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**Invention Or Discovery?
The Surplus-Anxiety Of Good Taste**

A man should make life and nature happier to us, or he had better never been born.

Emerson, *The Conduct of Life*

Briefly, two points of clarification. By the expression "surplus-anxiety," I refer to a certain mood that comes over people when certain topics are raised. Of the nature of that mood more later. As for "taste," I mean by the word to suggest a quality in us that is revealed by any judgment we make about the merits of almost any item in the culture at large. I will not be dealing here, however, with the question of whether judgments of "good" and "bad" in such matters are possible. I happen to think that within certain very carefully defined limits they are indeed possible. But my concern here is different, and it has to do with the affective tone that accompanies such judgments and that may be aroused in us when we hear them put forward or see them made in print. In the few places where I try to give some specificity to what is, admittedly, a very speculative argument, I shall usually refer to the states of feeling aroused by judgments made of works of art. But I urge that "taste" be understood in a much broader context than is afforded by art and that it include, among other things, tastes in food, clothing, furnishings, and the like. As examples of this breadth of context, let me simply mention conversations I have recently had about such matters as the following: the merits of Kubrick's "2001" and of Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*; children's toys; the buildings of Mies van der Rohe; the respective merits of Bob Dylan and Sinatra. Across each of these discussions—as well as across hundreds of others in which I have participated or which I have merely observed—has fallen, in varying shades of darkness, the long shadow of surplus-

anxiety. It is a shadow that can fall lightly over one discussion only because, over some other discussion, it can fall darkly.

A further preliminary note. I realize that the charge may be made that my analysis pertains only to me, that it reveals some problem peculiar to me. Apart from the general difficulties posed by *ad hominem* arguments, this response seems weak for other reasons. A moment ago I wrote that I had noticed the shadow of surplus-anxiety as it fell over arguments and discussions I had merely witnessed. Indeed, what has always rather staggered me is the way surplus-anxiety can go unnoticed by the very people in whom it is most apparent. I must, therefore, trust to my own observations (of myself and of others) and see in them forms of verification for my conclusions. If my argument is incorrect, it will need to be put right at some level other than that offered by my own person.

Imagine, then, a dinner-party. The table-talk has been safely of the weather, of university business, of house repairs, even of politics. The mood has been relaxed and the guests have been forthcoming. Then someone changes the topic: "Have you seen 'Nashville?' or watched 'Roots?' read *Gravity's Rainbow*? seen Peter Brooks' production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?" And then the terrible question: "What did you think of it?" Now the convivial mood undergoes a metamorphosis. A certain tension appears at the corners of mouths. Everyone goes ever so slightly on the *qui vive*.

But on the smooth surface of the discussion nothing seems to have changed but the topic. Indeed, as I have indicated above, one of the remarkable features of this metamorphosis is how rarely people whose gestures and tones reveal its presence will admit to its occurrence. Plates are passed around as before. Wine is drunk. But perhaps one notices that the guests are fiddling with the stems of wine-glasses or that they are now no longer looking at each other when they speak. It is as if everyone had been playing at twenty-dollar table-stakes at a Las Vegas baccarat table, only to hear the pit-boss announce that the stakes will now be two-hundred dollars. In the city of casinos the issue is financial bankruptcy. At the dinner-party it is a question of cultural bankruptcy.

The metamorphosis of mood has its source in that sudden demand that one reveal in public the essence of one's taste. The judgment one is invited to offer is to be a representation of that taste. One is free again! The *apparent* determinism of small-talk has end-

Let it be compared, first, to a host who offers his guests a wine that is universally recognized to be of inferior quality, or that is so recognized by everyone in the universe but that one person, the host, who purchased it. Or to the choice of an apartment that one then proceeds to furnish "badly." If the choice of a wine or of the furnishings of an apartment are the externalizations of one's inner space, then, to purchase reproductions of Renoir paintings from the drugstore, or to carpet when it is chic to have uncovered floors, is to reveal a flaw in one's being. It is to invite the question that is implicitly at issue at the dinner-party: "Can this fool not see what good taste *is* or where its first principles are to be discovered?"

But my analogies will not do, for they are merely in the nature of modulations of the problem posed by the dinner-party. Before I leave them, however, I would note only that apartment furnishings or clothing styles are never likely to be the dinner topic. In a curious way it is better to misjudge a play or a novel than to reveal that one's taste in furnishings or clothing is bad. The intimacy between what one *is* and what one *owns* or *wears* is too close to make this a tolerable topic for a discussion among friends. Later I will indicate why it may be that one can more safely misjudge art than clothing or tables. But I will leave this until we discuss Paris.

The dinner crisis may better be approached as one of the Visible and the Invisible. Who will *see*? Who is to *be seen*? Moreover, the crisis may itself be "seen" as one of bourgeois life. For the bourgeoisie, visibility is shame—at least for the intellectual bourgeoisie. Invisibility, on the other hand, is Distinction. And surplus-anxiety surges up as an invisible man feels himself becoming suddenly visible. In that placid political small-talk that accompanied the first course there was a community of the Invisible. And who was then visible? Perhaps it was Richard Nixon. A matter strictly of "determinism." One *knows* what to say about *him*. But to introduce "taste" raises the possibility that one or more of the guests may have to endure the terrible fate of Incarnation: a return to the visible flesh of the body. Normally, however, that shamed and suddenly-incarnated guest is quickly allowed to reassume the helm of invisibility and to undergo "dearnation." A certain courtesy obtains and no disclaimer is challenged. In my experience I have never seen such an encounter of the Visible and the Invisible end with an admission of error by the Incarnated Body of Shame. No one says, "I guess it was a mistake to have liked that play. What's *wrong* with me?" Nor have I ever seen the logic of the situation lead to the banishment from the

table of the visibly shamed person: "Anyone who holds such an opinion has no place at this table." Make no mistake about it: exile (or quarantine) stands as the logical final step to the dialectic of visibility and invisibility.

No. What happens is a general evasion of the consequences, a tacit vow by the community to pretend that no one has *seen* anything. It would be in bad taste for the shamed person to ask, "What's wrong with me?" The incarnated body is simply granted by the others the privilege of the disclaimer and then is dissolved in the acids of their invisibility. His shame, on the other hand, will live on, preserved in the alcohol of their memory. Of course, arguments may occur. But rarely are they allowed to take place on the level of Taste (the hostess intervenes). One argues instead about matters of fact and interpretation. But taste is always at the horizon of such discussions.

Now it will be obvious that what is missing from such encounters is *real joy*. I say "real" joy to distinguish it from certain kinds of perverse satisfactions that may be known in the world of surplus-anxiety, the kinds of eerie pleasures that one can detect in the aggressive assertions of taste. But almost never does one find the joyous and *carefree* affirmation of one's sheer pleasure in a book, a play, or a wine. One only hears the voice of measured or of aggressive discrimination. Real joy has been liquidated by what might be called Terror, the Terror of Surplus-Anxiety. Never do we hear the delighted and, more importantly, the delight-giving voice that is indifferent to other tastes or to the judgments made of its own taste. I am speaking of delight-ful and delight-giving indifference. Not of aggressive indifference. We hear only the anxious aggressivity of judgments: a pseudo-joy if ever there was one. We see only the incarnated body of shame in that brief instant before we redissolve it, thus affirming visibility in the very movement by which we negate it. Surplus-anxiety: the bourgeois version of Hegel's dialectic of the Master and the Slave.

Friendship (real friendship) and family life (real family life) may serve as exceptions to all this, but we must understand these as analogous to what Marx said of religion before he called it the "opium of the people," when he noted that it was also the "heart of a heartless world." But in that heartless world of bourgeois solitude and taste-terror almost never do we see the ecstasy that comes with a discovery of what it is on the tip of one's tongue that one actually tastes.

For people do not believe that tastes are matters of indifference. In

fact they are believed to be matters of difference, of *Distinction*. Of "I" from "You." Of the "Three-of-Us" from "Her." Joyless taste and the special surplus-anxiety that distinguishes it—what is all this but the quest-for-the-Other-who-must-be-seen? And the fear that when this Other is seen it will turn out to be one's self? For this reason, then, we may define Taste as a matter of "otherness."

How could it happen that in matters of taste people could come to prefer an invisible tongue to the one in the mouth, could become like Dickens' Mr. Dombey: cold, austere, and fearful of joy's capacity to take one, via ecstatic release, outside of oneself? The answer is to be found in the conditions of our bourgeois life. We are people caught in the double-bind of Visibility-Invisibility. If intellectuals be recognized as a *caste* within the bourgeois *class*, then, within that caste of intellectuals, the goal is to be invisible men and women: to be the Seers and never the Seen. But for the bourgeois class as a whole (and here I invert the terms of my explanation), the class to which the caste of intellectuals belongs, the goal is always *to-be-seen*. To be seen by someone else. And to be seen as not-being of another class. Its class-goal is, then, to be seen by some Transcendental Other as not-being-proletarian.

One hundred and fifty years ago, this bourgeois class-goal required of the bourgeoisie that it practice what Sartre has called "lay puritanism," an asceticism of the body that would serve to distinguish the bourgeois body (in its chill demeanor and its black suit of self-mourning) from the liquor-swilling and "sex-crazed" masses around it.² Of such an asceticism was born the peculiar form of decarnation practiced today by People of Taste. As in the United States white workers will try to behave and to dress like the bloodless 1950's bourgeoisie so that the "hip" bourgeoisie of the 70's (still anemic, despite its flashy costumes and casual attire) will recognize that the workers are *not* Blacks. For the white worker and his family, the bourgeoisie serves as the Collective and Transcendental Other who has the all-seeing eye that distinguishes White from Black.

A question: whose eye would have registered the distinction of the 18th and 19th century bourgeoisie from the masses? I think—and this will only be a preliminary stage of my hypothesis—that it was the Eye of the Sovereign. Or, to be precise, it was that collective and proxy eye of the sovereign constituted by the eyes of the Aristocracy who needed to practice no asceticism. *Their* distinction came with their blood. Today, in the East, it would, perhaps, be the Eye of the Despot, heir to the Tsars, and the proxy eye of the collective ego of the Part that

would distinguish the Imaginary Proletarians of the East, a region of the world where judgments of taste must be offered with much more care than they are at our dinner parties.

Now let us return to the intellectual caste of the modern bourgeois class. Recall that *within* this caste it is always better to be the Seer than the Seen. If one is seen one is deported in shame from the caste and into the lower or middle middle-class order of Density. The world of those who prefer James Jones to Vladimir Nabokov, Brahms to Bach, Puccini to Verdi—or worse. It is, in one incarnation, the world of Lolita's mother, in Nabokov's novel. *But*: these invisible Seers are themselves hoping to be seen. It is the "original sin" of their class. And they are hoping to be seen by someone else in the very movement that constitutes them as Invisible to the poor incarnated soul who has been shamed.

By whom, then, do the Seers of the Caste wish to be seen? By Elizabeth II or by the Pretender to the throne of France? No, surely not. But by those who have transcendent taste today and who are great invisible Presences, hidden behind their own radiance. The kings and queens are a bit tacky today, and no one cares about the aristocracy, at least insofar as the aristocracy is the collective eye of the sovereign. But one transcendental and collective Other remains. The collective and invisible ego of the Very, Very Wealthy, whose wealth is very fine. They who live—unseen—behind the enormous hedges that hide from us what we assume to be exquisite homes. They who vacation where we cannot afford to go. They whose fashions, five years after they tire of them, become *our* fashions; for in matters of taste intellect is alienated to High Fashion. Not for nothing is Paris at once the source of new tastes in art and ideas as well as in dresses and shoes. Not for nothing do we prefer our discussions of taste to be of art and ideas rather than of our clothing and our furniture. Always and forever that question from the 18th century: "Always scribble, scribble, scribble, eh?"

What I am suggesting is that the Transcendental Other is a necessary hypothesis by which to account for surplus anxiety. If surplus anxiety be understood as a crisis that arises from bourgeois lust for "distinction," then one must always ask about the "person" who possesses that which the bourgeoisie lacks. Distinction-respectability is a journey, up a ladder. At the top of the ladder is the Transcendental Other: real, but never seen. If there were no Immaculate Presence at the top of the ladder, there would be no despair among the climbers; there would be no ladder. A *kind* of Platonic

Idea, this Transcendental Other guarantees that distinction is realizable. This alienation to the Beautiful People may itself be distinguished in the pre-occupation among intellectuals with questions of academic status (for example, the eternal preoccupation with the status of departments and universities) that seem to outweigh, for so many, their preoccupation with ideas.

Now, in any assessment of the Transcendental Other the novels of Henry James become invaluable. For a time James himself served as a Transcendental Other for literary critics; just as, for some critics, a bit later, Jane Austen served in that role. In each case one suspects that it had something to do with country houses. But James' accounts of bourgeois Americans seeking noble and European ties (as in *The Golden Bowl* and *The American*) serve as a bridge between the Transcendental Other of the 19th century and its avatar in our century. They are not merely accounts of what James once called the peculiarly American "religion of foreign things", but of the desire to be seen, embraced, and married by the collective and aristocratic ego of Europe: by Prince (marvellously named) Amerigo. Seen, embraced, and married at the very moment when it is becoming unfashionable to be aristocratic. Thus James points to the historical replacement of the aristocratic ego by more "tasteful" forms of invisibility that are American and bourgeois—but *haut bourgeois*—by Christopher Newman and Maggie Verver.

This terrible dialectic of the Visible and the Invisible is a mug's game—this shuttle, via the despair of the disclaimer, into resentful peace and good manners at the dinner table. This surplus-anxiety of Good Taste. But it must go on until one realizes on one's pulses (and not merely in one's mind) that taste is not discovered but invented. The dinner-table anguish occurs because of a group commitment to the Discoverability of Good Taste. And this will serve also to account for those analogous and private forms of anguish aroused in us when we read reviews and critical studies that make us squirm because they condemn what we like.³ The group commitment to the discoverability principle assumes that good taste *exists*: hard, real, and somewhere. In my preliminary hypothesis I am assuming that this almost Kantian *Ding an-sich* of Good Taste (its negative pole, of course, is the *Ding an-sich* of Bad Taste) has hypothetical existence for the group in St. Moritz, Palm Springs, or wherever it is that the Beautiful People now live. They move on when we discover—and visit—their haunts. The phenomenal attributes of the In-itself of Good Taste are assumed to extend across the world, waiting to be discovered. Ultimately this

commitment assumes that one can discover good taste as Columbus discovered America, once and for all, the thing itself, on some October 12th of the sensibility. In fact, we go about it little by little, thanks to the magical trick that consists in perpetually unveiling some attribute of good taste, whether in print or at dinner. A strange unveiling, of course, since what one reveals is one's absence, one's invisibility.

Earlier, when I spoke of the gaze of the sovereign's eye, I called this a preliminary account of the Transcendental Other who establishes for each of us the Otherness of Taste. But, of course, the problem is theological in nature. The Transcendental Other, then and now, is none other than that supremely invisible One Himself, the deity. As long as He existed, then, in the final analysis, *Value* existed. His demise (around 1880, in Basel) called Value into question, at least insofar as Value might be said to *exist*. In its place there appeared values: literary, Christian, Marxist, analytical, structural, existential, and scientific. What holds together many of the proponents of these warring but secularized creeds (even secular Christianity!) is their commitment to the discoverability principle: Good Taste, last of the Gods. The Deity now exists at the level of our judgments of the value of wine, women, and song. Each affirmation of good taste and each exorcism of bad is thus a spiritual exercise. And we may now be able to understand why it is that People of Taste appear so often to be pious.

In order to step over the corpse of the Transcendental Other, in order, that is, at last to *believe* in a demise that one may merely accept intellectually, one must be able, in matters of taste, to invent. Life is not an Easter Egg hunt. But first let me distinguish the Inventor from the mere Rebel, that scandal-provoking Individualist with whom we might mistakenly confuse the Inventor. Individualism is a bourgeois virtue, and the Rebel who makes calculated eyebrow-raising judgments has a definite place in the intellectual caste. The caste requires his outrageous tastes in order that it may be confirmed in the propriety of its Good Taste. But here we enter the world of Kraft-Ebbing and Havelock Ellis. For the scandalized bourgeois who tolerate the Rebel and the Rebel himself have in common one thing: they seek a perverse pleasure. In the one case it is the pleasure of a sudden visibility to the Rebellious Eye. In the other it is the pleasure of sudden invisibility to the Respectable Ones who are normally Seers. The visible Rebel flashes invisibility. The People of Taste respond with a flash of visibility. It is the dialectical equivalent of sodomy.

The general problem, let me repeat, is that the discoverability principle assumes that good and bad taste can be found and that they have an essence, some vital principle which serves to distinguish each from the other. In the mind of the bourgeois intellectual there arises the dream of a Calculus of Good Taste that will allow him to make ever finer discriminations and thus to reveal himself as a man who is "discriminating." Not for nothing do literary critics call their books and journals *Scrutiny*, *Discriminations*, and *The Criterion*. Not for nothing do pedagogues worry about "standards." No matter where one happens to be on that ladder of taste, one fears that there is another rung just above and that someone else may be on it, looking *down*. Even more terrifying is the nightmare that one may be on the wrong ladder, the ladder of bad taste, climbing down to some pit of darkness, when one had thought one was climbing towards the vanishing point in the eye of the Transcendental Other. Thus we must scrutinize, discriminate, and find criteria.

But invention is difficult to describe. It is difficult because, after all, we are people who live in a discoverer's world; and, at best, we can know invention only by the low road of the negation: it is the negative of various forms of discovery. "It cannot," we say to ourselves, "be this Magellanism." Or we may look for hints of invention in the work of the great artists and thinkers who may offer to us glimpses of an Edisonian world.

At the very least, invention is a matter of joy, of music in the soul. It *establishes* value for itself and for others, but it does so in generosity (thus recognizing that we are all possessed of basic freedom to discover and to establish) and in a spirit of delight *that is infectious*. It cares not whether it be visible or invisible, and, in fact, to the Inventor this dialectic would be unintelligible. In the world of invention the "otherness of taste" would itself vanish. Of course one would hear other judgments, and one might or might not agree with them, argue with them. But one would realize that they were not worth indigestion after dinner. Invention relishes the vertigo of taste, the endless affirmation of endless possibilities in a world that has lost its center, its Transcendental Other. Inventors rejoice in this instability, this carnival where all values are, in the *final analysis*, meaningless. The serious-minded people of surplus-anxiety will see in all this the Medusa's face of Nihilism, Anarchy, and Chaos. They will think that Inventors should not dare to prefer Ibsen to Neil Simon. But such seriousness is really nostalgia: for Mt. Olympus, Mt. Sinai, and Vatican Hill—not to mention Buckingham Palace and Palm Springs.

should-have-said's, the voice that always couches its judgments in the austere assertive tones of cultural Dombeyism. A voice that can never carry a tune, issuing as it does from a mouth that has never known a taste.

NOTES

1. No word is more likely to send a thrill through the dinner-party than the word "sentimental." It is, of course, the ultimate weapon in the arsenal of modern criticism. If it has not already been written, there is a good doctoral dissertation in a study of the criterion of "sentimentality" in modern literary criticism. It would be interesting, for example, to know how often—when the word is applied to a text—it means nothing more than the display of feeling. When the word is uttered as a charge against us, it terrifies us to the extent that we realize the speaker is "beyond feeling."
2. "The bourgeoisie in the second half of the (nineteenth century) had a lay-puritan attitude to life, and its signification was immediately oppressive: *respectability (distinction)*. The respectable man is an object of *choice* (by superiors): he is an individual who is recruited by class co-option (or kept in his class by constant acknowledgement). But he is not *born* (even if he is in fact a bourgeois, a son of a bourgeois). The aristocracy derived its privileges from nature and from birth. However, in the 'democratic' capitalist world, Nature represents universality, which means that, *at first sight*, the worker is a man just like the bourgeois. Respectability is anti-nature: the bourgeois becomes *respectable (distingué)* by suppressing his needs. In fact, he suppresses them partly by satisfying them and partly by concealing them (and sometimes by displaying a certain asceticism): he exercises a dictatorship over his body in the name of non-need; in other words, a dictatorship of culture over Nature. His clothing is *constraining* (corsets, stiff collars, top hats, etc.); he advertises his *sobriety* (young ladies eat beforehand when they go out to dinner, so that they can fast in public), and his wife does not conceal *her frigidity*." (Author's emphases) Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1976), pp. 770-771.
3. Recently I happened to be reading in the periodicals room of a university library. I noticed a young man (probably a graduate student) who was reading a well-known literary journal. He had suddenly blushed. Blushing is, of course, a pronounced visibility. What better symbol (as it were) of "incarnation?" He had probably come upon an attack on one of his favorite authors or books.
4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, in "On The Genealogy Of Morals" and "Ecce Homo," trans., Walter Kaufmann. Vintage (New York, 1967), p. 252.
5. *Twilight of the Idols*, in "Twilight of the Idols" and "The Anti-Christ," trans. R.J. Hollingdale. Penguin (Hammonds Worth, 1968), p. 75.