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BEAUTY AND UGLINESS

a short response to Theodore Dalrymple



by Miles Mathis

A reader sent me a link to today to [an article at the City Journal](#) entitled “Beauty and Ugliness: on the Deformation of Art”. In it, Theodore Dalrymple compares the old art of Sir Joshua Reynolds to the new art of Marlene Dumas. Because Dalrymple *seems* to be defending Reynolds and beauty, my reader thought I would like it. I didn't, and I am here to tell you why. The reason can be found in this one sentence:

What most interests me is the change in sensibility between Reynolds and Dumas: a change that I recognize even in myself, in that I think that any modern attempt to reproduce Reynolds-like tenderness toward childhood would end up as kitsch, to which the harshness of Dumas (manifest even in her pictures of her daughter) would be artistically preferable.

Dalrymple doesn't just accidentally place that sentence at the midpoint of his article, set it off as its own paragraph, and put the first letter in a big bold font. That is the thesis of the article, though it is hidden in many veils of misdirection. Not only is that the thesis of the article, it is one of the main talking points of 20th century art criticism. The idea was promoted by everyone from Clive Bell to Clement Greenberg to Robert Hughes. It has always been used as the first line in a short argument for sweeping all earnest realism out the door.

My reader who thought I would like this apparently took Dalrymple at his word in the title, thinking this was a defense of beauty against manufactured ugliness. A defense of old art against new. And although large parts of the article are written to make you *think* that is what he is doing, that isn't what Dalrymple is doing. Dalrymple is flipping you, and he is doing it with maximum uncton and dishonesty.

I will be told Dalrymple says many kind things about Reynolds and many disparaging things about Dumas, but given the thesis above, we can see that was just misdirection. What *most* interests Dalrymple is selling you this blatant falsehood.

You really have to pause on that statement and fully digest the enormity of it. Do not pass it by. Dalrymple is telling you that the most important thing here is to understand that any attempt to paint childhood with tenderness is now impossible. It can't be done. You would be better off painting them as corpses and mutants.

If your hackles don't go up upon reading that, you aren't fully awake and need to slap yourself. Dalrymple has inserted you into a nightmare and told you you cannot awaken from it.

Next to that, the rest of the article is just frosting. And we can and should read the rest of the article in light of that thesis. If we do, everything starts to crumble before our eyes, and we see that we are being spun. For example, this is his second sentence in the article:

Recently, for example, I saw two [exhibitions] in a single day, the contrast between which seemed to cast a light on the soul of modern humanity, or at least of that part of it that concerns itself with art and aesthetics.

You see, Dalrymple didn't wait to spin you until you were halfway in. No, he set the hook early. He is letting Reynolds stand for of the soul of his age and Dumas stand for the soul of her age. This isn't just a matter of one old artist against one new artist, this is a matter of the "soul of modern humanity". In other words, you are living in a time of ugliness and horror, and you had better accept the fact. Dumas is standing for you in the annals of time whether you like it or not. There is nothing you can do to resist "the soul of the times".

I hope you are beginning to see that Dalrymple is just as great a ghoul as Dumas, and just as dishonest.

The article is also used to replant this seed of Modernism for the millionth time:

I came to the conclusion that while no definitive criteria could be given to distinguish good art from bad. . . .

If he had said "I have come to the conclusion that no *complete set* of definitive criteria could be given to distinguish good art from bad", I might have agreed. But, as stated, the sentence is false. There are many ways to distinguish good art from bad, and always have been. Further, I think your average person has a pretty good idea what many of them are, though they might be foggy and unstatable for most. I know that I would trust my luck with the unschooled opinion of a 10-year-old or a bum on the street over the artistic opinion of a professional critic. Certainly the first two categories of person have done far less harm to the history of art.

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As my regular readers may know, those are two of my own drawings, of one of my favorite models, Tess. I post them as proof against Dalrymple's thesis. The choice is not limited to Reynolds's sentimentality or Dumas' pathology. The critics have been trying to outlaw all realism of my sort for over a century, as kitsch or aristocratic or phallogocentric or otherwise outdated, but I will never believe that it is. These dishonest people haven't tried to outlaw me and all those like me because we are kitsch: they have tried to outlaw us because they didn't wish to compete with us. They wished to coopt art for their own purposes, the main purpose (other than [money laundering](#)) being the dissemination of propaganda.

Now, I am not actually a fan of Reynolds. I don't find the emotion in his paintings particularly convincing. But this has nothing to do with that. I am not defending Reynolds so much as defending art and humanity in general. I am defending the truth that Dalrymple is not telling.

To make his later thesis easier to plant, Dalrymple posts some meaningless slanders on Reynolds in the first section, going out of his way to mention that he was both a greedy climber and a penny-pincher. Since this is ostensibly a review of the art, I don't see how that is to the point. Paintings should be judged on their own merits, and bringing the artist's personal life into it is almost always a purposeful diversion. The entire first section is slippery in the extreme, since for every insincere flattery of Reynolds we find two slyly inserted cuts. And the section ends with this:

It avoids sentimentality because it represents not the whole of reality but of an undoubted aspect of reality—which delights us unless we are wholly soured by life, for children really do have soft skin, bright eyes, a trusting manner, and pleasure in life—but also because the sensitive viewer is only too aware that what is depicted is but fleeting, that Miss Bowles will grow up and face many sorrows, that the dog will age and cease to be so important to her, and that she will never again be so charmingly innocent: “Ay, in the very temple of delight/Veil'd melancholy has her sovereign shrine.” Our delight is thus tempered by an awareness that, like all delight, hers must decay.

Again, Ghoulish. Dalrymple is just poorly channeling Baudelaire here, but to me it reads like dark-kitsch. Standard-fare modern malaise—the sickly pose as simulacrum of depth. And utterly false.

Normal, healthy people don't have to apologize for being attracted to youth, beauty, and vigor by linking it to decay and death. In fact, anyone who does do that has—by definition—been “wholly soured by life”. Dumas and Dalrymple are trying to sell you their sour lives, but I for one am not buying.

The incredible and transparent dishonesty of Dalrymple continues in the second section on Dumas, where he says,

It is true that the dress of the eighteenth century, at least of the upper classes, was vastly more elegant and gorgeous (but also more uncomfortable) than anything we wear now; the interiors of houses—again, of the upper classes—were of an elegance now vanished unless specifically preserved; and towns were infinitely more graceful than they are now. But up close, they would have appalled us: the smell, dirt, and destitution would have been greater than anything of which we had the remotest experience. In the London in which Reynolds spent most of his career, 50 percent of children died before the age of five.

I guess that is supposed to stand as an argument against elegance and grace, but read that again more closely. You are being spun. The dirt and the infant mortality have nothing to do with the elegance, do they? You can get rid of the dirt and the infant mortality and keep the elegance, right? There is no connection between the two, although Dalrymple is suggesting strongly there is. He is trying to make you think that if you want things clean and babies to live, you have to get rid of elegance and grace. It puts a new twist on throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

To be even more blunt, my studio is clean and no babies have died here, and yet it aspires to some grace and elegance.

Dalrymple even closes with a small dose of misdirection, to round out the spin and further cloak it:

All that is necessary for ugliness to prosper is for artists to reject beauty.

Yes, and it also helps if they have tens of thousands of critics stirring everyones brains with contradictions and falsehoods for over a century.

Ask yourself this: if Dalrymple and all these critics supposedly defending beauty really wished to defend it, why don't they find a living artist to promote? That's what critics used to do, you know, and it is the only sensible thing *to* do. Rattling on about beauty in the abstract is pointless: find some real existing beauty and hold it up as an example. But they never do. Instead of promoting an artist who creates beauty, these critics always seem to promote artists like Dumas. Notice that Dumas gets all the name-time here, and therefore the promotion. I remember Wendy Steiner doing the same thing [a few years ago in her book *Venus in Exile*](#): she hemmed and hawed about a return of beauty for 300 pages and then used her final chapter to promote this same Marlene Dumas.

If you still don't believe Dalrymple would stoop to spinning you this way, you may wish to visit [his bio](#). His real name is Anthony Daniels, and despite that last name he is of Jewish heritage. He is also an atheist. We are told his father was a Communist businessman from Russia, which you should know is a red flag. I have shown [Marx himself was an early agent](#). Communism has been a front for the rich industrialists from the beginning. Daniels' bio confirms that in many ways, not the least of which is that *City Journal* is published by the Manhattan Institute, among the worst of the fascist “thinktanks”. Before coming out of nowhere in 1991 to appear on British television and write for Intel-front magazines, Daniels was a ghost. His early bio is almost completely scrubbed. All we are told is that he was a prison psychiatrist in South Africa. I don't know about you, but I am not terribly interested in

getting my art education from a prison psychiatrist. And why would an art critic need to publish under a fake name? Because these people are addicted to the lie. They have to lie about everything all the time. They have to create pseudonyms just to go out to lunch or take their children to the zoo. It looks to me like Daniels is just another spook hired to make sure art remains dead.