems a paradox that the reliance on formula should allow the fullest release of spontaneity, that must have less to do with the relation of these phenomena than with recent revolutions in our aesthetic requirements. The suggestion, however, is this. The context in which we can hear music as improvisatory is one in which the language it employs, its conventions, are familiar or obvious enough (whether because simple or because they permit of a total mastery or perspicuity) that at no point are we or the performer in doubt about our location or goal; there are solutions to every problem, permitting the exercise of familiar forms of resourcefulness; a mistake is clearly recognizable as such, and may even present a chance to be seized; and just as the general range of chances is circumscribed, so there is a preparation for every chance, and if not an inspired one, then a formula for one. But in the late experience of Beethoven, it is as if our freedom to act no longer depends on the possibility of spontaneity; improvising to fit a *given* lack or need is no longer enough. The entire enterprise of action and of communication has become problematic. The problem is no longer how to do what you want, but to know what would satisfy you. We could also say: Convention as a whole is now looked upon not as a firm inheritance from the past, but as a continuing improvisation in the face of problems we no longer understand. Nothing we now have to say, no *personal* utterance, has its meaning conveyed in the conventions and formulas we now share. In a time of slogans, sponsored messages, ideologies, psychological warfare, mass projects, where words have lost touch with

their sources or objects, and in a phonographic culture where music is for dreaming, or for kissing, or for taking a shower, or for having your teeth drilled, our choices seem to be those of silence, or nihilism (the denial of the value of shared meaning altogether), or statements so personal as to form the possibility of communication without the support of convention—perhaps to become the source of new convention. And then, of course, they are most likely to fail even to seem to communicate. Such, at any rate, are the choices which the modern works of art I know seem to me to have made. I should say that the attempt to re-invent convention is the alternative I take Schoenberg and Stravinsky and Bartok to have taken; whereas in their total organization, Krenek and Stockhausen have chosen nihilism.

VII

The sketches I have given of possible roles of improvisation and chance in describing composition obviously do not fit their use in the ideology of the new music; they may, however, help understand what that ideology is. When a contemporary theorist appeals to *chance*, he obviously is not appealing to its associations with taking and seizing chances, with risks and opportunities. The point of the appeal is not to call attention to the act of composition, but to deny that act; to deny that what he offers is composed. His concept is singular, with no existing plural; it functions not as an explanation for particular actions but as a metaphysical principle which supervises his life and work as a whole. The invocation of chance is like an earlier artist's invocation of the muse, and serves the same purpose: to indicate that his work comes not from *him*, but *through him*—its validity or authority is not a function of his own powers or intentions. Speaking for the muse, however, was to give voice to what all men share, or all would hear; speaking through chance forgoes a voice altogether—there is nothing to say. (That is, of course, by now a cliché of popular modernism.) This way of forgoing composition may perhaps usefully be compared with the way it is forgone in modernist painting. The contemporary English sculptor Anthony Caro is reported to have said: "I do not compose." Whatever he meant by that, it seems to have clear relevance to the painting of abstract expressionism and

what comes after.⁴ If you look at a Pollock drip painting or at a canvas consisting of eight parallel stripes of paint, and what you are looking for is *composition* (matters of balance, form, reference among the parts, etc.), the result is absurdly trivial: a child could do it; I could do it. The question, therefore, if it is art, must be: How is this to be seen? What is the painter doing? The problem, one could say, is not one of escaping inspiration, but of determining how a man could be inspired to do *this*, why he feels *this* necessary or satisfactory, how he can *mean* this. Suppose you conclude that he cannot. Then that will mean, I am suggesting, that you conclude that this is not art, and this man is not an artist; that in failing to mean what he's done, he is fraudulent. But how do you know?

In remarking the junctures at which composers have traditionally called for improvisation (cadenzas, figured bass, etc.), I might have put that by saying that the composer is at these junctures leaving something open to the performer. It is obvious that throughout the first decades of this century composers became more and more explicit in their notations and directions, leaving less and less open to the performer. One reason for allowing improvisation in the new music has been described as returning *some* area of freedom to the performer in the midst of specifications so complex and frequent (each note may have a different tempo, dynamic marking, and direction for attack, at extreme rates of speed) that it is arguable they have become unrealizable in practice. Does this use of "something left open" suggest that we have an idea of some notation which may be "complete," closing all alternatives save one to the performer? And is the best case of "leaving nothing open" one in which the composer codes his music directly into his "performer," thus obviating any need for an intermediary between him and his audience? What would be the significance of this displacement? A composer might be relieved that at least he would no longer have to suffer bad performances, and one might imagine a gain in having all performances uniform. But perhaps what would happen is that there would, for

⁴ Reported by Michael Fried (who showed me its significance) in an article on Caro in *The Lugano Review*, 1965. See, in addition, his *Three American Painters*, the catalog essay for an exhibition of the work of Noland, Olitski, and Stella, at the Fogg Museum, in the spring of 1965; and his "Jules Olitski's New Paintings," *Artforum*, November 1965.

music made that way, no longer be anything we should call a "performance"; the concept would have no use there, anymore than it has for seeing movies. (One goes to see Garbo's performance as *Camille*, but not to see a performance of (the movie) *Camille*.) Perhaps, then, one would go to "soundings," "first plays," and "re-runs" of pieces of music. And then other musical institutions would radically change, e.g., those of apprenticeship, of conservatories, of what it is one studies and practices to become a composer. Would we then go on calling such people composers? But of course everything depends upon just what we are imagining his procedures to be. If, for example, he proceeds only so far as Krenek's "initial choices" and accepts whatever then results, I think we would not; but if, even if he begins that way, we believe that he has in some way tested the result on himself, with a view to satisfying himself—even if we do not know, or he does not know, what the source of satisfaction is—then perhaps we would. If we would not, would this suggest that the concept of a composition is essentially related to the concept of a performance? What it suggests is that it is not clear what is and is not essentially connected to the concept of music.

I do not, however, hesitate, having reminded myself of what the notion of improvisation suggests, to say that what is called for in a piece such as Stockhausen's *Pianostück Elf* (where nineteen fragments are to be selected from, in varying orders, depending upon certain decisions of the performer) is not improvisation. (The main reason, I think, for my withholding of the concept, is that nothing counts as the *goal* of a performance.) To call it improvisation is to substitute for the real satisfactions of improvisation a dream of spontaneity—to match the dream of organization it is meant to complement; as Krenek's fantasy of physics substitutes for the real satisfaction of knowledge. It also, since improvisation implies shared conventions, supposes that you can create a living community at a moment's notice. A similar point occurs when such a work is praised, as it has been, on the ground that it is graphically lovely. It is, I think, quite pretty to look at, but so is a Chopin or Bach or medieval manuscript graphically satisfying. To rest one's hope for organization on such an admittedly pleasant quality is to suppose that you can become a visual artist inadvertently. It expresses the same contempt for the artistic process as calling something musically organized (let alone totally

organized) on grounds unrelated to any way in which it is, or is meant to be, heard.

VIII

Why, instead of philosophy, didn't music made in these ways produce laughter and hostility? It did, of course, and does. But the response couldn't end there, because nobody could *prove* it wasn't music. Of course not, because it is not clear that the notion of "proving it is (or is not) music" is even intelligible, which means that it is not fully intelligible to say that nobody could do what it describes. (*What* can't anybody do here?) My suggestion is only that some composers would have had the remarkable feeling that their lives depended on performing this indescribable task. Why? Because those productions themselves seemed to prove something, namely, that music (or whatever it is) produced in those ways was indistinguishable from, or close enough to music produced in traditional ways—by composers, that is, artists, from their inspiration and technique, both painfully acquired, and out of genuine need—to be confused with it, and therewith certain to replace it. (It's just as good, and so much easier to make.) And it seemed to prove that the detractors of modernism were right all along: whatever artists and aestheticians may have said about the internal and coherent development of the art, it all turns out to have arrived at pure mechanism, it has no *musical* significance, a child could do it. This, or something like it, had been said about Beethoven, about Stravinsky, and doubtless about every *avant garde* in the history of the arts. Only no child ever *did* it before, and *some* people obviously did find it musically significant. Saint-Saëns stormed out of the first performance of *The Rite of Spring*. But Ravel and serious young composers stayed and were convinced. But now a child *has* done it, or might as well have, and a child could understand it as well as anyone else—you prove he couldn't. It is, I take it, significant about modernism and its "permanent revolution" that its audience recurrently tells itself the famous stories of riots and walkouts and outrages that have marked its history. It is as though the *impulse* to shout fraud and storm out is always present, but fear of the possible consequence overmasters

the impulse. Remember Saint-Saëns: He said the Emperor had no clothes, and then history stripped him naked. The philistine audience cannot afford to admit the new; the *avant garde* audience cannot afford not to. This bankruptcy means that both are at the mercy of their tastes, or fears, and that no artist can test his work either by their rejection or by their acceptance.

These may or may not exhaust all the audiences there are, but they certainly do not include all the people there are. This suggests that genuine responses to art are to be sought in individuals alone, as the choice or affinity for a canon of art and a canon of criticism must be made by individuals alone; and that these individuals have no audience to belong in as sanctioning, and as sharing the responsibility for, the partiality they show for the work of individual artists and particular critics. (As the faithful auditor of God is perhaps no longer to be expected, and cannot receive sanction, through membership in a congregation.) This records one way of putting the modern predicament of audience: taste now appears as partialness.

This is the point at which Nietzsche's perception outdistances Tolstoy's. Tolstoy called for sincerity from the artist and infection from his audience; he despised taste just because it revealed, and concealed, the loss of our *appetite* for life and consequently for art that matters. But he would not face the possible cost of the artist's radical, unconventionalized sincerity—that his work may become uninfected, and even (and even deliberately) unappetizing, forced to defeat the commonality which was to be art's high function, in order to remain art at all (art in exactly the sense Tolstoy meant, directed from and to genuine need). Nietzsche became the unbalanced ledger of that cost, whereas Tolstoy apparently let himself imagine that we could simply *stop* our reliance on taste once we were told that it was blocking us to satisfaction—and not merely in art. What modern artists realize, rather, is that taste must be *defeated*, and indeed that this can be accomplished by nothing less powerful than art itself. One may see in this the essential moral motive of modern art. Or put it this way: What looks like "breaking with tradition" in the successions of art is not really that; or is that only after the fact, looking historically or critically; or is that only as a result not as a motive: the unheard of appearance of the modern in art is an effort not to break, but to keep faith with tradition. It is perhaps fully true of Pop Art that its motive is to break with the tradition

of painting and sculpture; and the result is not that the tradition is broken, but that these works are irrelevant to that tradition, i.e., they are not paintings, whatever their pleasures. (Where history has cunning, it is sometimes ironic, but sometimes just.)

IX

I said earlier that the periodicals about music which we were discussing were trying to do what only the art of music itself could do. But maybe it just is a fact about modern art that coming to care about it demands coming to care about the problems in producing it. Whatever painting may be about, modernist painting is about *painting*, about what it means to use a limited two-dimensional surface in ways establishing the coherence and interest we demand of art. Whatever music can do, modern music is concerned with the making of music, with what is required to gain the movement and the stability on which its power depends. The problems of composition are no longer irrelevant to the audience of art when the solution to a compositional problem has become identical with the aesthetic result itself.

In this situation, criticism stands, or could, or should stand, in an altered relation to the art it serves. At any time it is subordinate to that art, and expendable once the experience of an art or period or departure is established. But in the modern situation it seems inevitable, even, one might say, internal, to the experience of art. One evidence of what I have in mind is the ease with which a new departure catches phrases which not merely free new response, but join in the creation of that response; moreover, the phrases do not cease to matter once the response is established, but seem required in order that the response be sustained. New theater is "absurd"; new painting is "action"; Pop Art exists "between life and art"; in serial music "chance occurs by necessity." Often one does not know whether interest is elicited and sustained primarily by the object or by what can be said about the object. My suggestion is not that this is bad, but that it is definitive of a modernist situation. Perhaps it would be nicer if composers could not think, and felt no need to open their mouths except to sing—if, so to say, art did not present problems. But it does, and they do, and the consequent danger is

that the words, because inescapable, will usurp motivation altogether, no longer tested by the results they enable. I think this has already happened in the phrases I cited a moment ago, and this suggests that a central importance of criticism has become to protect its art against criticism. Not just from bad criticism, but from the critical impulse altogether, which no longer knows its place, perhaps because it no longer has a place. In a Classical Age, criticism is confident enough to prescribe to its art without moralism and its consequent bad conscience. In a Romantic Age, art is exuberant enough to escape criticism without the loss of conscience—appealing, as it were, to its public directly. In a Modern Age, both that confidence and that appeal are gone, and are to be re-established, if at all, together, and in confusion.

If we say it is a gain to criticism, and to art, when we know that criticism must not be prescriptive (e.g., tell artists what they ought to produce), then we should also recognize that this injunction is *clear* only when we already accept an object as genuine art and a man as an authentic artist. But the modernist situation forces an awareness of the *difficulty* in avoiding prescription, and indeed of the ways in which criticism, and art itself, are ineluctably prescriptive—art, because its successes garner imitations, not just because there are always those who want success at any price, but because of the very authority which has gone into the success; criticism, not because the critic cannot avoid prescriptive utterances, but because the terms in which he defines his response themselves define which objects are and which are not relevant to his response. When, therefore, artists are unmoored from tradition, from taste, from audience, from their own past achievement; when, that is, they are brought to rely most intimately on the critic, if only the critic in themselves; then the terms in which they have learned to accept criticism will come to dictate the terms in which they will look for success: apart from these, nothing will count as successful because nothing will be evaluable, nothing have a chance of validity. Here the artist's survival depends upon his constantly eluding, and constantly assembling, his critical powers.

A certain use of mathematical-logical descriptions of tone-row occurrences is only the clearest case of these difficulties, as it is also the case which most clearly shows the force of the aesthetically and intellectually irrelevant in establishing a reigning criticism—in this case, the force of a fearful scientism, an intellectual chic which is at

once intimidating and derivative, and in general the substitution of precision for accuracy. This is hardly unusual, and it should go without saying that not *all* uses of such techniques are irrelevant, and that they represent an indispensable moment in coming to understand contemporary music. The issue is simply this: we know that criticism ought to come only after the fact of art, but we cannot *insure* that it will come only after the fact. What is to be hoped for is that criticism learn to criticize itself, as art does, distrusting its own success.

This is particularly urgent, or perhaps particularly clear, in the case of music, because, as suggested, the absence of a strong tradition of criticism leaves this art especially vulnerable to whatever criticism becomes established, and because the recent establishment of criticism is peculiarly invulnerable to control (because of its technicalities, its scientific chic . . .). But if it is not technicality as such which is to be shunned, only, so to speak, its counterfeit, how do you tell? The moral is again, as it is in the case of the art itself: you cannot tell from outside; and the expense in getting inside is a matter for each man to go over. And again, this strict economy is not new to modern art, but only forced by it. Nor do I wish to impugn all music made with attention to "total organization," but only to dislodge the idea that what makes it legitimate is a philosophical theory—though such a theory may be needed in helping to understand the individual artistic success which alone would make it legitimate. It may be, given the velocity of our history, that the music and the theory of music illustrated in the recent work of Krenek is by now, five years later, already repudiated—not perhaps theoretically, but in fact, in the practice of those who constitute the musical world. What would this show? One may find that it shows such worries as have been expressed in this essay to be unfounded; that the fraudulent in art and the ideological in criticism will not defeat the practice of the real thing. At least they won't have this time; but that means that certain composers have in the meantime gone on writing, not only against the normal odds of art, but against the hope that the very concept of art will not be forgotten. That a few composers might, because of this distraction and discouragement, cease trying to write, is doubtless to be expected in a difficult period. But it is not unthinkable that next time all on whom the art relies will succumb to that distraction and discouragement. I do not absolutely deny, even in the face of powerful evidence,

that in the end the truth will out. I insist merely that philosophy ought to help it out. Nor have I wished to suggest that the recognition of the "possibility of fraudulence" manifests itself as a permanent suspicion of all works giving themselves out as compositions or paintings or poems One *can* achieve unshakable justified faith in one's capacity to tell. I have wanted only to say that *that* is what one will have achieved. If someone supposes that that leaves us in a hopelessly irrational position, he is perhaps supposing a particular view of faith, and a limited horizon of hope.⁵

X

I have spoken of the *necessities* of the problems faced by artists, of the *irreversibility* of the sequence of art styles, of the difficulties in a contemporary artist's continuing to *believe* in his work, or *mean* it. And I said it was the artist's need to maintain his own belief that forced him to give up—to the extent and in the way he has given up—the belief and response of his audience. This is reflected in literature as well, but differently. I do not mean, what I take to be obvious enough, that modern poetry often takes the making of poetry and the difficulties of poetry in the modern age, as its subject matter. What I have in mind is best exemplified in the modern theater. The fact that the language the literary artist uses does communicate directly with his audience—in ways the contemporary "languages" of painting and music do not—was earlier taken as an advantage to the literary artist. But it is also his liability. A writer like Samuel Beckett does *not* want what is communicated easily to be what he communicates—it is not what he means. So his effort is not to find belief from his audience, but to defeat it, so that his meaning *has* to be searched for. Similarly, modern dramatists do not *rely* on their audiences, but *deny* them. Suppose an audience is thought of as "those present whom the actors ignore." Then to stop ignoring them, to recognize them explicitly, speak *to* them, insist on the fact *that* this is acting and this is a theater, functions to remove the status of *audience* from "those out there who were ignored." Modern dramatists (e.g., Beckett, Genet, Brecht) can

⁵ The addition of this paragraph is only the main, not the only, point at which a reading by the composer John Harbison caused modification or expansion of what I had written.

be distinguished by the various ways in which they deny the existences of audiences—as if they are saying: what is meant cannot be understood from that position.

But why not? Why, to raise the question in a more familiar form, can't one still write like Mozart? The question makes the obscurities and withdrawals and unappealingness of modern art seem *willful*—which is another *fact* of the experience of that art. But what is the answer to that question? One answer might be: Lots of people have written like Mozart, people whose names only libraries know; and Mozart wasn't one of them. Another answer might be: Beethoven wrote like Mozart, until he became Beethoven. Another: If Mozart were alive, he wouldn't either. Or even: the best composers do write as Mozart did (and as Bach and Beethoven and Brahms did), though not perhaps with his special fluency or lucidity. But by now that question is losing its grip, one is no longer sure what it is one was asking, nor whether these answers mean anything (which seems the appropriate consequence of looking for a simple relation between past and present). A final answer I have wanted to give is: No one *does* now write that way. But perhaps *somebody* does, living at the edge of an obscure wood, by candlelight, with a wig on. What would our response to him be? We wouldn't take him seriously as an artist? Nobody could mean such music now, be sincere in making it? And yet I've been insisting that we can no longer be sure that any artist is sincere—we haven't convention or technique or appeal to go on any longer: *anyone* could fake it. And this means that modern art, if and where it exists, *forces* the issue of sincerity, depriving the artist and his audience of every measure except absolute attention to one's experience and absolute honesty in expressing it. This is what I meant in saying that it lays bare the condition of art altogether. And of course it runs its own risks of failure, as art within established traditions does.

This will seem an unattractive critical situation to be left with. Don't we know that “. . . the goodness or badness of poetry has nothing to do with sincerity. . . . The worst love poetry of adolescents is the most sincere”?⁶ But I am suggesting that we may not know what sincerity is (nor what adolescence is). The adolescent, I suppose it is assumed, has strong feelings, and perhaps some of them

⁶ René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism*, Vol. II (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 137.

can be described as feelings of sincerity, which, perhaps, he attaches to the words in his poetry. Does all that make the words, his utterance in the poem, sincere? Will he, for example, *stand by them*, later, when *those* feelings are gone? Suppose he does; that will not, of course, prove that his poetry is worthwhile, nor even that it is poetry. But I haven't suggested that sincerity proves anything in particular—it can prove madness or evil as well as purity or authenticity. What I have suggested is that it shows what kind of stake the stake in modern art is, that it helps explain why one's reactions to it can be so violent, why for the modern artist the difference between artistic success and failure can be so uncompromising. The task of the modern artist, as of the modern man, is to find something he can be sincere and serious in; something he can mean. And he may not at all.

Have my claims about the artist and his audience been based on hearsay, or real evidence, or really upon the work itself? But now the "work itself" becomes a heightened philosophical concept, not a neutral description. My claims do not rest upon works of art themselves, apart from their relations to how such works are made and the reasons for which they are made, and considering that some are sincere and some counterfeit. . . . But my claim is that to know such things is to know what a work of art is—they are, if one may say so, part of its grammar. And, of course, I may be taken in.