



explosive, involving sex and money, politics and social standing.

Even in their most abstract and philosophical forms, discussions of taste concerned the position of the *amateur*, the lover of the arts, rather than the artistic creator. Treatises on taste were studies in how culture was appreciated rather than how it was made; they examined the feelings and response of those who looked, watched and listened. They assumed that arbiters of taste were observers rather than creators – collectors of pictures rather than painters, the audience for music or drama rather than its performers, and readers rather than writers. The appreciative amateur, who did not profit from culture, was given pride of place over the professional artist, whose status was compromised by his using art to make a living, by sullyng good taste with foul mammon. Taste was not a question for the artist but for the public, the collective body of those who had taste.

What was this body? Throughout the eighteenth century this remained a vexed question. On the one hand commercial pressures largely favoured cultural expansion. On the other, there was a contrary desire to define the tasteful public not as those who were *present* as listeners, viewers or readers, but as those few among them who could *appreciate*, who could respond tastefully to what they saw, heard or read. As the economic barriers that restricted access to the arts were lowered in the eighteenth century and the numbers who enjoyed them certainly increased, cultural provision grew richer and more varied. As a result of this transformation culture became a commodity, an item or event that could be bought and sold. One could buy landscapes by the yard, shares in book copyrights, a percentage of a play, or a box at the opera. Money rather than privilege became the chief currency of culture. Some arts and cultural goods were, of course, extremely expensive. To commission a full-length portrait by Reynolds or rent a box at the opera was beyond the means of all but the very rich. But much was available for less. Admission to concerts and spectacles in London's pleasure gardens (except for the socially exclusive Ranelagh) was a shilling or less. The cheapest seats in the theatre (filled on the basis of first come, first served) were the same price, and one could get in at half the cost after the second act. At mid-century half-price admission cost the equivalent of two quarts of ale. The newspapers, journals and pamphlets kept in coffee houses could be read for the price of a drink. Secondhand books and cheap prints, bought at street stalls or in shops, cost a shilling or less. These

possibilities were not beyond the means of an artisan earning between £40 and £60 a year.

Given such prices, culture was well within the purchasing power of the 'middling sort' who had enough money and leisure time to acquire a small but solid library and prints or paintings to decorate their houses, and to enjoy periodic visits to the theatre, art exhibits and concerts. Music was the most expensive recreation – the cost of buying instruments or subscribing to a concert series was high; opera, as today, was the dearest of all – but even a sizeable oil-painting could be bought at auction for between five shillings and a pound.

As we can tell from the inventories of possessions made for probate of wills, the houses of prosperous merchants, shopkeepers, farmers and traders were ever more densely populated by books, prints and pictures. When the London haberdasher Robert Fotherby died in 1709, he had no fewer than forty-four pictures hanging in his dining-room. A mercer who died four years earlier left his heirs almost 1,000 books. These spectacular individual examples were part of a broader trend. Between the 1670s and 1720s pictures recorded in inventories increased threefold, appearing in about two thirds of the surviving documents, while book ownership grew at almost the same rate. Women of the same social standing as men were much more likely to own both books and pictures.

But the optimistic picture conveyed by these figures, which suggest that many people took the opportunity to acquire works of art and literature, just as they eagerly flocked to the theatre and the exhibition hall, needs to be qualified, for other barriers besides wealth restricted access to culture. More than anything else, taste depended upon the written and printed word, on the descriptions, criticisms and discussions of cultural activity which created communities of interest. Music and the theatre could be enjoyed by illiterate people, and their access to literature was also helped by the practice among all classes of reading aloud. But it was very difficult, unless you were a fluent reader, to talk knowingly and with authority about the cultural fashions of the day. In circles such as Anna Larpent's, developing critical opinions was every bit as important as watching a play or hearing a concert, and one of the chief sources of critical comment was newspapers and periodicals. Anna Larpent's observations in her journal on pictures at the Royal Academy may not have been consciously taken from or modelled on reports in the press, but their resemblance to newspaper comment shows that her

private comments closely concurred with public discussion. Those who could not read lacked a crucial link in the chain of communication that connected public exhibition and performance to the printed column and the written manuscript, and both to the spoken realm of drawing-room conversation.

Admission to a theatre or exhibition hall often depended upon the appearance of respectability. Theatre managers, proprietors of pleasure gardens, organizers of public assemblies and members of exhibiting societies took measures (admittedly not always successful) to exclude people they found undesirable. Shabbily genteel people did not wish to risk the humiliation of being turned away at the door. Poor hacks like the young Samuel Johnson and Oliver Goldsmith would wait to go out on what Johnson called 'clean shirt days'; a satire of the 1720s depicted hacks and poets 'cogging their Stockings and *darning* their Shirt Collars in order . . . to borrow half a Crown and beg a Dinner'. The ill-dressed, ragged and poor, or servants wearing their masters' livery, even if they were able to pay the price of admission, were often excluded from places where their presence might offend more respectable folk. The persistent barrage of complaint about disreputable customers was a sign of impresarios' hostility to members of the public whose presence they believed did not reflect well on their establishments.

Clubs and societies could, of course, more easily restrict access to the cultural activities they promoted. Reading societies, concert series and public assemblies were self-perpetuating bodies of subscribers, and admitted only those who were like-minded and 'acceptable', a term that was supposed to speak to someone's taste but more often referred to their social standing. Sometimes this was simple snobbery of the sort that the gentleman composer John Marsh encountered when trying to get his friends who were tradesmen into a local assembly, but it was also a matter of maintaining a particular milieu which might, as in the case of artisans' and tradesmen's clubs, exclude gentlemen. Whatever the kind of association, it valued its exclusivity. An introduction, the recommendation of a member or subscriber, was necessary. Culture was not only a commodity but also the currency of patronage and the means by which social distinctions were made.

Yet even those with an elitist view of culture did not reject the idea that its proper audience should be *the public*. Many English commentators, especially Whigs, argued that the distinctive feature of Britain,

and the circumstance that enabled it to be a new centre of civilization, was its public, separate from court, church and state. This was partly a political argument based on the view that the free British constitution fostered what the Scottish philosopher George Turnbull called the 'aptitude to promote public spirit, virtue and the arts, beyond any other in the world'. This view became such a cliché that it was parodied and lampooned, most notably by Alexander Pope. But the idea that 'the Ease of our Government and the liberty of professing Opinions' was a stimulus to debate and the source of effective criticism did not die easily. It fitted too well with the notion of national singularity, the belief that the peculiarities of the English lay in a political and social order of unique liberality.

The beneficial consequences of open government, a free press and active debate were obvious. Artists who had to present their work before the tribunal of the public would be encouraged, it was argued, to produce better work; open debate about culture would raise standards. As the highly influential Whig critic and moralist Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, put it,

without a public voice, knowingly guided and directed, there is nothing which can raise a true ambition in the artist; nothing which can exalt the genius of the workman, or make him emulous of fame, and of the approbation of his country, and of posterity . . . When the free spirit of a nation turns itself this way, judgments are formed; critics arise; the public eye and ear improve; a right taste prevails, and in a manner forces its way.

It was therefore possible to represent the growing cultural public not as a sign of luxury and degeneracy, but as a symptom of a healthy political order, uniquely modern and British. The boldest and most optimistic commentators, notably such poets as James Thomson and social commentators like James Millar, traced a cultural history which began in Greece, gravitated to Rome, and moved progressively westward until it reached 'the sceptred isle'. Debating societies and literary and philosophical clubs saw themselves as superior to the ancients and to their continental rivals because they enjoyed the advantages of a free constitution and a commercial economy, both of which ensured an unprecedented circulation of ideas.

This enthusiasm tended to beg an important question, namely, who

were the public and how were they defined? Twentieth-century definitions tend to emphasize the public's associations with openness and visibility, as when we use the expression 'public performance'. This was also an eighteenth-century usage. In his *Dictionary* Dr Johnson defined the adjective 'public' as 'open, notorious, generally known', 'general, done by many', 'open for general entertainment', and the noun as 'the people' and as 'open view; general notice'. But he also went on to speak of public as 'regarding the good of the community'. In this instance 'public' is a moral value, which Johnson contrasted with private and particular interests. In the first case the definition of the public is exceptionally broad – it is a question of bums on seats – but the second opens up the possibility that the public does not consist of 'people' but of particular people who know what is good.

A commercialized culture had its audiences: rowdy servants in a theatre's upper galleries, drunken bucks in the pleasure garden, fashionable belles and beaux wanting to be seen in picture galleries and private assemblies. But were they the body which decided what was in good taste? Or did the public consist solely of those who were discerning and had good taste? Artists were at once dependent on paying audiences and resentful of their power. Reynolds warned his fellow artists about the 'mischievous tendency' of Royal Academy exhibits which seduced 'the Painter into an ambition of pleasing indiscriminately the mixed multitude of people who resort to them'. And the critic and failed painter Anthony Pasquin launched a furious attack on the fashionable art public: 'the mightiest evil to be regretted is, that the VULGAR, who have no knowledge of propriety, should, from their numbers, their riches, and consequently their power, have the national patronage within their dominion; and yet these bipedal reptiles must be uniformly soothed and solicited, under such a forcible designation, as THE PUBLIC.' The tension between these different senses of 'the public' had the paradoxical effect of reinforcing a consensus about the importance of the public as an arbiter of taste while exacerbating disagreement about its membership. The problem was similar to that posed by 'taste'. The impulse to imagine an inclusive, open public was countered by a concern for exclusiveness.

The size and scope of the British public, its opportunities for freedom of expression, whether hooting down a play at Covent Garden or damning a picture in the correspondence columns of the *Morning Post*, were considered symptomatic of the virtues of British political life, but also as

disturbingly disorderly and unregulated, not only by moral critics of modern depravity but by the artists and performers who desperately needed the approval of their audiences. Audiences and the public, their good and ill conduct, their approval and their disorderliness, were constant subjects of artistic and literary comment. Novels, poems, paintings and plays repeatedly reflected on the relations between artists and their public, on the tensions and paradoxes that surrounded culture and mammon. Pope's *The Dunciad* and Swift's *The Battle of the Books* excoriated the venal world of bookselling, the novelist Charlotte Lennox satirized both the deluded romantic reader and the cynically fashionable public in her *The Female Quixote* (1752), while artists like Thomas Rowlandson painted images of people looking at pictures or being painted, of people going to the theatre, listening and playing music, reading and writing; playwrights were preoccupied with the nature of performance (plays within plays, from Buckingham's *The Rehearsal* (1672) to Sheridan's *The Critic* (1779), were common), and 'numerous prologues discussed the unruly nature of the audience. This attention was part of the artists' desire to establish the idea of a respectable public, a body whose support would secure their own status. As Garrick remarked, 'There are no hopes of seeing a perfect stage, till the public as well as the managers get rid of their errors and prejudices: the reformation must begin with the first. When the taste of the public is right the managers and actors must follow it or starve.'

Given the efforts of cultural middlemen and impresarios, it was not difficult to buy a picture or attend a theatre or concert, but it took time, effort and money to become, like Anna Larpent, a person of taste. Why did she and others choose these activities rather than engage in other forms of pleasure or recreation? Why literature and not cards, serious conversation not tittle-tattle, the exhibition room and gallery rather than the public promenade, the concert hall rather than the tavern? Of course, in practice many people of taste enjoyed both – it was not always a question of one rather than the other – but journals and diaries reveal that their authors saw a contrast between virtuous culture and frivolous society. In their eyes taste and morality were compatible, even if some aspects of refined pleasure were to be condemned.

The extraordinary expansion in cultural provision enabled many aristocrats, gentlefolk, merchants and artisans to pursue their cultural interests, but it does not explain why they should want to belong to a

community of taste. The conventional modern answer to such questions is usually derived from *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), the classic work of the nineteenth-century sociologist Thorstein Veblen, who believed that the pursuit of good taste and the growth of refinement were prompted by a desire to emulate and imitate one's social superiors. Owning exquisite pictures and patronizing the opera were signs of social distinction, and people who aspired to high status therefore did both. In Anna Larpent's case, the assiduous pursuit of refinement was therefore less a matter of keeping up with her middle-class friends than of imitating and emulating her aristocratic acquaintances – the Duke and Duchess of Queensberry and Earl Bathurst. Veblen's interpretation would not have surprised most eighteenth-century critics, who had long anticipated his views, seeing emulation as either the spur to improvement or, with less approval, as a source of luxury and moral corruption. (It would, however, have seemed less credible to Larpent herself, whose journal offers not an iota of evidence that social emulation mattered to her.) But neither Veblen nor his Georgian predecessors explain why taste rather than some other individual quality was seen as so important in deciding a person's status.

To understand why people considered an interest in the arts and imaginative literature as a way to lead a better, more virtuous life, we have to see how cultural pursuits fitted into a larger scheme of social and moral values. We need to return to the origins of public culture, to the circumstances of its inception, for they profoundly affected how it was understood.

The last years of the seventeenth century and the first of the eighteenth were not only years of transition, when the focus of English culture moved from the court to the city, but also an age of political, religious and moral crisis. Political passions, religious enthusiasm and social antagonism divided Britain. The wounds of the civil wars refused to heal; sectarianism was rife. Thriving commerce and powerful new financial interests made the nation richer, but they appeared to undermine the landed social order, to perpetuate flux and change, to fragment society and destroy its unity. And recent new philosophy and scientific discoveries and new ways of thinking, though they could be reconciled with more traditional beliefs, nevertheless encouraged doubt, dispute and heterodoxy. The

propertied classes, attached to beliefs that valued a stable political order based on land and frightened by the possible return of the upheavals of the Civil Wars, hankered after a harmonious, unchanging polity. In the *Spectator* No. 125 Joseph Addison graphically depicted the ills of national disharmony:

There cannot a greater judgment befall a country than such a dreadful spirit of division that rends a government into two distinct people, and makes them greater strangers to one another, than if they were actually two different nations . . . A furious party-spirit, when it rages in its full violence, exerts it self in civil war and bloodshed; and when it is under its greatest restraints naturally breaks out in falsehood, detraction, calumny, and a partial administration of justice. In a word, it fills a nation with spleen and rancour, and extinguishes all the seeds of good-nature, compassion and humanity . . .

If this party-spirit has so ill an effect on our morals, it has likewise a great one upon our judgments . . . Knowledge and Learning suffer in a particular manner from this strange prejudice, which at present prevails amongst all Ranks of the British Nation. As Men formerly became eminent in learned Societies by their Parts and Acquisitions, they now distinguish themselves by the Warmth and Violence with which they espouse their respective Parties. Books are valued upon the like Considerations: an Abusive Scurrilous Style passes for Satyr, and a dull Scheme of Party-Notions is called fine Writing.

Whigs and Tories alike concurred in regretting such a state of affairs, but their disagreements over how unanimity should be achieved perpetuated the divisiveness they so desperately wished to overcome.

For moralists and social commentators the problem was to tame the diverse issues of religion and politics, to create coherence and unity in a society characterized by change and variety, and to harness the insights of the new philosophy. Many different solutions were offered, but the important one for our purposes, both because it placed special emphasis on works of the imagination and the fine arts and because of its subsequent popularity, was the notion of politeness.

Today the term politeness conjures up ideas of etiquette, of conventions that help to smooth social relations, even if they are not essential