

Middle Class Beastliness

Man, as far as I know, is the only creature who can envisage his own extinction: not only envisage it, but enjoy doing so. Deadly new viruses, collisions with asteroids, overwhelming floods: all are the stuff of Hollywood films.

But of all of mankind that enjoys contemplating its own extinction, the portion that enjoys it the most must surely be the bourgeoisie. I happened the other day to want to look up the full text of D. H. Lawrence's poem "How Beastly the Bourgeois Is", and to my surprise discovered that it had been set to music by the young Portuguese composer, Pedro Faria Gomes. There is a performance of the piece on the internet, and I much enjoyed it myself. It was performed by the Orquestra Gulbenkian of Lisbon and the singer Inês Simões in the Grande Auditório of the Gulbenkian Foundation.

The singer was in a long green silk evening dress and the orchestra played in tails. It would be rather difficult to imagine a more bourgeois occasion: unless the audience was sown with a few aristocrats, I doubt that there was a single member of any other class in it.

The poem begins:

How beastly the bourgeois is

Especially the male of the species –

Well, we all have our faults and no doubt some of them are collective, in the sense that others of our kind have them too. I am certainly not against drawing attention to those faults, either in ourselves or in others, even if some deplore the practice as stereotyping. In my view, stereotyping is both inevitable and necessary: anyone who didn't stereotype wouldn't survive long.

But Lawrence went a little further in his poem than stereotyping. Having drawn the attention of his readers to the defects of the stereotypical bourgeois – moral complacency, shallowness, philistinism, mental rigidity and hypocrisy among them – he goes on to compare them to parasitic mushrooms who are all wormy inside. And then he goes on to express what can only be described as a near-genocidal wish:

*Standing in their thousands, these appearances, in damp
England*

what a pity they can't all be kicked over

like sickening toadstools, and left to melt back, swiftly

into the soil of England.

Needless to say, this was received with ecstatic applause by the bourgeois audience: but, speaking as an oppressed bourgeois myself, isn't it time that we banned D. H. Lawrence and removed him from libraries and bookshops for such blatant hate-speech?

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