

Mozart: An Overture

(1992)*

In preparing this essay, I have found myself sizing up Mozart as if I were thinking of writing a novel in which he might appear as a character. I was not aware at the outset that this was what I was doing. It was only after I had written half of it that I recognized what I had done.

Mozart is immediately accessible to the naive. Others obviously require preparation. It is no criticism of twelve-tone composers, to choose an obvious example, to note that they oblige us to give some thought to the formal assumptions they expect us to share. Mozart, however, can be loved freely and naturally by amateurs. It is because I am an amateur that I have been invited to discuss Mozart, and I intend to make the most of my amateur standing, bypassing the problems that intrigue and vex the learned specialists I have read in my efforts to get a handle of my own on this subject.

My best course is to convert ignorance to an advantage. What follows is a confession, supplemented by such tentative ideas as are bound to flutter out when any of us makes an open declaration of this sort. I shall begin by saying that there are corners of my existence which from the first were furnished by Mozart. It does not seem to me that any other musical tenant ever had to be moved out to make room for him. I had an older sister – much my senior – who played the piano. She did not play particularly well. She was a perfect metronome (metrognome) of a pianist, but she did familiarize me with Mozart.

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There was a manufacturer in Chicago by the name of Gulbrantson, and in his advertisements, painted on brick walls, an infant was shown pressing the pedals of a piano. The legend was: 'The richest child is poor without a musical education.' This was a warning taken seriously by parents in the Midwest. I was given violin lessons at an early age. Many of the music teachers were refugees from revolutionary Russia. Mine was a stout gloomy man from Odessa seeking a prodigy, a second Heifetz or Menuhin or Elman, to make his reputation. Obviously I lacked the gifts he was looking for, and he would snatch the bow and whip my bottom with it. He was so peevish and futile that I was more amused than hurt. I did, somehow, learn to fiddle adequately, and until middle age I was on the lookout for amateur musicians like myself and had the pleasure occasionally of playing Mozart sonatas arranged for duets and trios. In my student years I was an unpaid usher at the Auditorium Theater; the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and the San Carlo Opera came regularly to Chicago. Samuel Insull, the utilities tycoon, gave the city an opera house (before he fled to Greece and had to be extradited). International celebrities were brought to Orchestra Hall by Hurok the impresario. There were excellent teachers of theory and music history and first-rate performers at the south end of the Loop. Although I was not trained in a conservatory, I absorbed a considerable amount of music, and while I preferred books to instruments, there were odd corners of my existence reserved for Handel, Mozart, Pergolesi, etc.

I have now explained my amateur standing and will go on to the confessions I promised. But what does one confess today, when the worst of the sins have become venial? It is the violation of orderly processes of thought as prescribed by the higher rationality that throws you into sin. To be unscientific is in our time a grave mental offense.

Some of my speculations on Mozart are notably unscientific. I often puzzle over the nature of his genius. How was it that it should appear so early and develop so swiftly and be so complete? Was it because his father was an educator of corresponding genius? Nobody ever suspected genius of any sort in Leopold. Neither do the educational or genetic contributions of his mother strike his biographers

as exceptional. Mozart, to borrow a figure from William Blake, was a piece of ground already spaded and seeded. It looks, in other words, as if he had brought it all with him. And then I think of other prodigies born into mathematical or musical families. The mature forms assumed by these exceptional creatures are not to be accounted for by environmental or historical theories. They resemble the flowers or the insects, they have powers that astonish and physiological refinements or resources of intelligence too curious to be explained by probability theory or the ponderous slowness of time, or by trial and error. What they suggest is the intervention of invisible purposes. 'To a certain extent,' writes Alfred Einstein, 'it is true that Mozart was only a visitor upon this earth. Mozart as a man was nowhere truly at home: neither in Salzburg, where he was born, nor in Vienna, where he died.'

At the heart of my confession, therefore, is the hunch that with beings such as Mozart we are forced to speculate about transcendence, and this makes us very uncomfortable, since ideas of transcendence are associated with crankiness or faddism – even downright instability and mental feebleness. These are the charges and the guilts you open yourself to when you confess that you find it impossible to dismiss such speculations. To some reasonable minds this might lead to the limiting of art – art in which religious or other 'undesirable' tendencies survive – to ceremonial or traditional observances. On occasions like the present one: occasions of cultural piety.

Music, I assume (amateurishly), is based on a tonal code containing, inevitably, expressions of the whole history of feeling, emotion, belief – of essences inseparable from what we call our 'higher life.' I suggest also that this is where we tend to go when we have gone as far as we can in the new positive orthodoxies that keep us within bounds – the assumptions which our education and the business of the world have trained us to accept as normal, practical, and indispensable: the founding postulates of our scientific and technological achievements.

From all this a Mozart gives us an orderly and also an emotional exit – an endlessly rich and exalted release.

I don't want to make too much of this notion of a profound originality coming from God knows what source. I invoke it as a corrective to the earthbound psychology that rules our minds in this century. It does no harm to be reminded that this psychology is painfully limiting to the intelligence and is often little more than a convenient way to dispose of troublesome intimations of a forbidden nature. The miracles that fascinate us are the scientific and technological ones. These have changed space, time, and nature. To positivists ours is an object world ruled by ideas. A contemporary environment is made up of such embodied ideas – ideas of residence, transportation, seeing and hearing at a distance, etc. By means of such ideas (and they are highly sophisticated) the earth itself has been humanized. This is simple enough to see, and externally self-explanatory. Press a switch and you will see people, you will hear them speak. Few of us, however, can explain the techniques by which this is accomplished.

Years ago I read a curious book by Ortega y Gasset called *The Revolt of the Masses*. In it Ortega explains what a Mass Man is: he is not invariably a proletarian – educated professionals may also be mass men. This is not the place to explain what Ortega was talking about. Only one of his arguments concerns me here: he says that the Mass Man is unable to distinguish between a natural object or process and an artifact, a second-nature object. He takes it for granted, as part of the order of things, that when he enters an elevator and presses the button he will go up. When mechanisms fail, when, for instance, elevators do not rise or buses do not arrive, the spirit in which he protests reveals that he understands elevators or buses to be free commodities like daylight or the universal availability of breathable air.

To congratulate ourselves, however, on our educated enlightenment is simply an evasion of the real truth. We the 'educated' cannot even begin to explain the technologies of which we make daily use. We speak of electronics or cybernetics – but it is all in vain. Natural processes are beyond us too, and despite our talk of lipids or carbohydrate metabolism, we understand virtually nothing about the physiology of digesting or the transmission of nerve impulses.

Face-to-face with the technological miracles without which we could not live our lives, we are as backward as any savage, though education helps us to conceal this from ourselves and others. Indeed, it would utterly paralyze us to ponder intricate circuits or minicomputers, or attempt to gain a clear understanding of the translation of the discoveries of particle physics into modern arms.

These, however, are the miracles for which we have a very deep respect and which, perhaps, dominate our understanding of what a miracle is. A miracle is what brings people to Australia in ten hours. And we owe this to the scientific revolution.

What I am calling to your attention is entirely transparent. No other generation in history has lived in a world miraculously transformed by readily available artifacts. Ortega y Gasset notwithstanding, we are by and large no better at distinguishing nature from artifice than his *Mass Man*. Worse, we have lost Ortega's old-fashioned confidence in our power to explain what nature is. Can we say that we comprehend the metabolic internal blizzard that converts matter into energy?

Our assignment, in one sense, is simply to man the artifacts that technology provides in ever more esoteric and miraculous variations. But what of the music of *Don Giovanni* or *Così fan Tutte* considered as a miracle – as a comprehensive revelation of what Eros can be in two such different outpourings of sound?

I suppose almost everyone would feel that just as the principles behind a product of technology can be fully grasped if we determine to study the method laid down for us by intelligent beings whom basically we resemble, we will be able also to give a full account of these operas. But when we try to do that, the music brings us to a standstill. There is a dimension of music that prohibits final comprehension and parries or fends off the cognitive habits we respect and revere. We appear to feel that we are riding the crest of a wave of comprehension that has already overcome nature, and we are committed to the belief that there are no mysteries – there is only the not-yet-known. But I think I have made myself clear. We are as ignorant of fundamentals as human beings ever were. Self-respect demands that we appear to be 'with it.'

And perhaps what I have been saying is related to the growing importance of Mozart, for as the twentieth century concludes, his Romantic rivals seem less great than they did fifty or sixty years ago. The most accomplished of contemporary music historians, writers like the brilliant Wolfgang Hildesheimer, feel that he is the sort of man we find singularly familiar, and Peter Porter some time ago in an *Encounter* essay (June 1983) wrote that Mozart 'seems a modern man,' closer to ourselves than Bach, 'a personality in sight and comprehensible to our temperament.' He goes on to say that there is enough evidence (by which he means documentary evidence – correspondence, personal reminiscences, data brought to light by researchers) 'to induce a great sadness when we consider Mozart's life. It will not look like a triumph, it refuses to allow us to escape an uncomfortable if anachronistic sense of guilt; no arrangement of facts or twisting of fiction, from the sugary distortions of Sacha Guitry to the demeaning simplifications of Peter Schaffer's *Amadeus*, will fit Mozart out in the garments of vindication or apotheosis. He is so very unlike Beethoven, a titan of a very different sort.'

Now, 'modern' is a curious term: it can be used to degrade as well as (or more often than) to elevate. It can mean decadent, degenerate, nihilistic, abysmal, at one end – or it can signify a capacity to overcome contemporary disorder, or to adumbrate a stage in the formation of a new superiority, or to begin to distill a new essence. It can mean that the best of contemporary minds show qualities of power, subtlety, scope, and resourcefulness, of infinite plasticity, adaptability, of the courage to cope with all that world history has dumped on the generations of this present age. 'The human mind,' E. M. Forster observed, 'is not a dignified organ.' And he called upon us to 'exercise it sincerely.'

In Mozart's case, 'sincerity' is a marginal consideration, since he was not obliged to seek the truth in German, French, Italian, or English. His objective was not sincerity; it was bliss. But as we will all understand immediately, the view that the mind is not a dignified organ is modern. It is exactly what we expect. It is this casualness, irony, levity, that we seem in our time to take for granted. The

starchiness of nineteenth-century ideals, the pompousness of twentieth-century dictators, are rejected and mocked as dangerous and false. Reading about Mozart's personal life, we recognize that he was informal, to say the least, *sans façon*. He struck no attitudes – the very idea of 'genius' was alien to him. From his letters we see that as an observer he was singularly modern. Let me give a few examples of this. Here is his description of the Archduke Maximilian, a brother of the emperor and the new Archbishop of Cologne:

When God gives man a sacred office, He generally gives him understanding; and so it is, I trust, in the case of the Archduke. But before he became a priest, he was far more witty and intelligent and talked less, but more sensibly. You should see him now. Stupidity oozes out of his eyes. He talks and holds forth incessantly and always in falsetto – and he has started a goitre. In short, the fellow has changed completely. (1781 – *aetat.* 35)

And here is his description of a Dominican monk from Bologna:

. . . regarded as a holy man. For my part I do not believe it, for at breakfast, he often takes a cup of chocolate and immediately afterwards a good glass of strong Spanish wine; and I have myself had the honor of lunching with this saint who at table drank a whole decanter and finished up with a full glass of strong wine, two large slices of melon, some peaches, pears, five cups of coffee, a whole plate of cloves, and two full saucers of milk and lemon. He may of course be following some sort of diet, but I do not think so, for it would be too much; moreover, he takes several little snacks during the afternoon . . . (21 August 1770)

Mozart has the novelist's gift of characterizing by minute particulars. He is not respectful, neither is he severe – not even when he writes: 'Stupidity oozes out of his eyes.' His manner of seeing comes directly from his nature, perhaps from a source close to the source of his music. The two styles, the verbal and the musical, have something in common. He often comments on the voices of the people he describes. The archbishop holds forth in falsetto. The poet Wieland, whom he meets in Mannheim in 1777, 'has a rather

childish voice' and a defect of speech 'that makes him speak very slowly,' so that he 'can't say half a dozen words without stopping.' As for singers, he comments extensively on them: 'A fine singer, a baritone, and forced when he sings falsetto, but not as much as Tibaldi in Vienna.' 'Bradamante, in love with Ruggiero . . . is sung by a poor Baroness . . . She appears under an assumed name . . . has a passable voice, and her stage presence would not be bad, but she sings off pitch like the devil.'

He has a keen modern appetite for personal impressions, Einstein notes. About landscape – though he is a great traveler – he rarely writes. 'About art he did not express himself at all.' Einstein adds a little further on that in Rome, 'the most beautiful flowers did not interest him, for he was sitting at home covering paper with music.' From Rome, Mozart had written to his sister jokingly that beautiful flowers were being carried past in the street – 'so Papa has just told me.'

To be modern is to be mobile, forever en route, with few local attachments anywhere, cosmopolitan, not particularly disturbed to be an outsider in temporary quarters. On his journeys Mozart composed in his head. He was mobile by temperament. Nissen, one of his early biographers, records that Mozart's sister-in-law remembered that in his last years 'he looked at everyone with a piercing glance, giving balanced answers to everything, whether he was merry or sad, and yet he seemed at the same time to be lost in thought about something entirely different. Even when he washed his hands in the morning he walked up and down, never stood still, knocked one heel against the other and was always reflective . . . He was always enthusiastic about new entertainments, riding and billiards, for example . . . He was always moving his hands and feet, always playing with something, e.g., his hat, pockets, watch-chain, tables, chairs, as if they were pianos . . .'

What *was* permanent, evidently, he carried within. In 1788, he writes from Vienna: 'We are sleeping tonight, for the first time, in our new quarters [in Währing], where we shall remain both summer and winter. On the whole the change is all the same to me, in fact I prefer it . . . I shall have more time to work.'

Einstein tells us that Mozart and his wife changed their residence in Vienna eleven times within a period of ten years, 'sometimes after so little as three months. Their life was a perpetual tour, changing from one hotel room to another, and the hotel rooms were soon forgotten . . . He was ready at any time to change Vienna for another city or Austria for another country.'

Nor was art a 'project' for him, as it was to be for others in the nineteenth century. Nor did the thought of being a genius fortify him. He shed superfluous externals, and he appears early in life to have made his reckonings as to what could be dispensed with. This was done with intuitive rapidity and sureness – the clear signs of a pure and faultless freedom. To a modern, the posturing of Romantic geniuses has become hateful. It smells of public relations and imagemaking. In this line we think of Wagnerian megalomania, histrionics, cultism, and politics. Mozart has none of these defects or designs. He does not care about politics. 'Power,' in the classic modern sense, holds no appeal for him. Scheming is utterly alien to his character. And on the practical side he is utterly without foresight. His recent biographers agree that the management of his own affairs was disastrous. From these failures he withdrew into work. Among his Viennese contemporaries, says Peter Porter, summarizing the conclusions of Hildesheimer, he was judged to be unserious and improvident by nature. But this negligence or inability to foresee consequences (how could he fail to understand that *Figaro* would antagonize the Viennese aristocracy and that it would punish him by boycotting his concerts?) is something like the Roman flowers, the endless procession of carriages on tour, the landscapes he ignores, the many changes of residence. These transient experiences are a background or horizon. *The Marriage of Figaro* had to be written; the withdrawal of patronage consequently had to be endured. And so with other snubs, defeats, and disappointments. He fell in love with a woman who would not have him and made do with her sister. Of the lively interest he took in Constanze we know from the boisterous sexual candor of the letters he wrote her. Was he making the best of things, or are his fantasies about his genitalia and hers also on the transient

horizon, a pleasant subject for correspondence – *not* after all the main thing?

We today have a particular fondness for Mozart's adolescent levity about sex (and what Porter speaks of as his 'coprophilic fun and his . . . infantile sexuality'). But Mozart's own contemporaries were habitually freer in this regard than we are. His mother, too, used plain language. The nineteenth century gave us an interregnum of puritanism. I have often thought that 'repression' and 'inhibition' as described by Freud refer to a temporary shift of 'moral' emphasis. Students of English literature are familiar with this move from the open sensuality of Fielding and Laurence Sterne to Victorian prudery ('propriety') in Dickens or Trollope. Rousseau's *Confessions* or Diderot's *Les Bijoux Indiscrets* confirms this. What the twentieth century has is a 'liberation,' with all the excesses and exaggeration the term connotes. It would be wrong to take Mozart as a herald of the 'freedoms' we 'conquered' at midcentury. He was not at all the pioneer 'swinger' of Peter Schaffer's *Amadeus*. Seventy years ago, my Russian immigrant uncles, aunts, and cousins were still speaking freely and colorfully about bodily functions and things sexual – 'country matters,' as Shakespeare called them in *Hamlet*. (Such lewd double entendres are common in his plays. Specialists in Tudor and Stuart literature have collected them.) Bawdry has a long pedigree. Conversation in the courts of Elizabeth and James I was not what we came later to call 'respectable.'

Mozart's lewdness in his letters to his 'Bäsele' – a first cousin – might have been recorded, Mr Porter says, for a textbook on infantile sexuality. But it is nothing like our modern street language, which is seldom funny and tends rather to become routine. The high-spirited obscenities of the eighteenth century disappear from the Romantic literature of the nineteenth – perhaps as a concession to the self-improving bourgeois reader with his peculiar ideas of gentility.

Yet it is no use pretending that Mozart was not curiously erratic. There is plenty of evidence that he acted up, that he clowned, performed tricks, made gags. He had a liking for low company too. A certain Frau Pichler, who wrote historical novels, observes that

both Mozart and Haydn never ‘demonstrated in their personal intercourse any unusual intellectual power at all, and scarcely any learning or higher culture. In society they displayed only a common temperament, insipid jests, and [in the case of Mozart] a thoughtless way of life; and yet what depths, what worlds of fantasy, harmony, melody . . .’ etc., she writes.

As this same lady once sat at the piano playing ‘Non più andrai’ from *Figaro*, ‘Mozart, who happened to be present, came up behind me, and my playing must have pleased him, for he hummed the melody with me, and beat time on my shoulder; suddenly, however, he pulled up a chair, sat down, told me to keep playing the bass, and began to improvise variations so beautifully that everyone held his breath, listening to the music of the German Orpheus. But all at once he had had enough; he jumped up and, as he often did in his foolish moods, began to leap over table and chairs, miaowing like a cat and turning somersaults like an unruly boy.’ Hildesheimer speaks of such outbursts as ‘physical necessities, automatic compensation for a transcendent mind . . . they are the results, as well as the reflection, of mental distraction.’

To think about Mozart’s personality and the circumstances of his life is, to me, very pleasant – his boisterous humor is so very contemporary. Still, we can no more understand him than we can understand our contemporary selves. We come away from books like Hildesheimer’s study of Mozart confessing that the riddle of his character is beyond us. It stands concealed behind his music, and we will never get to the bottom of it. When we say he is modern I suppose we mean that we recognize the signature of Enlightenment, of reason and universalism, in his music – we recognize also the limitations of Enlightenment. We have learned from history that enlightenment, liberation, and doom may go together. For every avenue liberation opens, two are closed. Within Mozart’s cheerful daylight secularity there is always an otherworldly darkness. And the freedom he expresses is never without sadness, a deep submission to melancholy. We are endowed – so I interpret him – with comprehension, but what we are required to comprehend is too much for us.

Hildesheimer is persuaded that both Mozart and Beethoven carried what he calls 'a metaphysical aura.' Beethoven was aware of this, and he cultivated and exploited it. Mozart, not knowing that he had such an aura, 'exaggerated his physical presence with continual diversionary tactics, which became routine.' He was clownishly demonic. He was a 'stranger' who never understood the nature of his strangeness. Beethoven asserts his greatness. Mozart does not. He is not concerned with himself, rather he is intent on what he was born to do. In him there are few indications of ordinary *amour propre* or common vanity, and no signs whatever of *grandezza*.

Now, all this talk of 'metaphysical auras' can be irritating, I know. Still, when people who are clearly sensible insist on speaking of metaphysics and auras, we had better control our irritation prudently and ask ourselves why clear-minded, well-balanced people are obliged to forsake the positivist common sense on which we all rely. It is the music itself that drives them away from the rules of intellectual respectability. The music presses us to ask why it is so continually fertile, novel, ingenious, inexhaustible – why it is able to tell us so much more than other languages can tell us and why it is given so readily, easily, gratuitously. For it is not a product of effort. What it makes us see is that there are things which must be done easily. Easily or not at all – that is the truth about art. Concentration without effort is at the heart of the thing. Will and desire are silenced (as many mystics have understood), and work is transformed into play. And what we see in Mozart's earthly record is the preservation of what matters amid distractions and harassments – shall we make a sketchy list of these: lodgings, taverns, salons, cold and stupid aristocrats, unpaid debts, petty tyrants like the Bishop of Salzburg and his flunkies, endless travels, irrelevant landscapes, bad music, disappointments in love. Even the burden of a natural superiority, which breeds rancor in others and must therefore be dissembled.

Against this, there is the understanding that work should be transformed into play – perhaps as Wisdom puts it in the Book of Proverbs: 'The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his ways, before he made anything from the beginning. I was set up from

eternity, and of old, before the earth was made . . . I was with him forming all things: and was delighted every day, playing before Him at all times; playing in the world. And my delights were to be with the children of men.’ (Proverbs 8:22–3, 30–1)

We can’t speak of Mozart without wondering ‘where it all comes from,’ without touching on certain ‘eternal,’ ‘mysterious’ questions. Many have credibly argued that he is ‘modern’ (‘one of us’), and yet it is the essence of the ‘modern’ to demystify. How is it that our ‘modern Mozart’ should *increase* mystery? We are inclined to think of mystery as woolly or amorphous, yet Mozart, working in the light, openly, is all coherence. Although he does not use a cognitive language, we can, up to a point, understand him fully. His sounds and rhythms correspond to states of feeling that we have all somehow learned to interpret. This musical mode of speech is different from the semantic one that allows us to specify or denote. We feel moved to go beyond such speech, either in the direction of the pure exactness of mathematics or in the direction of the higher affects of sound or sight. The latter, the affects, are all the more powerful because they go beyond the definitions of speech, of intelligible discourse. This music of Mozart is the speech of affects. What can we call it *but* mysterious. In it we hear; through it is expressed our sense of the radical mystery of our being. This is what we hear in *Così Fan Tutte* or in the G-minor Quintet. In the latter more than a few writers have told us that they hear ‘the prayer of a lonely man,’ ‘the Garden of Gethsemane’ – ‘cutting pain,’ says Abert. I prefer the term ‘radical mystery’ to these religious interpretations. Radical mystery leaves Mozart freer to go into the problematic regions of existence in his Mozartean way. And all we can say about it is that it is ‘from beyond.’

A few remarks now about the conditions of those of our contemporaries who listen to music. They – or, rather, we – can’t be taken for granted. They are not what they were in the eighteenth century. I have already referred to Mozart as modern and drawn the usual unflattering picture, distorted if you like, of man in the present age. A strange creature – cerebral but not too intelligent, he lives in a special realm of consciousness, but his consciousness is inadequate.

Applied science and engineering have so transformed the external world that it affects him as something magical. We know of course that it isn't magical; it is highly rational – a kind of rationality that might as well be magical. Self-respect demands that he (the pronoun includes us all) make gestures of rationality to signify that he is capable, at any rate, of keeping up. But you would agree – I think we are all ready to confess – that this 'keeping up' is very tiring.

Civilized man does not give himself a good press. I don't say that he deserves to hold a good opinion of himself. Philosophy and literature have been particularly hard on him from the beginning of the modern age, and by now 'Eurocentrism' has become a terrible reproach. We reproach ourselves even for the few decencies, bourgeois relics, with which we cover our shame. We hear from all sides that we are 'inauthentic' and that we are, every one of us, impostors.

All of this, I think, comes from *us*. It is *we* who set up and *we* who knock down. If we are impostors, we are also those who expose impostors. This 'being human' is our very own show. All that mankind is said to be, pro and contra, comes from mankind itself. Everything that we can possibly conceive is made into fact, and it all comes out of bottomless reservoirs of our invention and fantasy. Everything has to be tried out. Funnily enough, the same mind that takes in 'Dallas' or rap music is also accessible to Homer and Shakespeare.

These are not merely diverting speculations. The awful truth is visible behind them. In this century, although briefly, slavery reappeared in Europe – in the wartime factories of Germany and in Siberian mines and forests. Only a few decades later, the finest kitchens and bathrooms in history were produced in the West, a wide-scale consumer culture such as the world had never seen.

But there is no need to make an inventory of the times. It is demoralizing to describe ourselves to ourselves yet again. It is especially hard on us since we believe (as we have been educated to believe) that history has formed us and that we are all mini-summaries of the present age.

When I say, however, that the mind that takes in the 'Dallas'

melodrama is capable of absorbing Homer and Shakespeare – or Mozart, since he is the focus of our attention – I am saying also that we have transhistorical powers. The source of these powers is in our curious nature. We have concentrated with immense determination on what forms us externally but that need not actually govern us internally. It can do that only if we grant it the right.

But we as individuals, in inner freedom, need not grant any such thing. This is a good moment to remind ourselves of this – now that the great ideological machines of the century have stopped forever and are already covered with rust.

What is attractive about Mozart (against this background of rusting ideological machinery) is that he is an individual. He learned for himself (as in *Così fan tutte*) the taste of disappointment, betrayal, suffering, the weakness, foolishness, and vanity of flesh and blood, as well as the emptiness of cynicism. In him we see a person who has only himself to rely on. But what a self it is, and what an art it has generated. How deeply (beyond words) he speaks to us about the mysteries of our common human nature. And how unstrained and *easy* his greatness is.

PART ONE

Riding Off in All Directions

In the Days of Mr Roosevelt

(1983)*

It was in Chicago that Roosevelt was nominated in 1932, when I was seventeen years of age, just getting out of high school. When he defeated Hoover in November of that year, he didn't become President, merely. He became *the* President, presiding over us for so long that in a movie of the early forties, Billie Burke – Silly Billie – said to a fat, flummoxed senator that she had just been to Washington to see the coronation.

Early in the Depression, my algebra teacher, an elderly lady whose white hair was piled in a cumulus formation over her square face and her blue-tinted square glasses, allowed herself a show of feeling and sang 'Happy Days Are Here Again.' Our astonishment was great. As a rule, Miss Scherbarth was all business. Teachers seldom sounded off on topics of the day. It's true that when Lindbergh flew to Paris, Mrs Davis told the class, 'I do hope, from my heart, that he is as good a young man as he is brave, and will never disappoint us.' A revelation to the sixth grade. But that Miss Scherbarth should interrupt her equations to sing out for FDR showed that the country had indeed been shaken to its foundations. It wasn't until later that I understood that City Hall was busted and that Miss Scherbarth wasn't being paid. In the winter of '33, when I was a freshman at Crane College, the whole faculty went to the Loop to demonstrate at City Hall. Shopkeepers were taking their scrip (municipal funny money) at a discount. My English teacher, Miss Ferguson, said to us afterward, 'We forced our way into the mayor's office and chased him round his desk.'

* *Esquire*, December 1983.

Miss Ferguson, a splendid, somewhat distorted, but vigorous old thing, believed in giving full particulars. To chant the rules of composition was part of her teaching method. She would dance before the blackboard and sing out, 'Be! Specific!' to the tune of Handel's 'Hallelujah Chorus.' A charming woman, she had overlapping front teeth, like the new First Lady. As she flourished her arms while singing her messages, it was not difficult to imagine her in the crowd that burst through the mayor's doors. They cried, 'Pay us!'

In 1931, Chicago had elected its first foreign-born mayor. He was a Bohemian – Anton Cermak – and a formidable politician, one of the builders of the Democratic machine, soon to be taken over by the Irish. Cermak, who had tried to block Roosevelt's nomination, went down to Florida to make peace with the President-elect. According to Len O'Connor, one of the most knowledgeable historians of Chicago, Pushcart Tony was urged by alderman Paddy Bauler, who bossed the German vote, to come to terms with FDR. 'Cermak,' Bauler later recalled, 'said he didn't like the sonofabitch. I sez, "Listen, for Cry sakes, you ain't got any money for the Chicago schoolteachers, and this Roosevelt is the only one who can get it for you. You better get over there and kiss his ass or whatever you got to do. Only you better get the goddamn money for them teachers, or we ain't goin' to have a city that's worth runnin'." So he goes over and, Christ Almighty, next thing I hear on the radio is that Cermak's got shot.'

The assassin, Zangara, had supposedly aimed at Roosevelt, although there were those in Chicago who asserted that Cermak was his real target. Lots of people were in a position to benefit from Cermak's death. As he was rushed to the hospital, Cermak supposedly whispered to Roosevelt, 'I'm glad it was me instead of you.' This legend was the invention of a Hearst reporter, John Dienhart, who was a drinking pal of the mayor, as well as his public relations man. Dienhart's last word on this subject, as quoted in O'Connor's *Clout*, was: 'I couldn't very well have put out a story that Tony would have wanted it the other way around.'

Years later, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that in a letter of thanks to Mrs W. F. Cross, the Florida woman who had struck away

Zangara's arm as he was pulling the trigger, the White House had written: 'By your quick thinking a far greater tragedy was averted.' Colonel McCormick's files collected anti-Roosevelt facts as Atlantic beaches gather stones. The Colonel's heart never softened toward the Roosevelts. But the writer of the White House letter, perhaps Roosevelt himself, had it right. Alas for Pushcart Tony Cermak, the tragedy *would* have been far greater.

The Roosevelt era began, therefore, with the unwilling martyrdom of a commonplace Chicago politician who had gone to make a deal – an old deal – with the new guy, an Eastern swell, old money from an estate on the Hudson, snooty people, governor of New York (so what!), a president with pince-nez and a long cigarette holder. How was Pushcart Tony to know that he had been killed by a bullet aimed at the very greatest of American politicians? Jefferson (himself no mean manipulator) and Madison had had eighteenth-century class. Jackson had had fire. Lincoln was our great-souled man. Wilson was the best America had to show in the way of professorial WASPdom. But FDR was a genius in politics. He was not an intellectual. He browsed in books of naval history, preferring those that were handsomely illustrated, and he pored over his stamp albums like many another patrician. Great politicians are seldom readers or scholars. When he needed brainy men, he sent to Columbia University for them. Following the traditions of monarchy, he created a privy council of brain trusters, who had more influence, more money to spend, than the members of his cabinet. Experts now tell us that Roosevelt was an ignoramus in economic matters, and the experts are probably right. But it wasn't the brain trusters who saved the USA from disintegration; it was – oddity of oddities – a country squire from Dutchess County, a man described by a shrewd foreign observer as the Clubman Caesar and by the witty if dangerous Huey Long as Franklin De La No. The unemployed masses, working stiffs, mechanics, laid-off streetcar conductors, file clerks, shoe salesmen, pants pressers, egg candlers, truckdrivers, the residents of huge, drab neighborhoods of 'furriners,' the greenhorns today described as ethnics – all these swore by him. They trusted only Roosevelt, a Groton boy, a Social

Register nob, a rich gentleman from Harvard and Hyde Park. They did not call for a proletarian president.

There are many for whom it was bliss then to be alive. For older citizens it was a grim time – for the educated and professional classes the Depression was grievously humiliating – but for the young this faltering of order and authority made possible an escape from family and routine. As a friend of mine observed during the complacent Eisenhower period: ‘The cost of being poor has gone so high. You have to have a couple of hundred bucks a month. Back in the thirties we were doing it on peanuts.’ He was dead right. Weekly rent in a rooming house was seldom more than three dollars. Breakfast at a drugstore counter cost fifteen cents. The blue-plate-special dinner of, say, fried liver and onions, shoestring potatoes, and coleslaw, with a dessert of Kosto pudding, appeared on the hectographed menu for thirty-five cents. Young hustlers could get by on something like eight or ten dollars a week, with a bit of scrounging. The National Youth Administration paid you a few bucks for nominal assistance to a teacher, you picked up a few more at Goldblatt’s department store as a stockroom boy, you wore hand-me-downs, and you nevertheless had plenty of time to read the files of the old *Dial* at the Crerar Library or in the public library among harmless old men who took shelter from the cold in the reading room. At the Newberry, you became acquainted also with Anarchist-Wobbly theoreticians and other self-made intellectuals who lectured from soapboxes in Bughouse Square, weather permitting.

Between the twenties and the thirties, a change occurred in the country that was as much imaginative as it was economic. In the twenties, America’s stability was guaranteed by big business, by industrialists and statesmen whose Anglo-Saxon names were as sound as the gold standard. On March 4, 1929, when Herbert Hoover was inaugurated, I was out of school with a sore throat and had the new Majestic radio in its absurd large cabinet all to myself. I turned the switch – and there was the new Chief Executive taking the oath of office before a great crowd. From the papers, I knew what he looked like. His hair was parted down the middle, he wore a high collar and a top hat and looked like Mr Tomato on the