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THE UGLY [part 3]

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# THE UGLY

Mark Cousins

If the argument in the previous two articles<sup>1</sup> is entertained, then a number of consequences flow from it. The question of ugliness is reformulated and the aesthetic and ethical issues surrounding the relation of beauty and ugliness are transformed. For, while ugliness continues to be considered as merely the negative of beauty, the critical field will continue to be swamped with the traditional nostrums of an empty enthusiasm for art. Muses and schoolteachers will insist in much the same dull way that the aesthetic imperative is to avoid ugliness and to cultivate beauty. If it turns out that this is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know, then art faces a dim future. But in any case those sermons on beauty, which demand that we turn away from ugliness, are redundant, for that, as I have argued, is the spontaneous reflex of the subject. Ugliness in its positive dimension, in its force, provokes within the subject a turning away, a retreat. The subject retreats and hangs out in the space of the defences. The aesthetic attitude, far from animating the subject with desire, wilfully produces and even demands the nullity of experience which characterizes the defences. The aesthetic attitude and the economy of the subject together co-operate to promote a response to the ugly which seeks to obliterate the ugly through the cancellation of experience. The real problem is not the ugliness of the object but the subject's relation to the defences. Far from revealing the fastidiousness of the lover of beauty, it betrays the cowardice that lurks within many an aesthetic. This cowardice shows itself in a sudden reduction of interest in the object, in the lulling of sensation, in the blurring of perception, in the indifference to space. The subject hibernates in dead time, in the boredom of the defences.

It is clear that the true antithesis here is not that between beauty and ugliness, but between vivacity and . . . what? For reasons I will suggest below, the term that might be used probably should not be 'death', although it is difficult to avoid. For the quality I am trying to suggest is that which characterizes the defences. It is not so much death, as *playing dead*. In fact, death has a crucial role in vivacity; and, if anything, playing dead involves a certain conservative relation to life – it conserves itself, but only by suspending itself. 'Vivacity' and 'playing dead' as qualities of the subject's relation to the object do not fit as a distinction between life and death. But, before these complexes of subjectivity can be unravelled, the question of the life and death of the object must be considered.

A famous answer to this question may be found in Victor Hugo's novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*.<sup>2</sup> One of the novel's characters, the archdeacon Claude Frollo, declares, 'This will kill that, the book will kill the building.' (p. 192) Beneath the interpretations of this sentence which would entail the prediction

that thought will escape from theological control, or that the printing press will destroy the Church as an institution, is the more radical idea that printing will kill architecture. Hugo's account of architecture is that, up to the invention of movable type, architecture was 'the great book of mankind' (p. 194). It was the record and monument of collective existence. Indeed, architecture was a species of writing – each raised stone was a letter, each capital on a column bore a meaning, and the letters and words, spelt out of wood and stone, were records of the community.

Solomon's Temple, for instance, was not simply the binding of the sacred book, it was the sacred book itself. On each of its concentric enclosures the priests could read the novel translated and made manifest to the eye, and could thus follow its transformations from sanctuary to sanctuary until in the final tabernacle they grouped it in its most concrete form, which was still architectural: the ark. Thus the word was enclosed in the building, but its image was on the envelope, like the human figure on a mummy's coffin. (p. 194)

In this sense, architecture was the dominant form of expression and the record, the 'great script', of the human race. Letter as monument, monument as script. Hugo's description echoes Hegel in his *Aesthetics*. Architecture is a symbolic form of art, in so far as it manifests or embodies insights and thoughts, rather than being merely a useful art which provides cover and an environment for things already shaped in independent ways. The tower of Babylon is the example Hegel provides: 'In the rich plains of the Euphrates an enormous work was erected; it was built in common, and the aim and the content of the work was at the same time the community of those who constructed it.' The building is the people writing itself, reading itself. For Hugo, as for Hegel, this origin of architecture obeyed a logic of development which would ultimately destroy its own character. For, as successive forms of authority reuse the architectural forms of earlier authorities, a stimulus is given to stylistic change. Hugo interprets the Gothic succession to Romanesque architecture as the projection of a power struggle in which the aristocracy challenged papal authority, and in which the artist secured a licence to innovate. 'The book of architecture belonged no more to the priesthood, religion, Rome, but to imagination, poetry, the people.' (p. 196) Architecture became a kind of free speech. 'St Jacques-de-la-Boucherie was wholly an oppositional church.' (p. 197) Since there was no other freedom of thought, it was a freedom inscribed in buildings. Hugo seriously contends that this is why so many Gothic cathedrals came into being: 'Having no other way of declaring itself but in stone masonry, thought rushed to it from every direction.' (p. 197)

Hugo contends that up to the fifteenth century architecture was humanity's record of itself to itself: 'During that time no concept of any complexity appeared in the world which was not made into a building . . . the human race never had an important thought which it did not write down in stone.' (p. 195) But why stone? Why not in a manuscript? Since the life of an idea depends upon its durability; since, if a monument is to survive as a record, it must live, must survive, it will choose the durability of stone over the fragility of a manuscript. Stone is the medium with which to mark the future, with which to legislate on earth. But the appearance of the printing press utterly transforms this relation and kills the building. 'Orpheus' letters of stone were replaced by Gutenberg's letters of lead.' (p. 198) Printing sets up a new form of the indestructibility of thought. Thought is no longer embodied; it no longer takes the form of monumental objects which take possession of time and space. Thought can now reproduce itself with the minimum of labour and materials. It becomes ubiquitous – everywhere in general yet nowhere in particular. The durability of stone is replaced by the immortality of mechanical reproduction.

In Hugo's account thought begins to withdraw from architecture. The Renaissance is regarded as decadent; what was alive and modern in the Gothic declines into the pseudo-antique. As the record of human thought, printing supersedes architecture. At the end of the chapter we are left with a changed authorial mood. Suddenly Hugo has the warm phantasy of printing creating its own vast, unfinished architecture, with people scurrying about the scaffolding of this second Tower of Babel, and the printing press below, churning like a cement mixer of human discourse. By this time we are some way from the original chilled exclamation of the Archdeacon Frollo, that 'This will kill that.' (p. 192) He says this while gesturing with his right hand towards a printed book, and with his left hand towards Notre-Dame, which, 'with its twin towers standing out in silhouette against the starry sky, its stone ribs and monstrous crupper, looked like an enormous two-headed sphinx sitting there in the middle of the town.' (p. 190)

This death, the death of architecture, seems both grandiose and whimsical, an announcement in the mode of eschatological journalism bequeathed by Hegel to intellectuals so that they might tell fellow citizens that an epoch was at an end. It belongs to the long muddle of periodization. The death of architecture here is the supposed transition from one modality of expression to another. This 'death' belongs to a genre of births, deaths and revivals as recorded by philosophical histories.

But in Hugo's novel the fate of Notre-Dame itself does more than obey the law of this historical development. Certainly the cathedral died in the fifteenth century, certainly its death is related to the 'dead' character of architecture in the modern period. But its death is complex and enigmatic; its death is equivocal, and raises the question, not of what caused its death, but of what kept it alive. The initial account is one which describes Notre-Dame in the nineteenth century as a building which has been damaged. The flight of stairs which once raised the cathedral above the existing ground level, the lower series of statues which occupied the arches in the three doorways, and finally the upper series of the early kings of

France have been removed from the façade. These are part of the countless degradations and mutilations which time and men have inflicted on the venerable monument. Time has chipped away at the building; political revolution has smashed its rose windows and statuary. But it is architecture which has attacked the building most successfully. . . . Mutilations, amputations, dislocations of its limbs, 'restorations' are the Greek, Roman and barbaric work of professors quoting Vitruvius and Vignolo. . . . To the centuries and revolutions, which at least devastated impartially and on the grand scale, have been added the swarm of architects from the schools, licensed, sworn and accredited, degrading with all the discernment and choice of bad taste, substituting Louis XV chicory for Gothic lace to the greater glory of the Parthenon. (p. 123)

The death of the building is laid at the door of time, of revolution, but chiefly of architects.

This is not just a question of an original, pure stylistic integrity being diluted by inappropriate additions and modifications. For it is of the essence of Notre-Dame, according to Hugo, that the cathedral was always a hybrid. 'It is a transitional building. The Saxon architect was just completing the first pillars of the nave when the pointed arch arriving from the Crusades installed itself victoriously on those broad Romanesque capitals designed only for round arches. The pointed arch, dominant from then on, constructed the rest of the church.' (p. 124) This hybrid form demonstrates 'that architecture's greatest productions are not so much the works of individuals as of societies; the fruit of whole peoples in labour rather than the inspiration of men of genius; the deposit left by a nation; the accumulation of centuries; the residue from successive evaporations of human society; in a word, types of formation.' (p. 125) The life of a building, according to these effusions, lies in the organic character of its construction. Lacking the singular intention of a plan, the building breathes the life of an organism. 'That is the way of beavers, that is the way of bees, that is the way of men. The great symbol of architecture, Babel, is a beehive.' (p. 125) If this were the case, then the death of Notre-Dame dates from its 'decline' into being just a building, a building which is tended and mended by architecture. For once the additions come from architecture, that is, from trained architects, the cathedral loses its connection with the communal vitality which gave it life, and which it expressed. Building had, as it were, been unconscious. 'It all takes place without trouble, without strain, without reaction, according to a tranquil law of nature. A graft occurs, sap circulates, vegetation occurs.' (p. 125)

In this account, then, the death of the cathedral comes from two causes: the printing press and the rise of the profession of architecture. They are two sides of the same coin – the severing of the relation between the building and the community, from the former's role in representing the latter. But neither of these accounts provides more than typical nineteenth-century tropes for the death of Notre-Dame. The organic character of the community, the communal character of art, the expressive character of social phenomena are all frequently used terms of historicist criticism. Yet there is another space in which the death of the Cathedral can be thought out – within the narrative itself, and in the secret which is contained within the narrative. In the first edition of the novel there is a note which explains that the author was prying about Notre-Dame when

he found on the wall of one of the towers the following word carved by hand:

‘ΑΝΑΓΚΗ’. He wondered whose hand had incised these letters and what they signified. Since then the wall has been distempered or scraped and the inscription remains only in the author’s memory. The erasure of the word repeats the process of mutilation which has been visited upon Gothic buildings. The man who wrote the word is erased, the word is erased, perhaps the church itself may be erased. This book was written about that word. (p. 12)

The word ΑΝΑΓΚΗ was written by Claude Frollo, the cathedral’s archdeacon whose spiritual ambitions and austerity have led to a passion for alchemy and for the gypsy girl Esmeralda. He inscribes the word in a despairing recognition of being caught up in a drama that will bring catastrophe upon everyone. Thus ΑΝΑΓΚΗ is conceived as the irreversible malevolence of fate. In Frollo’s gloomy cell a fly seeking the March sun blunders into a spider’s web. It collides with the fatal ‘rose window’ of the web. Frollo reflects that in pursuing the object of his desire, knowledge, he had not recognized the web that destiny had stretched between him and the light, ‘that pane of glass beyond, that transparent obstacle . . . separating all philosophical systems from the truth.’ (p. 299) ΑΝΑΓΚΗ is not only fate in its blind determination of the course of things; it is that which acts through the unconscious desires of humans. The pursuit of the object of desire secretly prepares the form of the subject’s nemesis. Blind to the conditions of desire, the subject unconsciously works to fulfil his own downfall. Turned towards the light, with his back to the dark – far from being the path towards the object of beauty, this is the way of passive co-operation with catastrophe. The beauty of knowledge and the beauty of Esmeralda will kill Frollo, for he cannot desire them except as an exceptional triumph, as the reward for a life of austerity and celibacy. Unconsciously, the objects of desire are in fact the death of his life, just as his life has been the mortification of desire. The more he wishes, the more he becomes the messenger of death.

The source of life in the novel is his adopted son, Quasimodo. The Quasimodo of the novel should not be confused with the charm and pathos of the baby/man portrayed by Charles Laughton in the film *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*. Above all, Quasimodo is ugly. His first appearance in the novel, in the contest for the Pope of Fools, with that

tetrahedral nose, that horseshoe mouth, that tiny left eye obscured by a shaggy red eyebrow, while the right eye lay completely hidden beneath an enormous wart. Those irregular teeth, with gaps here and there like the battlements of a fortress, that calloused lip, over which one of those teeth protruded like an elephant’s tusk, that cleft chin, and above all the facial expression extending over the whole, a mixture of malice, amazement and sadness. (p. 58)

This description of Quasimodo reads like an inventory of the negation of beauty – his irregularity, his lack of recognizable form, the way in which people turn away from him. He was found outside Notre-Dame in 1467, on a bedstead where infants were abandoned to public charity. The four *bonnes femmes* bending over him recoil. He

is both too much and too little, an attribute which suggests the name Quasimodo with which he is christened by Frollo, who adopts him.

The deformity of Quasimodo’s physical appearance is matched by a distorted internal life. This is not a frog waiting to be kissed into a prince, but a vivid, excessive and repulsive being. Yet Quasimodo finds his place – inside and all over Notre-Dame. As a consequence of his adoption by Frollo he inhabits the cathedral, becoming its bell-ringer; indeed, he is adopted by the building. Although the question of sanctuary, in the narrative, turns on the person of Esmeralda, the relation between the building and Quasimodo is really one of sanctuary. Sanctuary can be thought of, here, not in terms of the spaces of competing jurisdictions, but of a spatial acceptance without conditions. The space of sanctuary is not the product of a social contract; it is not a space where I am placed in a web of rights and obligations. It is a space which accepts the subject unconditionally. Whatever crime the subject may have committed, however repulsive the subject, the sanctuary accepts the existence of whomsoever seeks refuge.

This relation meant for Quasimodo that Notre-Dame was ‘his egg, his nest, his home, his country, his universe’. Between the two there grew a relation ‘of mysterious pre-existent harmony’. Quasimodo came ‘to resemble it, to be encrusted on it. . . . His protruding angles fitted, if we may be allowed the comparison, the concave angles of the building, and he seemed to be not just its denizen but its natural contents.’ (p. 166) Sometimes the relation might seem like the relation between the maternal body and the infant: he crawls across every part of the cathedral. But in this relation it is the child who animates the mother: ‘It was as if he made the immense building breathe.’ (p. 169) Thus it is Quasimodo who keeps the building alive. Hugo at one point calls the building a ‘carapace’, as if the relation between them is not merely that between stone and flesh, but something between the two, a moment between expression and impression.

Quasimodo breathes life into the building, not in spite of his ugliness but because of it. The building, unlike the Parisians, does not turn away from what is there and should not be, but, rather, makes a space for the horror Quasimodo embodies. This guarantees its strength and its presence, which is undefended and alive. Of course there can be no simple translation from the narrative to an architectural proposition, but the tale of Quasimodo’s relation to Notre-Dame suggests a parallel with the question of the use of ugliness – vivacity. The response to the hideousness of Quasimodo, who stands for all that the world abandons on the steps of the cathedral, assumes the form of sanctuary, a space which models the condition of being without defences, without turning away or without turning away the object. Indeed, this provides the non-philosophical answer as to what killed Notre-Dame. Not the printing press, not the depredations of architects, but the death of Quasimodo. ‘So much so that for those who know Quasimodo once existed, Notre-Dame today is deserted, inanimate, dead. There is the feeling that something has gone. That immense body is empty; it is a skeleton; the spirit has left it.’ (p. 536) This poses the question of how the force which Quasimodo represents might be articulated in terms of architecture.

The place of the term ANATKH in Hugo's novel produces a novel in which the narrative hurtles to its several catastrophes. The word, scratched on the wall of Notre-Dame, signifies a recognition of the harsh dramas human beings are compelled to enact. ANATKH is the revenge destiny takes against the paltry efforts of human beings to achieve some autonomy in their affairs. Not content with crushing its subjects, destiny defeats its victims by signing a diabolical alliance with their unconscious wishes, so that they become the instruments of their own destruction. In the novel, all desires open on to the death of what is loved. Desire turns upon its object with unintended fatality. The investment of a wish is destiny's ruse to provoke disaster. To wish is to kill. To scratch ANATKH marks the entry into a secret, powerless knowledge of the malign game whose pawns we are. The only course open to desire is to seize and pillage what it may on its way to the gibbet. And so it may seem strange, then, that this secret word, ANATKH, was a favourite word of Freud.

Indeed it was so treasured a word that Freud never pushed it out into the world as a concept, but kept it at home, as an emblem of what can never be fully avowed. It wanders through his writings as if a familiar; he bestows it upon friends in letters and conversations as the mark of that which is known by those who have recognized the need to befriend death. In his writings it flashes past in remarks which are scandalous in their simple disregard for the proprieties of public discourse.

Its bearing upon the question of ugliness is abrupt and radical. If ugliness describes a situation in which the subject feels overwhelmed or undone, in which the propositions and location of the subject seem on the verge of being swept away or swallowed up, then everywhere the experience of ugliness tends towards the fear of death as a subjective insistence. 'I cannot be here; the object takes all.' We have seen that the reflex of the subject is to scurry into the realm of the defences, into the quotidian suspension of experience – of turning away, closing my eyes, shutting my ears, being bored, killing time, being nowhere, waiting. In economic terms this describes a moment when all investment is withdrawn from the object and is now expended upon the affective and perceptual tasks of being without objects, through the consumption of things. But the defence is against, not death, but the fear of death, just as ugliness presages not the fact of death but the fear of death. This is because, for Freud, death occupies an odd place. Unconsciously I know nothing of my death; I am invulnerable and only you can die. The fear of death arises, not from the unconscious, but from the super-ego, from the fear of punishment. This is why ugliness can take the form not only of what is there and should not be, but of what is not there and should be. Both describe a subjective formula in which I may be annihilated as a punishment. Both describe a subjective formula in which I retreat into the defences. But they also explain a further manifestation of the reflex from ugliness – the awakening of a wish to destroy the object. If I unconsciously know nothing of my death, I consciously experience it, none the less, as the approach of the punishment. One resolution of this contradiction is to unleash a murderous ferocity, to kill. Such a response may explain the violence with which the ugly object provokes the wish to abolish

it. Language opens itself to this experience when murder is referred to as 'cleansing', or 'purification'.

Within the defences and within the mortal ferocity of the ego's denial of its death, Freud proposes a conception of ANATKH which is quite different from Victor Hugo's. In an essay of 1915, 'Thoughts for the Times of War and Death', Freud meditated upon the consequences of the First World War for subjective life.<sup>4</sup> Despite its destructiveness the war had a positive feature. The reality of the possibility of one's own death had transformed the psychic economy. 'Life has indeed become interesting again; it has recovered its full content.' The sheer proximity of death had initiated a changed relation between the defences and libidinous energy. In short, the acceptance of death, the inability to hide from it behind the defences, has the perhaps unexpected consequence of eroticizing reality. Freud sums this up by insisting upon the task that the acceptance of one's own death entails: 'Si vis vitam, para mortem.' (If you want life, prepare for death.) What is at stake here is what we should call, not the life, but the vivacity of the subject. Far from vivacity and death being opposed to each other, I must accept the latter in order to accede to the former. Vivacity is the capacity of the subject to endure, indeed to enjoy, a reality which includes his own death, without retreating behind a defensive wall.

The ugly – be it in the form of something that is there and should not be, or in the form of something that isn't there and should be – can be an artistic resource of great value, though it is a value which is quite detached from the beautiful. Initially it will take the form of offering to the undefended spectator or reader a situation which is fundamentally interesting. Not surprisingly, traditional aesthetics makes little use of the value of what is *interesting*, for it stresses the fact that the aesthetic attitude is itself disinterested. But an art which is interesting, which mobilizes libidinal energy without its being side-tracked into the defences, is one which is able to stage the dramas in which the subject will find itself caught, but in a zone of representation. This is not the place to discuss the uses of ugliness in art and architecture, but it is the justification for its use as a positive term in the artistic investigation of the possible modes of relations between a subject and an object. Such production is in fact central to contemporary work, which has far exceeded the capacity of aesthetic analysis to comprehend and judge it.

#### Notes

1. Mark Cousins, 'The Ugly': Part 1 in *AA Files* no. 28 (Autumn 1994), pp. 61–4; Part 2 in *AA Files* no. 29 (Summer 1995), pp. 3–6.
2. Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris* (Oxford, 1993).
3. *Hegel's Aesthetics*, translated by T. M. Knox, vol. II (Oxford, 1975), p. 638.
4. 'Thoughts for the Times of War and Death', *Sigmund Freud*, standard edition (Harmondsworth, 1985), vol. 12, pp. 57–89 (p. 80).