

CRITICS OR “ON ENVY”³⁹

*“My son you are one of the most
envied men in the world”.*

(words said in a state of trance by medium
Morosini to the painter Giorgio de Chirico.)

Envy, a degrading and shameful characteristic of the human soul probably has the same origin as jealousy, which consists in an exaggerated love for oneself and the total lack of this sentiment for one's fellow being. If one looks carefully and attentively at jealousy one can find excuses for it. In order to identify these, however, one must venture into the metaphysics of love. I am referring to Schopenhauer's metaphysics, according to which love takes away (in great part if not entirely) the responsibility of an individual as a thinking person acting according to his own will and moral sense. Envy is merely egotistical and voluntary and can in no way be forgiven. The only comprehension a moral person can have towards envy is in understanding the suffering it inflicts upon those who feel it, in this case, such understanding is true Christian compassion, for a moral man must conquer a justified repugnance to be able to feel such compassion.

The envious man may possess terrestrial riches but is generally not very well endowed intellectually and especially morally. Briefly, envy arises, according to me, from a lack of moral and intellectual qualities and the satisfaction these give.

In an age such as ours, in which all bad instincts have been overly stimulated, one can study the sentiment of envy in all its manifestations and analyse it at will. However, I want to go even further back in time as envy has always existed and troubled human happiness. It has been enormously detrimental to the world in all things: progress, art, politics, and in general, every idea, activity, thought and constructive undertaking.

Envy, the daughter of mediocrity, could not and would not desire anything else but the birth of more mediocrities. In this sad and imperfect life, talent alone can restore all things and also deliver man from his difficulties, misfortunes and unhappiness. Generally speaking, such suffering is the unfortunate consequences of the ineptitude of people in positions of responsibility. In all fields of action, talent is indispensable for actions to be properly carried out and it is precisely talent and value that unfortunately awaken the greatest envy. It is especially these particular qualities that contemptible men (and there are many), try to bar the way of. I think that a good part of the misfortunes mankind suffers from is due to the stealthy but constant work of the envious who have succeeded in hindering the upward march of men of true value and capability, thus leaving space for mediocrity alone. Envy, it is true, has always been proportionate to the moral and intellectual quality of an epoch, and to the talent possessed by a certain category of men. This is what I mean: the higher the general level of men is, the less envy rages among them for there would be fewer actual reasons for envy to be felt. A man possessing true spirit qualities cannot be envious for he has nothing to envy; in living an intense and important internal life, he possesses the spiritual qualities that make him content with his existence. Even if he complains of it continually, this discontent is purely superficial and does not penetrate his interior life, enriched as he is, with many other things.

In spite of its affinity to jealousy, envy is actually very different. One can be jealous even of people who

39 G. de Chirico, *I critici o dell'invidia*, signed “Isabella Far” in *Commedia...*, pp. 233-236. Published in English here for the first time.

are intellectually, morally or socially inferior to them, whereas envy is especially provoked by the superiority of others. The feeling of envy in its most instinctive, primitive form, is generally brought on by the physical or material advantages a person has compared to another. Men are profoundly irritated when they observe the results of such advantages and feel great injustice in them. Naturally, the person their envy is directed at becomes absolutely intolerable for them. Here, envy is provoked by external factors and can disappear when a positive change comes about in the situation of the person feeling envious, which means that envy in this case was not an absolute, definite sentiment, but depended upon variable circumstances and consequently did not run deep. A much stronger and more serious sentiment, far more complex and harmful, is the kind of envy or hysteria provoked by the absolute intellectual superiority of an individual over others. This is a definite and absolute sentiment for it is provoked by stable factors, such as spiritual values, which are not subject to change as are all things material. A gnawing feeling of envy is contemporaneously felt by different individuals and often even by those who should not normally be subject to it but are for various reasons. The exceptional man becomes, by tacit accord, a sort of public enemy for the envious. One can observe strange reactions among the members of this unappealing league, who on the outside are all very different, but indeed come from the same source.

No great and noble effort can call forth such unity of action and feeling in a large group of people as envy does. From this one must, alas, deduce that nothing binds men so deeply and sincerely as evil, malice and baseness. Why does this happen? Is it that the bad aspects of our nature are the only true ones? Or is it our innate wickedness that binds such relationships? When one sees the envious forgetting their personal rancour to come together for one that is greater, there can be no more room for doubt.

Now more than ever I am witness to unsettling behaviour in such individuals, seen in their discourses, written work and hysterical silences etc., and other such manoeuvrings proper to them. I also know the profound and intimate drama their souls are subject to and consequently their poor bleeding hearts that show through in their words and acts. They are wicked, it is true, however, like all the wicked they are unhappy. All such suffering could be avoided if men without talent would only understand the useless effort of their relentless hunt for genius.

Genius is wild game that cannot be trapped whose dwelling is mysterious and unknown. Is it on the moon, planet Mars or in the heavens? Man will never find genius if it is unwilling to come of its own accord and honour him with a visit. One must not forget that genius is the master and not the slave; it goes where it wishes and to whom it wishes, but when it has become a friend of a dweller of our planet it remains faithful and will never forsake him. Something that genius truly dislikes is when contemptible men should criticise someone that genius favours. This is probably the reason why critics of art, and of all else that is good, do not get along with genius. The story is brief and even rather banal: when the love a critic feels towards genius remains unrequited, after a period of sadness and terrible depression this love turns to hatred. They come back to life with a clear aim: to live for revenge alone. This in a few words is the biography of most art critics. Seen in this light I think that even the most confused and obscure writings of art critics will become clear to my readers. The art critic's task – the name is sufficient in itself – is to criticise art and to praise everything that is not art. Hence an art critic worthy of himself must be capable of writing numerous columns, of which, at the end, even he is unable to understand a single thing. Evidently today, writing such as this is considered intelligent. In truth, one must always be fair, and not be offended if an art critic (whose true vocation is that of a writer) is more interested in his own reputation than in a small, ugly still life or one of those "landscapes",

which are the speciality of modern “landscapists”, the sight of which is enough to make one want to stay indoors and remain there until the end of his days.

An art critic is always merciful towards mediocrity and incapacity for he knows that where value is wanting there can be no rivalry nor competition and so, in this case, solidarity and mutual help amount to Christian sentiments for him. He hopes that with a little praise and much vague rambling, he will build up a good career both for the painter and for himself. Let us be honest, a bad painter is an ideal pretext for practicing the art of persuasion as it is necessary to convince people, almost or entirely lacking in brains, that value exists especially there where they do not see it. The art critic hopes that in the future or, better still, in the present, he will profit by this brilliant modern theory. What more can he hope for, having finally chosen the trade of art criticism after having vainly attempted to become an artist or, more often than not, a writer...?

I speak of painting critics for they are the more numerous. It is true that their knowledge is limited to being able to distinguish with certain facility an oil painting from a drawing, but in compensation the art critic, the 20th century critic, has become a master in the art of profound knowledge with regard to the “soul” and the “spirit” of painting.

In conclusion, I would like to quote some of the phrases one often comes upon in the writings of our most famous art critics and comment on them of course. It would be very congenial with regard to the overly numerous “worlds” to speak of the overly numerous bad painters. Worlds that can be reduced to one world: a world without art. But I had better abstain as I have no special desire to commit suicide as the one thing critics never pardon is criticism.