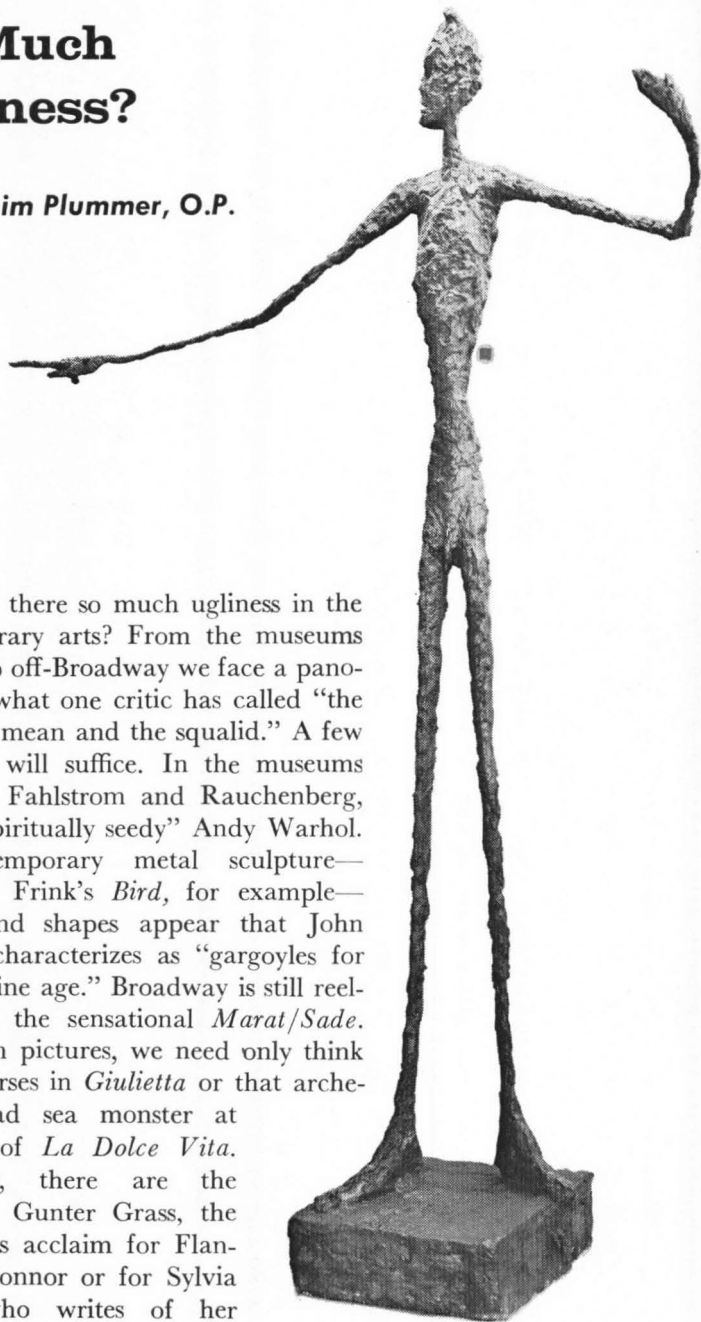


So Much Ugliness?

by Joachim Plummer, O.P.

Why is there so much ugliness in the contemporary arts? From the museums uptown to off-Broadway we face a panorama of what one critic has called "the drab, the mean and the squalid." A few examples will suffice. In the museums there are Fahlstrom and Rauchenberg, or the "spiritually seedy" Andy Warhol. In contemporary metal sculpture—Elizabeth Frink's *Bird*, for example—figures and shapes appear that John Canady characterizes as "gargoyles for the machine age." Broadway is still reeling from the sensational *Marat/Sade*. In motion pictures, we need only think of the horses in *Giulietta* or that archetypal dead sea monster at the end of *La Dolce Vita*. Moreover, there are the novels of Gunter Grass, the posthumous acclaim for Flannery O'Connor or for Sylvia Plath, who writes of her



father: "Marble heavy, a bag full of God/ Ghastly statute with one grey toe/ Big as a frisco seal." Finally, plays by Van Italie and Le Roi Jones bring ugliness to the Village, while the themes and actions of off-Broadway theatre have been too amply publicized to need confirmation here. These are all artists of serious intent, as is Alberto Burri (winner of the 1966 Sao Paolo Bienal), whose express aim is to "construct an aesthetic of ugliness," as well as artists who indulge in flights of macabre fancy such as Charles Adams of the *New Yorker*, whose recent exhibition included sculpture of an intestine dangling in space.

Depressing as all the ugliness is, however, it is nothing new. The ugly has been around for a long time, and often in the best company. Aristotle points out its partnership with the comic muse in the plays of Aristophanes; the bloodbaths of the Roman dramatist Seneca make even *Marat/Sade* look tame; there were the gargoyles of the Middle Ages, and painters such as Breughel or Hieronymus Bosch who loved to depict the horror of souls writhing in hell. Down through later ages, great masters such as Velasquez or Goya were often accused of trafficking in ugly subjects. Closer to our own day, Leon Bloy railed at Rouault for "being exclusively concerned with what is ugly." Ugliness became the fetish of 19th century Romantic writers and painters such as Huysmans, Gustav Moreau, d'Annunzio and the like, who have provided prototypes for contemporary artists. One of the most striking examples of this, I think, is the similarity between the mother in d'Aurevilly's *A Un Diner d'Athées* and the character of Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? Both women are like Medusa: lustful but sterile, true monsters, which Albee re-inforces not only by calling Martha "ugly" twice in the stage directions for his play, but by calling her a Medusa as well.

Philosophers have discussed the notion of ugliness at some length, perhaps rising to Bergson's challenge that "ugliness is not much easier to analyze than is beauty." Granting oversimplification, prominent theories of the ugly from Plato down to our own day all have the essential note of *something-lacking*. What they call "beautiful" has everything it is supposed to have, with clarity and in proper proportion; what they call "ugly," on the other hand, has something missing—noticeably missing—such as sanity in *Marat/Sade*, proportion and distance in a good many Warhol paintings, or a son in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? Saint Thomas conveys the notion of something-lacking metaphorically (following pseudo-Denis) when he

says: "What is in darkness is ugly." (*Comm. in Div. Nom.* IV, 1, 4). lacking metaphorically (following pseudo-Denis) when he says: "What is in darkness is ugly." (*Comm. in Div. Nom.* IV, 1, 4).

Yet audiences are pouring into the darkness. They keep *Marat/Sade* or *Virginia Woolf* sold out, *America Hurrah!* is still running, and the violence (always a bedfellow of the ugly) of *Bonnie and Clyde* reaches new limits. Why?

Perhaps it is the medium rather than the message that attracts. As Aristotle pointed out so long ago, we take delight in artistic representations of the most disgusting objects (a dead dog is his example) because we appreciate the artist's skill so much: he has made the repulsive seem attractive (we would shy away from an actual dead dog if we saw it in the gutter).

Perhaps the reason is cathartic. Do audiences want to rid themselves of ugliness by encountering it in art? Apparently some of the artists feel this way. Albee has said he feels a need to enter into the almost overwhelming experience of evil and ugliness in our time to rid himself of it and cleanse his audiences at the same time. Herbert Read feels that the whole movement of modern painting is "an immense effort to rid the mind of corruption."

Perhaps the reason has something to do with the notion of ugliness itself, and with the notion of beauty. We use the terms with surety, as if they were absolutes and as if we were absolutely sure that we knew what was beautiful and what was ugly. But many hold for a degree of relativity about both terms, including Aristotle and Saint Thomas, and defend my right to turn around and call everything I have hitherto called ugly in this article beautiful, if it seems so to me. And what I may think beautiful, you may think ugly as sin.

The thinking behind this relativity is as follows: the cognitive delight we feel when we have had an experience of beauty arises from a felt harmony between the art work and ourselves. Now people today seem to be getting this cognitive delight from ugly, or at least displeasing art; therefore, could a proportion exist between themselves and the art? It seems true that nowadays audiences feel somehow connatural to the unnatural; they sense a proportion between a twisted, decapitated sculpture by Giacometti or the repulsive scenes and language in Sartre's *Les Mouches*, and themselves. They seem to sense a proportion between the lack or imbalance in the art work and the lack or imbalance in themselves.

Under each kind of pleasures we find some that are not natural speaking absolutely, and yet connatural in some respect . . . it happens that something that is not natural to man becomes connatural to this or that individual man, on account of there being some corruption of nature in him. (Summa, I-II 31, 7).

Indeed, it may be that artists such as Giacometti, Pinter, Satre remind us of the darkness in all of us; perhaps, at the same time, they shine the light of self-knowledge into that darkness simply by reminding us that the darkness is there.

But it is still possible to say, as Bloy did of Rouault, that "they are concerned exclusively with what is ugly." The rub lies in the fact that we traditionally delight in beauty, not ugliness, and now the situation seems to be reversed. But traditional aesthetics tells us that we can delight *only* in beauty; it is beauty that, when seen, pleases. Ugliness will not do it, no matter how hard we try to have it so.

If we cannot delight in ugliness, then, and audiences are flocking to what seems to be ugly art, then they must be finding some beauty there, perhaps through the notion of connaturality that Aristotle and Saint Thomas make such a point of. Otherwise, they would simply be unable to take such delight in *Marat/Sade* or the gargoyles of the machine age. Can there be beauty in those?

If it seems an almost impossible thought, we might remind ourselves that in the past we have perhaps been too nice to beauty. Consistently, we have relegated her to angelic realms, to the domain of the sublime almost at the expense of the real. Perhaps we have forgotten about her ruggedness and her immense staying power, as for example, in the great Shakespearian tragedies, or the magnificent, rhythmic atonalities of Stavinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Of course beauty found a home with Botticelli, but does that mean we must deny her access to Giacometti? Apparently, thousands of art lovers refuse such a denial all together. It is almost as if they were starved for what Giacometti shows them of man; the Victorian ideal has vanished, and man stands indeed twisted and somehow without a head after two world wars, the bomb, and the present anguish of Vietnam. We look at the statues and we know what they feel, for we feel it ourselves. They are uncomely, but then so are we; in fact, so was Beauty Himself: "There was no comeliness in him/and we have seen him and there was no sightliness in him that we should be desirous of him . . ." (Is 53:2, 3).

So much ugliness in contemporary art? So much beauty?