The Enjoyment of Vulgarity

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Max Ernst, "The Virgin Spanking the Christ Child before Three Witnesses: Andre Breton, Paul Eluard, and the Painter, 1926

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One of the most indicative signs of the influence of the regressive processes that we have described in the preceding pages of this book [L’Arco e la Clava] with regard to customs and tastes, is the enjoyment of vulgarity, with its more or less subconscious undercurrent of pleasure taken in degradation and self-contamination. Related to it are the various expressions of a tendency towards deformation and a taste for the ugly and the base. A few observations with regard to this matter will perhaps not be devoid of interest.

It is almost unnecessary to point to this tendency in certain forms of a new literary realism, in its choice of subject matter, which does not — as the term otherwise might suggest — deal with “reality” in general, whether individual or social, but only with its most vulgar, base, dirty, or squalid aspects. This subject matter becomes an object of “commitment,” to the point that the term “committed literature” has often been used by authors of this type, whose works are also linked to the specific intent of social and political agitation. However, what above all matters here is that the representatives of this movement do not, in general, themselves come from the world they so morbidly or tendentiously focus their attention on. They are, in fact, members of the bourgeoisie, even the upper bourgeoisie with intellectual pretensions, but which also takes an obvious pleasure in descending into degradation or succumbing to the unwholesome enticements of the inferior.

The same characteristic appears in a much larger domain, in varied forms, for example in the vulgar manner of speaking. Low-class slang has become so common that not only novels and stories, but even radio and television do not hesitate to make use of it on some occasions. The same observation can be made with regard to this phenomenon as was made above. Since this manner of speaking is not that of their social class, of the social environment to which they belong by birth, and since youths, girls, and even elderly persons from the middle classes, from the respectable bourgeoisie, and even parts of the aristocracy, imagine themselves to be demonstrating anti-conformism, freedom, and “modernity” by ostentatiously making use of slang, the real meaning of the phenomenon must simply be a pleasure taken in self-degradation, self-abasement, and self-contamination. To anyone who speaks of freedom from convention here, one should reply that all convention has different aspects; conventional or not, certain customs are — or were — intrinsic to a given class, are — or were — its “style” and distinguishing mark. To take pleasure in flouting them simply means wanting to transgress all limits and all boundaries, and opening oneself to that which lies below. Until recently, the tendency was exactly the opposite: many men and women of the lower classes sought, more or less artificially and clumsily, to imitate the manners, the speech and the behavior of the upper classes. Today the reverse is true, and people think they are emancipated, when, in fact, they are merely vulgar and idiotic.

Another, similar phenomenon, is the taste for the ugly, vulgar, and slovenly in clothing and hair-styles, which has also become fashionable in some circles: workers’ or cyclists’ jerseys, farmers’ jackets and pants, shirts untucked and tied in knots, and so on, together with long and dishevelled hair, and the careless and coarse manners and attitudes that American films have taught a boorish youth, with its whiskey shots and “double gin.” The most prodigious phenomenon of this kind is the fashion, which has not yet waned, of blue jeans for girls, and even for ladies: blue jeans being, as we know, work pants. The passivity and tolerance of the male sex is, in this regard, astonishing. These young women ought to be put in labor and concentration camps; that, rather than luxurious existentialist apartments, would be an appropriate place for them and for their “practical” outfits, and might bestow upon them a salutary reeducation.

In a different field, another manifestation of the taste for vulgarity is the fashion of “screaming” singers, unfortunately widespread in Italy. The tendency is the same. One takes pleasure in descending to the level of the street, of the marketplace: the primitivism of the vulgar voice, at best an almost animal instinctiveness in expression and emotion. Another aspect of the same phenomenon are the ecstasies that white men and women for some time now have been sent into by the raucous and graceless singing of the Negro, which almost seems to take pleasure in its own vileness. At the time of this writing, a particular instance of vulgar singing were the Beatles, who aroused delirious enthusiasm among the youth. Apart from their hairstyles, which are of the kind indicated above, the very name chosen by this group is revealing: these screamers called themselves “the Beatles,” choosing as their symbol the most disgusting of insects [the Italian word scarafaggio can mean either “beetle” or “cockroach”]: yet another obvious example of the pleasure in abjection. We can also point out in passing, by way of illustration, that a member of the Roman aristocracy, who had opened a nightclub, wanted to call it “The Sewer,” had he not been prevented from doing so by the police. But back to the Beatles: have they not been made Knights of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth of England? These are signs of the times. The swamp has even flooded the palaces, which are now, however, only faded relics.

If these phenomena, as we have already stated, fundamentally stem from a pleasure in lowering and debasing oneself, we may add that this pleasure is the same that, in the field of sexology, characterizes masochism and auto-sadism. In terms of “depth psychology,” it is a destructive drive turned against the self. Thus, we should reflect upon the unconscious, but no less active “guilt complex” at work in these phenomena. Perhaps that is their most interesting and, in a way, most positive side. It is as if people sensed the failure to realize their true being, the renunciation of every higher meaning of life which characterizes the present time, and as if, as a result of this obscure feeling of guilt or betrayal, they took pleasure precisely in self-degradation, self-harm, and self-contamination.

But there are also cases where the destructive impulse is turned, not inward, not against ourselves, but outward, or cases where the two directions meet and are mingled. Concerning such cases, we could speak about that another set of typical modern phenomena, the scope of which ranges from the most banal everyday life to the level of culture. Indeed, the sadistic tendency, in the general sense, is also manifested in an aspect of the art and literature that enjoys focusing on types and situations pertaining to a broken, defeated, or corrupted humanity. The well-known pretext is that “this too, is life,” or that all this must be shown for the sole purpose of provoking a reaction. In reality, what is here at work is rather what the Germans call Schadenfreude, a spiteful pleasure, a variety of sadism, of sadistic enjoyment. One enjoys seeing not upright, but fallen, failed, or degenerate man: not the upper limit, but the lower limit of the human condition (we could repeat here, at least in part, what we will say later about the “laughter of the gods”). There was a time when it was mostly Jewish (and Russian) writers and artists that were active in this domain; today, the phenomenon has become ubiquitous.

We see similar phenomena even outside of literature, for example in music and figurative arts. Here again the critics and exegetes have their pretexts. We are told that the meaning of these displays is an “existential revolt,” and in some cases also the political and social motives of leftist “committed intellectuals.” In a well-known book on the Philosophy of Modern Music, Adorno rightly wanted to interpret atonal music along those lines: the irruption of sounds that shatter the norms of traditional harmony and rebel against the canon of the harmonic triad would be the expression of existential revolt against the false ideality and conventions of bourgeois and capitalist society. However, we recognize that in this case, the issue should not be addressed too simplistically; in order to judge, we must consider the variety of possible orientations. Besides what we have already stated about contemporary music in Ride the Tiger, we will return to this issue in another chapter of this book. There is no doubt, however, that in many cases the “valid elements” that we sought to uncover in contemporary music are nonexistent, and that, to a large extent, the right view is instead the one expressed by an American, John Hemming Fry, in a book entitled The Revolt against Beauty, published between the wars. This author speaks of the sadistic and destructive drives that permeate many areas of contemporary art, manifested in the deformations, distortions, and primitivism that characterize a vast category of works of figurative art, painting, and sculpture: the elective affinities with the art of savages and Negroes being, in some cases, a further, quite eloquent indication.[1]

Naturally, our positive standard will not be beauty in the academic, empty, and conventional sense. Instead, we should refer to the opposition between form and the formless, to the idea that every truly creative process consists in the domination of form over the formless, in Greek terms, in the passage from chaos to cosmos. In its higher meaning, recognized not only by the classical authors but also by Nietzsche, the “beautiful” corresponds precisely to the perfect and dominant form, to “style,” to the law that expresses the sovereignty of an idea and a will. From this point of view, the advent of the formless, chaotic, and the “ugly” are signs of a destructive process: not of power but of impotence. It has a regressive character. Psychologically, it always has the same basis: a sadistic tendency, a pleasure in contamination in both the artist and in those who appreciate and enjoy art of this kind (if it is a sincere enjoyment, and not a stupid reverse conformism, as it is in most cases). It is not for nothing that in all representations of demons in fairy-tales or superstition, the grotesque distortion of the human figure is a key element: just as in the works of certain modern artists in fashion today.

Some of the latest dances also have typical self-sadistic traits. It is no longer simply a matter of “syncopated” or intense elemental rhythms (in which case we could even recognize a positive element in all this, as we have stated elsewhere), but dances with grotesquely epileptic and simian movements. It is almost as if they expressed a joy in degrading to the maximum anything noble in the human form through paroxysmal contortions, jumps, and puppet-like convulsions. There is a real sadism in the so-called “arrangements” practiced by almost all the orchestras currently in fashion, which specialize in anarchic “solos” as well as cutting up, tampering with, deforming, and decomposing themes from yesterday’s jazz and popular music that were once still acceptable, to the point of absolute unrecognizability.

Finally, a specific area that must be considered is pornography and obscenity, so widespread nowadays. There is no need to provide examples here. Various controversies, sometimes touching the problem of censorship, have been raised with regard to writings deemed obscene, but have never arrived at any clear notions of this issue. It may be of interest to quickly bring up the trial for “obscenity” brought against the famous novel by D. H. Lawrence, Lady Chatterley’s Lover, a trial that took place in London thirty-two years after its first publication, on the occasion of the release of a cheap edition of the book in England, where it had been banned until then.

In England, as in other countries, the law defines as obscene anything that may have a tendency to corrupt and pervert. It does not permit the prosecution of works that, despite being “obscene,” are valuable in the domains of art, science, or “any other field of public interest.” Two things were at issue in the case of Lawrence’s novel: the obscene language and some descriptions of erotic scenes, which “left nothing to the imagination.”

We must distinguish these two points. With regard to the second, a general problem arises: to what extent sex in itself could be something “obscene” and unclean, so that to talk about it and draw attention to sexual experiences could have a corrupting effect. We know that Lawrence not only denies this, but even makes sex a kind of religion: he saw in sexual experience a means “to realize the living and undivided wholeness of the person.”

In a later chapter we will discuss at some length the nature of the various contemporary trends that glorify sex and propound sexual freedom. For the moment, we will merely state that our view has nothing to do with bourgeois puritanism and its various taboos. One can indeed go beyond the prejudices of Christian sexophobic moralism and recognize that, in many higher civilizations, sex was not at all considered to be something shameful, unclean, and “obscene.” The problem is something else. Today, it is rather to take a stand against anything that only serves to incite a kind of chronic obsession centered around sex and woman, and that is, fundamentally, a systematic attack, conducted on a grand scale, against virile values. For where love and sex predominate, the influence of women predominates, in one way or another. This obsession is fed in countless ways, mostly by media that are not not strictly speaking “obscene,” in magazine illustrations, advertising, films, beauty contests, literature on ”sexual education” with scientific pretensions, female immodesty, striptease shows, shop windows exhibiting lingerie, etc. “Racy” novels are only one particular instance of this. It is the total phenomenon that should be made visible in order to expose its corrupting action, not on the basis of a petty moralism, but because of its surreptitiously corrosive effect on those interests and values ​​that must always remain dominant in any higher type of civilization.

But with regard to the particular matter we are discussing, what is relevant is the “obscene” in the proper sense. In order to adequately define the “obscene” and “pornographic,” a recourse to etymology is sufficient. “Pornographic” comes from porne, which in Greek means “a low-class prostitute” (as opposed to the courtesan); the application of the term to writings that do not only concern themselves with prostitution and low-class prostitution, is arbitrary. The term “obscene,” on the other hand, comes from the Latin word caenum, which means filth, dirtiness, mud (also excrement). It can therefore be used to characterize an aspect of recent erotic literature, which brings us back to our main theme, the taste for all that is dirty, inferior, vulgar. What is relevant here is the choice, in many authors from Lawrence onwards, of the most vulgar, low-class words, ”obscene” words, precisely, to designate sexual organs and sexual acts.

What Henry Miller has written in defense of obscenity [“Obscenity and the Law of Reflection”], with its characteristic confusions, is typical. Miller is also regarded as openly “pornographic.” For him, “obscenity” in literature, with recourse to the most vulgar erotic language, is a form of protest, rebellion, and liberating destruction; through it, Miller wants to awaken man, by means of an anti-conformism that does not hesitate to perform ”sacrilegious acts.” “Ultimately, then, [the artist] stands among his own obscene objurgations like the conqueror midst the ruins of a devastated city. . . . he knocked to awaken [. . .].” Here, we are really at the limits of the ridiculous.[2] Since Miller is not a theoretician, but primarily a novelist, he should provide some compelling examples of these miraculous powers of “obscenity”; but his books are not even exciting in the manner of certain risqué literature; instead, it all boils down to the grotesque and the dirty when subject matter of this kind is treated and erotic scenes are described. All that remains is the satisfaction in pure and simple obscenity in the etymological sense mentioned above, the reference to sex being secondary, and, for our purposes, irrelevant, since it is possible to speak of even the most risqué matters while avoiding vulgarity and obscenity. A short book generally categorized as pornographic literature, Gamiani, is said to have been written by Alfred de Musset to win a bet that he could describe the wildest and most perverse erotic scenes in a way “that leaves nothing to the imagination” without using a single vulgar word; certain works of anonymous French literature sold under the counter (for example, Vingtquatre nuits charnelles), offer further examples of the same kind. Thus, beyond any moralistic sexual taboo, the salient point is precisely “obscenity” — and the current use of obscene language, regardless of absurd pretexts like those concocted by Miller and Lawrence, belongs essentially to the tendency of self-degradation and contamination, of which we have enumerated a series of typical expressions. That the extolment and the exaltation of sex is associated with obscene language that can only make sex disgusting and repellent, can only be considered singular. Anti-conformist revolt, which has descended from Nietzschean heights to the level of solidarity with the Negro, has found a worthy counterpart in those who have recourse to the dirty and vulgar language of the street. If the justifications of obscenity mentioned earlier are made in good faith, we must simply conclude that those who make them do not even realize the nature of the influences they are subject to, that they merely undergo them and are used by them, pulled along by a deep current, the multitudinous manifestations of which all rigorously converge in a single direction.

Attentive observers will have no difficulty in extending the list of phenomena enumerated here, all of which betray the same origin, and are telltale signs of an atmosphere now prevalent everywhere. We do not need to repeat that any form of conformism is alien to us: in general, conformism consists of residues of bourgeois mores and culture which do not deserve to survive, and which are increasingly affected by processes of dissolution which have become irreversible. Under certain conditions, these processes of dissolution may even be a prerequisite for a new and better order. But this is certainly not the case in everything we have discussed here so far. With regard to all of that, one must only speak of debasement, vulgarity and pure degradation as essential components of the taste and mores predominant today.

Notes

1. In the case of genuine, original works by Negroes and primitives, it should be noted that this is not a matter of artistic style; deformation and distortion are usually a component of “magic art,” which is not based not on the subjective imagination, but on the actual perception of certain dark, elemental powers.

2. In another misuse of terms, Miller says that “the whole edifice of civilization as we know it” is “obscene,” which is nonsense, since that edifice is, if anything, absurd and meaningless. For Miller, who is an extreme pacifist, what is particularly “obscene” is modern mechanized warfare, and war in general: another absurdity that reflects the same overwhelming tendency to emphasize only that which, in any given experience, is of an inferior character. The negative, and sometimes degrading and demoralizing aspects of modern warfare — the only ones that are described and emphasized by authors like Barbusse and Remarque — can be contrasted with what men like the early Ernst Jünger and Drieu La Rochelle personally experienced in the same “total war.”