

Ugliness is the Promise of Misfortune¹

*Written for the 70th birthday of Renato Zevi,²
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The powerful originality and impassioned violence that inspired D. H. Lawrence to write this pamphlet,³ the maliciousness of the deep psychological penetration, and Lawrence's unappealable condemnation, of English and American hypocrisy – which, in the final analysis, remains contemporary – has made it a small masterpiece that merits inclusion in every library as a document that is as important for the history of art as for the history of revolt.

That Lawrence hit his target is proved by the furious reaction that this pamphlet caused at the time it was published, by its seizure and destruction, as well as by the way that it was subsequently forgotten. The work of art in it is not the paintings themselves, which were a pretext for the scandal and the pamphlet, but the text itself: not only is there a lot of Paul-Louis Courier in it, but Lautréamont, too. And, as always, when a healthy insolence towards everything that an epoch respects and fears is accompanied by the ability to discern the truth and the courage to speak it, an explosive mixture is formed. Let us recall what Courier says: “In everything that makes an impression, there is poison that is more or less watered down, more or less harmless, fatal, according to the length of the work. A grain of *morphine acetate* is lost in a vat, makes one vomit when consumed in a cup, and kills in a spoonful – this is this pamphlet.”⁴

Lawrence rebelled against “the horror and terror” of the physical body expressed in literature and the figurative arts, especially in England, since the end of the 16th century, and he attributed its cause to the spread of syphilis. Thus, his text was the first to sketch out a theory of illness and the moral, social and spiritual effects illness has upon art, that is to say, the contamination of minds by illness.

¹ Written as a preface for D. H. Lawrence, *La Beauté malade* (Editions Allia, 1993), but not included.

² A friend of the author, Renato Zevi (1923-1996) was a painter, a collector of art, and the owner and editor-in-chief at Maison Fratelli Alinari.

³ “Introduction to These Paintings,” that is to say, Lawrence's own paintings, written in 1929.

⁴ *Author's note*: Paul-Louis Courier, *Pamphlet des pamphlets*, 1824.

With a violent and impassioned fire, worthy of the scandalous Rochester⁵ and the anonymous Junius,⁶ Lawrence gives herein a very eloquent description of the consequences and ravages of that contamination. Now that the time of AIDS⁷ has brought the horror and terror of the body and beauty up to date by opening the road to all the repugnant perversities of a new Puritanism, we can appreciate this text as a warning and a prophylactic against the effects of an epidemic that effects the mind.

Lawrence notes caustically: “If America really has sent us syphilis, she got back the full recoil of the horror of it, in her Puritanism.”⁸ Thus, it is because of the horror and terror of the illness that “we have become ideal beings (...) [There has been] the substitution of our ideal, social or political oneness (...) We are *afraid* of the instincts (...) Intuitively, we are dead to one another, we have all gone cold.”⁹

The end of intuitive knowledge, which is the only one that allows man “to love and know woman or the world,” is also the end of his ability “to create images of magical knowledge that we call art.”¹⁰ The quite recent development of this artistic inability has, in the epoch of the triumph of the commodity, reached such perfection that the simulation of a pleasure, “conceptual,” of course, has made the pleasure of simulation the only pleasure that frigid minds that have never been sexually excited can feel.

Lawrence saw it clearly: “In the past men brought forth images of magic awareness, and now it is the convention to admire these images. The convention says, for example, we must admire Botticelli or Giorgione, so Baedeker stars the pictures, and we admire them. But it is all a fake (...) A dead intuitive body stands there and gazes at the corpse of beauty (...) Poor things (...) And they stand in front of a Botticelli Venus, which they know as conventionally ‘beautiful,’ much as a blind man might stand in front of a bunch of roses and pinks and monkey-musk, saying: ‘Oh, do tell me which is red, let me feel red!’”¹¹

⁵ John Wilmot, the second Earl of Rochester (1647-1680), was an anti-Puritan English poet.

⁶ Junius was the pseudonym of an unknown writer who, between 1769 and 1772, published a series of letters in the *Public Advertiser*.

⁷ An allusion to Michel Bounan, *Les Temps du sida* (1990).

⁸ Here we quote directly from the original text, not its translation into French.

⁹ Once again, quoting from the original text.

¹⁰ The original text by Lawrence reads: “By intuition alone can man live and know either woman or world, and by intuition alone can he bring forth again images of magic awareness which we call art.”

¹¹ Quoting from the original text. Note that the words “and pinks and monkey-musk” does not appear in the French version.

The spectacle only produces voyeurs, who look *without seeing*; on the other hand, they look a lot, they are obedient and line up by the thousands to go into the musée d'Orsay or look at Riace's bronzes, pass out from an *overdose*¹² of this beauty (which is elusive for them), and thus become the most recent sufferers from "Stendahl's syndrome."¹³ Their frigidity is also titillated in a Pavlovian way when they contemplate the masterpiece of conceptual installation art that is the Pompidou Centre, erected for them on the ruins of a neighborhood¹⁴ that was reconstructed with the goal of *appearing* to be what it had been for centuries and is no longer: simply *habitable*, because this is what one previously asked of a neighborhood or a house.

Everyone presses him- or herself to become as stupid as the intellectuals so as to not miss out on the correct mental sensation that allows him or her to judge such a monstrous self-celebration of the despotism of *real democracy* as "aesthetic." Immense means are placed at the service of an infinite lack of spirit. They do not fill up the emptiness; they *occupy it*. Thus did the young Tocqueville note, standing before the spectacle of the Greek temples in Sicily: "In general, the Greeks and even the Romans, who had so much greatness in engineering and dealing with the things of this world, never had a taste for the gigantic in matters of art. *They rightfully believed that it is more difficult to make something very beautiful than something very large, and it is almost impossible to make something that is both very beautiful and very large.*"¹⁵

In matters of aesthetics, the most radical option will be the beautiful. In *Zibaldone*, Leopardi says that "from the foolish idea that one has of the absolute beauty comes the very foolish opinion that useful things must not be beautiful or cannot be beautiful. For example, imagine a scientific work. If it isn't beautiful, one can excuse it due to its utility, one can even claim that beauty isn't suitable. And I say that if it isn't beautiful, it is ugly and, finally, it is bad in this regard, even if it is very valuable in every other one (...) Every book has the obligation to be beautiful in all of the rigor this term has, that is to say, completely beautiful. If it isn't beautiful, it is bad in this regard and there is no middle ground between not being beautiful and not being perfectly beautiful and thus it is bad. *And what I say*

¹² English in original.

¹³ Named after Marie-Henri Beyle (1783-1842), a French novelist who took the penname "Stendhal" and suffered from what some wags have called "hyperkulturemia."

¹⁴ The working-class district formerly known as *Les Halles*.

¹⁵ *Author's note*: Tocqueville, *Voyage en Sicile*, 1826-1827.

about books must be extended to all things judged to be communally useful and generally to everything."¹⁶

Quite obviously, our epoch thinks the opposite of what Leopardi does, but in an equally extreme way, and of course it has more means to impose its views. Where this is concerned, we must recognize a certain coherence in it. Its syllogism is *only profit is good, and only what is good is beautiful*. Profit is the only valuable morality and the only aesthetic measure. Here in its nudity appears "the disgusting ghost, the spirit of the times" evoked by Goethe.

Once the criteria of indifference in matters of beauty have been established, once the tiny intellectual, "conceptual" and commodified thrill becomes a conditioned reflex among the vast plebian masses that vote when one whistles to them, the road is opened to *make everything pass*. Lawrence foresaw it: "If you ignore the look of the thing you plaster England with slums and produce at last a state of spiritual depression that is suicidal."¹⁷ And that is what has happened, and not only in England.

Here Lawrence traces out a wandering of the modern spirit, from the fear of beauty to the production of ugliness, from ugliness to misfortune, and from misfortune to cretinism: "Look at New French suburbs! Go through the crockery and furniture departments in the Dames de France or any big shop. The blood in the body stands still before such cretin ugliness. One has to decide that the modern bourgeois is a cretin." And it is indeed he, the cretin, who must buy the "conceptual" masterpieces that are capable of provoking in him the same tiny thrill that the producer, the artist, is still surprised to feel, in his turn, when he first got in touch with the "concept." Thus *everything* is explained, really.

The Stendalhan rule according to which "beauty is the promise of happiness"¹⁸ has its twin at a time when the fear of beauty only produces ugliness: *ugliness is the promise of misfortune!*

From this, one must know that there will be no real revolt against misfortune that is not also a revolt against ugliness.

* All footnotes by the translator, except where indicated.

¹⁶ *Author's note: Zibaldone*, 16 April 1821. My emphasis. [*Translator*: rather than use Sanguinetti's French translation of Leopardi's Italian, I have translated directly from the original source.]

¹⁷ Quoting directly from the original text.

¹⁸ Cf. Stendahl, *De L'Amour* (1822).