The Writing on the Wall

Much of the intellectual preoccupation of the British post-war sociologists was, unquestionably, with social mobility. It was essentially a collective concern with origins and destinations. It was rather widely defined and could have meant any movement from one social position to another including marriage, religious faith, political affiliation, or even geographical movement. All of these possible facets, and especially the complicated connections between them, were part of the research, teaching and practice of this first group of professional sociologists. But within the subject the focus was narrower. Is there an end? John Goldthorpe, who came to Nuffield from Cambridge in ‘69, remains a heavy-weight in it, and has become an international leader in the field along with Robert Erikson of Stockholm. My purpose in adding the present chapter is to emphasise that social mobility has been a personal as well as a professional concern. My knowledge of it is accordingly a life-long accumulation. I appreciate, for example, that recent research has demonstrated the stability of relative rates of class mobility and that the United States is, in this sense, not different from but similar to Britain. But this is not the place for a professional recital of research findings. Instead I want to stress the extreme complication of the determinants of modern mobility.

Let me now add and illustrate a use to which a concern with social mobility may be put. I have in mind the openness of society. The distinctive modern contribution by sociologists is quantitative. But here I look at the case of a noted English composer from earlier in the twentieth century. Belshazzar’s Feast had its première at the Leeds festival in October 1931. William Walton was not yet 30 years of age. He died in 1962 and he is an English institution. Belshazzar’s Feast was a tumultuous success which has become a classic. His biographer, Michael Kennedy, (Portrait of Walton, OUP 1989) relates that ‘with scarcely a dissenting voice, the critics acclaimed it as a landmark in British choral music, perhaps the greatest work in its genre since Elgar’s The Dream of Gerontius in 1900.
and the biggest choral success at Leeds since Vaughan Williams's *A Sea Symphony* at the 1910 festival*. Neville Cardus offered a neat summary 'A clear case of red-hot conception instinctively finding the right and equally red-hot means of expression'. Walton, himself was dissatisfied with it, 'ten minutes too long'. *The Times* critic (10 October 1931) fastened on its barbaric and pagan as distinct from its Judaic and Christian character. 'Stark Judaism from first to last,' he wrote, and 'it cumulates in ecstatic gloating over the fallen enemy, the utter negation of Christianity'. The Ecclesiastical establishment of the Three Choirs Festival refused to admit it to their cathedrals until 1957. It was certainly a triumph of secular rather than sacred music.

I am no expert in musical criticism. I must take Walton's attested genius for granted. Instead I want to raise two different and probably more difficult questions. How does a society recognise genius? And how does society recognise in the second sense – of rewarding and therefore making possible genius seen to become genius heard? Walton's case is illuminating to both these questions.

It is a sociological commonplace that human ability is immensely varied. John Gielgud reads like the recording angel, Elizabeth Schwarzkopf sings like a nightingale, Linford Christie runs like a deer and Margot Fonteyn dances like a Hindu goddess. Most of the rest of us are pedestrian, tongue-tied, tone-deaf, and timorous. Moreover, ability may be even more specific. Walton, was a superb composer but an indifferent performer on the piano for all his practise. The problem all the time is to know how potential is transformed into performance.

There must be a social element in the visibility of talent. No genetic explanation is plausible of, say, the predominance of male painters, or the flowering of music in 18th century Vienna, or the exuberance of footballing talent in Brazil in the 1960s. So social organization overlaps genetic variation in producing the conditions for potential virtuosi in the panoply of human excellence. Society is a more or less inefficient engine for mobilising human achievement. A search goes on all the time in families, schools, workplaces, social clubs, for unusual capacities but the search is focused according to what is currently held to be important or desirable for the working of the recognising institution itself. Society through its agents is a continuously selective process.

There is an underlying Darwinian process of genetic selection which operates essentially on the next generation. It rewards particular capacities by awarding them more children. There are higher rates of reproduction of those who happen to possess those capacities, which con-