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**THE “SACRED” OF ART
A LETTER TO ARTISTS**

MARIO DONIZETTI

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CORPONOVE EDITRICE

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After a century of so-called experimental art inspired by iconoclasm, an important artistic evolution is now taking place: the reappearance of the figurative genre.

Today, the question is asked*: which source has fuelled the strength of the market for so long and why does convention still ignore artists devoted to the “sacred”? Why is there a disregard for artists fascinated by values which cannot be ignored, as they are the vital foundation of everyone’s existence and are therefore sacred?

By ignoring ethical artists, convention actually promotes unholy nihilism.

Artists of the “sacred” are against the profane

* Vittorio Sgarbi - *Lettera ai Vescovi* - “IL GIORNALE”, 25 June, 2011

* Jean Clair - “*L’Hiver de la Culture*” - Flammarion 2011

egoism which degrades creativity to the level of personal taste. They consider all works which do not promote the common good to be regressive.

Today, after two thousand years of Christianity, the “sacred” is perceived as the spirit of the common good: a tangible being. For believers, it is the result of the spirit of love for one’s neighbour. For non-believers, it is the result of ethical desire moved by love for one’s neighbour. For this reason, I think it is possible to define ethical goodness as spiritual and define spiritual goodness as ethical; it does not seem to be a practical difference between spiritual goodness and ethical goodness.

Non-believing ethical people also hold non-religious entities to be “sacred” – for example social justice based on secular laws – and therefore possess “sacredness”, after Christianity has defined the substance and a wider conception thereof.

And therefore, the convention which opposes the works of the ethical man opposes the “sacred” and the “spiritual”.

I believe that the existence of God is necessary as a reason for the existence of the world, but



W. Donnell
8/2000

faith may be endangered by the things analogically attributed to it by theologians, for example human power which, by analogy, becomes the almightiness of God. I hold that God cannot be neither powerful nor omnipotent nor without power. Analogies may also conceal God from a distracted spirit and may not reveal the “sacred”. Analogies – it is said – with superficiality, run the risk of reducing God to the level of an idol, and it is for this reason that there has been no end to the ongoing docetic dispute, according to which the incarnation of God is impossible.

And this is another reason why figurative representation is ignored by modern criticism. In fact, according to the theories of Hegel, the father of the modern world, the form of the body is not “suited” to the interests of the spirit. The spirit and the body are said to be two conflicting entities, “*the struggle of the spirit against the flesh*” (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel – *Estetica* (Aesthetics), Einaudi 1976, pag.65). And, in this sense, the modern world has much in common with the surpassed docetic doctrine.

For two thousand years, Catholicism has made a definitive choice for art to oppose the de-

struction of the figurative analogical representation of God and the spirit, as it declared and declares in advance that artistic representation is merely an analogy which can help in thinking and speaking of God, who is objectively inscrutable and, therefore, the analogy of the representation cannot conceal God, is not opposed to the spirit and reveals the “sacred”. In this way, Catholicism has resolved the apparent contradiction between the body and the spirit in artistic representation and, in real life, with the Eucharist, body and spirit are an inseparable unit as in the resurrection of Christ and the final resurrection.

The objective representation of God is not the aim of the figurative genre, which reasserts the inscrutability of God and His transcendence.

For believers, however, it should not be possible for our body to be in conflict with its spiritual soul, or be in opposition to it. Because, as is stated primarily in the Christian Testament, the direct relationship with God takes place through the tangible “sacred” in works of art and not through analogies or religious ceremonies, or through religious artistic subjects.

Spirit and body are concurrent in their operation; in fact, they also realise the “sacred” in art. Therefore, what is important here is to properly define what is the “sacred” in the art descending from this simultaneity, for both believers and atheists, in order to be able to define which artistic questions must be promoted and ignored.

If spirit and body are concurrent in works of the Real, the one is the other in the Real.

Representation, or depiction by analogy of the real body, is concurrently the representation by analogy of its real soul and its real spirit, that is, its will to plan – “ethical tension” for atheists – and “mystical tension” for believers. In fact, for atheists, a body without the presence of an intrinsic ethical purpose cannot exist. It would not be alive and, for believers, a body without a soul and without mystical, or spiritual, tension, would be nothing more than mud. A body would be inert matter for everyone. It would not be alive.

It should follow that only the representation of the body is the representation of the soul and, simultaneously, its spirituality, because they are the same. And not only this, but the “sacred” for atheists – as I have said – has a greater extension

as it holds all bodies sacred, not just the human body. Indeed, every living body is directed by the will and the will, in the words of the philosopher, is the visibility of the soul. Without will, a body does not exist, and the death of the body is merely the separation of its parts, which are still alive in a new living concept.

With the word “form”, believers and atheists refer to the unity of the soul and body of living beings; they refer to the directed will of the body and, with the word “spirit”, they refer to the tension of the soul towards ethical or religious goodness. The modern dualism of heretical inspiration, on the other hand, conceives the spirit as a separate entity from the body, which guides the reluctant body towards goodness, assigning the body a negative role with respect to *the spirit, as stated by Hegel, master of the modern world.*

In the view of atheists, moreover, not even the smallest parts of matter are in opposition, or in conflict, with the teleological vitality; therefore, they are animated by the sacred tension of life, thus the body is sacred as such, for believers and for atheists.

I believe that atoms have a soul, as, if they did

not, they would not have cohesion in the aggregation of their constituent parts, oriented towards their existence. In the same manner as a human body, which is composed of parts which have a finalistic cohesion with the entire body, in order to constitute the existence of the body.

Today, we can think that the whole of physical existence, being directed, is spiritually animated and we can think that, if an animated being does not act ethically, i.e. he/she does not act spiritually, he/she assumes the demonic role of the negation of God and the divine creation for believers and, for atheists, the role of traitor and destroyer of the existence which is the result of the ethical tension of all the living. Spontaneous nature also teaches us this: bodies in opposition to the good of the species are rejected as foreign bodies. Therefore, believers and atheists can think in the same way: that every living corporal being is itself a spiritual soul. They can think that the spirit is the same body because it is ethically directed.

We can rightly think that every living being is a soul: namely, the personal vital body which joins together with others and the world in the sole purpose. And the greater extension of the

“sacred” in the eyes of atheists does not consist in assigning greater worth to the “sacred” with respect to believers, as I have said.

It seems clear to me, with regard to art, that there is an uninfluential difference between the theistic and atheistic conception of the living world. Believers and atheists have the same conception of the sacredness of the living being, which is conceived as the positive or vital fruit of the spirit-soul-body, or personal substance, which joins together with the world in the same world purpose.

The plan for the good of everyone now seems “sacred” to me, and I believe that I accept the atheist extension of the sacred, whereby sacred means everything which is planned by every living being for the promotion of themselves and, simultaneously, the species.

Now, acting positively for the good of oneself and, simultaneously, for the good of everyone is acting in compliance with the sacred.

Acting for the negation of oneself and others is acting against the “sacred”.

What, then, is sacred in a work of art if not the representation of sacred bodies?

Lionna



W. Donzelli
Bologna - 1998

But two aspects of the sacred are still mixed up to this day. Most people hold the religious subject to be sacred, as by means of the tool of the religious subject it is possible to speak of the “sacred”. But I must point out that it is possible that a religious subject does not reveal the sacred, even if the aim of that religious subject is sacred. I can give you an example: the “Death of Mary Mother of Jesus” by Caravaggio is a religious subject and the theme is highly sacred. It is said that the women’s body used as a model by Merisi was that of a woman who died by drowning, but death, in the painted face, is not revealed, and this cannot but make one think that the artist did not carry out his analytical studies on a dead person, but on a living person, and that he represented “Mary” with the values of the body of that model. Thus, Mary seems like a sleeping woman, i.e. far from the values of the religious theme. Nevertheless, the unity of the body and spirit is represented in that woman’s body, therefore the work is, in itself, “sacred”, but its sacredness desecrates the religious sacredness of the death of Mary mother of Jesus. What I wish to say in a conclusive manner is:

only the true synthesis of the infinite temporal images of visual historical experience, even if oriented in an instrumental manner towards an ideological content, can reach the demanding heights of high art.

It becomes clear that the “sacred” in art is that which is proposed in the representation by the emotionality of the real values of the body and, therefore, does not depend on religious or political or historical themes as Hegel, wrongly, believed.

The representation of the true and real teleological body is “sacred”, because only the true real is sacred. For this reason, only the representation of the true real is sacred. What is not “sacred”, on the other hand, is that which purports to set itself above the existence of the true real, such as Hegelian dualism and new-old docetism.

Ultimately, the unity of the spirit and body is sacred, while the theory which denies this unity is desecrating.

And, given that in real life we see the lesser and greater degree of everything, it follows that a work which better represents the unity of the spirit-soul-body will be more artistic, and there-

fore sacred, with respect to one that represents this unity to a lesser degree. A work which does not highlight this unity will not be sacred, even if it is a work with a religious theme.

In the specific case of the work by Caravaggio, the body of Mary, being the body of a real woman, reveals the specific sacredness of her body, even if it is desecrating that this particular female body is presented as the body of Mary, mother of Jesus.

It remains certain, however, that the more the body reveals its sacredness, the more this contributes to the clarity of the theme, the more the theme ascends to the sacredness of the body. Ultimately, it is the “sacredness” of the body alone which adjudicates whether a work or art reveals sacredness, or reveals less sacredness. And a work of art where there is no body, because the body is held to be a hindrance to the spirit, will be completely desecrating. And I would like to reiterate that the element which distinguishes a highly sacred work of art is the degree of visibility of the teleological vitality, or the finalistic movement of the form of the body as it is visible in reality. But, “movement” in artistic represen-

tation should not be intended as movement by translation, as it was envisaged by that futurist painter who, in order to give an idea of vital movement to his portrayal of a small dog, multiplied the animal's paws in the walking position, imitating a sequence of cinematic images.

The movement of a body should be thought of as the visible palpitation of a body's teleology that emerges from its form, even when the body is not actually in a movement of translation. In a portrayal, one must be able to see the potency of the movement of translation. And here I must mention Michelangelo's "Moses", who sits still in the stone, while still giving the certain impression that he could stand up and speak. The great work of art reveals the internal movement of the body: the form of the internal structure of the body has always been a subject of in-depth analysis by great artists who, through the study of the anatomy on real human subjects, have been able to discover the hidden part of vitality and movement, even movement of translation. It is clearly simple that a body which does not possess movement of translation is in vital movement. In fact, its constituent parts, including molecules and



subatomic energies, are under vital impulse and, therefore, in movement, and so, when this vital impulse is highlighted, its sacredness is highlighted, and the more evident this impulse is, the more sacred the work of art will be.

A position of absolute sacredness must be acknowledged for Caravaggio's "Basket of Fruit" in the Ambrosiana Picture Gallery in Milan. In this painting, Merisi has been successful in portraying the unity of the living being, something he did not do in the majority of his other works.

And an everyday, man-made object directed towards a specific use is also artistic in the proportion of its formal perfection in accordance with the ideological purpose for which it was constructed. As a result of this, a perfectly formed object intended for evil purposes is sacred, even if its use is contrary to the sacred. It is always necessary to distinguish the ideological theme, which may be desecrating from the formal perfection of a body where the sacred unity of the content is evident.

I must also say that if, on the one hand, the Informalists think the body is in conflict with the spirit and wish to portray only the spirit in their

works, on the other hand, today's "photographic" artists, known as Hyperrealists, by limiting themselves to reproducing solely the photographic image of the body, portray a part of the body which is too small in temporal terms: the mechanical reproduction of the body represents a weak vitality, therefore it represents an incomplete body, i.e. an imitation of the reality of the body.

In ancient times it was said that the work of art was an imitation of nature. But it is not possible that the great artists of ancient Greece and our own Renaissance did not refer, with this term, to the concept of vitality of nature, because their works clearly show that the term "imitation" indicates equalisation with the reality of its values. Art aspired to the depiction of the teleological truth of nature, i.e. the portrayal of the unity between spirit and body. If this unity is broken from a lived and shared dualistic ideology, the work of art will be destroyed. The high artistic peaks reached in ancient times cannot be the result of a simple "imitation" of the form of nature; instead, they reveal themselves to be the result of a recreation of nature's teleological organization by means of form.

How could the ancient Greeks have created a canon of beauty if their artists had continued copying bodies belonging to nature where the canon does not exist? The Greek canon is the formalisation of the vital efficiency of the best athletes and not a mere copy of an athletic body. Our current inadequacy can only be attributed to the ancients by the gross naïveté of our decadence.

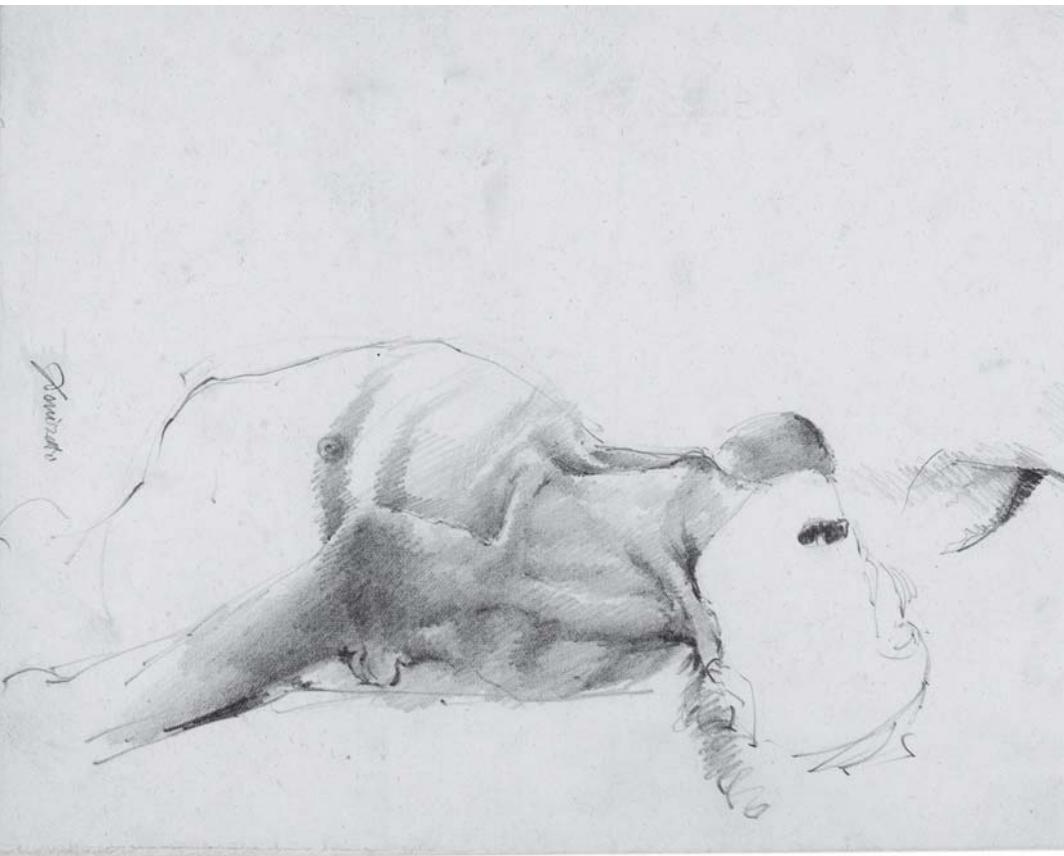
Today's ignorance and arrogance have even been able to make us believe that art is a pointless game and that obscene new approaches, such as putting one's own faeces in a box, can ascend to the spirituality of art. Therefore, all that is repugnant can ascend to the level of art, if it goes against the "imitation" of the finalised form of nature. But it is also in this sense that modernism turns something old into something new. In the ancient Orient, in fact, the highest spiritual manifestations were, in certain religious rituals, repugnant sacrifices accompanied by the equalisation of the moral and the immoral: the equalisation of life and death.

Today, the highest manifestation of the artist is suicide: art does not heal from wounds, it wounds itself, perhaps by cutting its wrists with

razor blades. As everyone knows by now, these manifestations of modern contemporary art hold that the “imitation” of the form and content of reality has been surpassed.

But today, it must also be said that the “imitation” of form, due to the mechanical means available, can also manifest itself in a distorted and decidedly non-“sacred” manner. The mechanical copy of a given body is not the “portrayal” of the body: A simple mechanical reproduction ostentatiously neglects the purpose of form and the purpose of art should not be confused with the simple purpose of the theme, as we have seen. The “purpose” of art is what true artists call “evidence of vital breath”: the purpose for which Michelangelo asked his Moses to speak.

Thus, it is again highlighted how the “sacred” in art does not depend on a religious subject, or on a secular subject, as I have already said, but on the efficient portrayal of a body. We cannot accept that a body is spiritual and sacred just because it serves the purpose of the sacred theme. Without simultaneity between spirit and body, the work of art lives in a form of ambiguity which taints the sacred real and drifts away from art.



And what is desecrating if not the absence or the theoretical rejection of the portrayal of sacred bodies? The artificial and unreal separation of the body from the spirit, which is typical of Informalism, will be desecrating. And the form of a body will be faintly sacred, if it is the reproduction of an almost imperceptible moment of its life.

The form of art will speak sacredly if that form makes its past heard in the future. So: the portrayal of the purpose of a body in a work of art is the visible kinetic characteristic of the form, even if it is immobilised in technical matter.

The photographic image of an instant is too small a synthesis of the vital historical sequence of a body. Not even the same living and real body can convey its purpose through instantaneous optical perception; this purpose can only be understood by means of an in-depth rational analysis of the body's temporal state of being alive. Therefore, it is only possible to speak of art in the synthetic form. The frequent subjection to the photographic image reduces the artist to silence. In fact, the photographic image, relative to a moment in time, speaks for that moment of its life and has little to offer. Resorting

to a photographic image in to order to compensate for a momentary absence of models is only possible without causing total damage if an artist is aware of the real values previously acquired through analytical studies on the true real. But if the artist ignores analytic study on the form of the real, his work will appear empty of content. Even so, if the historical vitality of the form is ignored by the artist, the work would appear devoid of content even without the mechanical click of the photograph: in fact, the instantaneous image received by the visual cortex of our brain is also a photograph and, if the artist does not carry out a purposeful synthesis of the images received from the visual cortex, it is reduced to being photographic, even without a camera.

And nor can artistic emotionality be provided by exhibitions of the real body (body art), or by the replacement of the latter with mannequins, or by nude photographs, or by the bodies of stuffed animals, all of which can only provide ideological emotionality connected to the theme.

Those who shirk analysis of the living body also shirk the knowledge of its truth. It seems

clear to me – I reiterate – that the reproduction of a given body is not yet the portrayal of the body, when it is not substantially a lack of portrayal of the body.

And I will attempt to convey how a body, in a painting, can be present for an instant of its life and, at the same time, absent, in the teleological developing time of portrayal.

By now, we all know that the visual cortex receives images of reality from the eyes in an objective manner.

*“Reversing visual perception, by permanently placing a lens in front of the eye, from the time of birth, which rotates images by one hundred and eighty degrees, we obtain a structure of the occipital cortex in question which is inverted with respect to the controlateral”.**

It is now certain that the form of reality which is external to the brain forms the anatomical structure of the latter, therefore we think what we see objectively according to the function of the brain’s structure. We receive billions of objective images of reality, but we only use those

* Experiment carried out by G. Moruzzi and cited by Vittorino Andreoli in *“La Norma e la Scelta”* Mondadori 1984 page 25

which are necessary for our personal plan which is based on the personal need for survival.

But returning to artistic matters, it is necessary to conclude that the artist constructs an image of reality composed of objective images, but uses them in synthesis for a personal finalistic construction. In order to achieve the synthetic image of their works, great artists have always carried out studies on real form with analytical drawings. The drawing possesses the virtues of immediacy and of being technically easy to perform. In preliminary analytical drawings, which are subsequently united in synthesis in order to portray reality, the idea of the essential representative element is highlighted. And the more time is devoted to the study of formal analytical reality, by means also of the execution of drawings, the more the synthetic work will surpass the approximation of the project sketch and show the real vitality of the body. The works of great artists were born, and can only be born, in this manner. Because the objective parts which are chosen in a finalistic manner are united in a construction which, in turn, has its own purpose. The true artistic idea of reality is objective in terms of its constituent



parts but, as a whole, is personal and has a purpose. Art is the portrayal of the design of nature's living body and the personal aim of the artist. Only in this way can the painted or sculpted image be a portrayal of a present and non-absent body, and rise to the level of a work of art.

As I have said, the more the body shows its teleological lifetime in its past and in its future, the more it is present.

Contrariwise, it becomes absent.

The "short cut" of the photographic snapshot leads to execution with a poor teleological capacity for portrayal, therefore it leads to an insufficient portrayal of the real.

Dear artists,

I invite you to observe what is taught to us by the ancients.

Caravaggio, for example, employed a so-called "realist" style of painting. And, to a certain extent, he adhered to the mystique of instantaneous reality, which induces one to believe in the supremacy of the fleeting moment, as was later believed by the Impressionists in the latter part of the 19th century with the illusion that this "moment" was the true real.

The portrayal of the formal moment may be significant in relation to the ideological values of the theme, as I have said, but this is not enough with respect to depictions rich in the teleological reality, such as those by Masaccio, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Mantegna, and all the greats of our history.

The reality of Piero della Francesca, in addition to capturing the moment of the present reality, also captures the finality of past and future history.

Today, young artists must be careful not to sink to the level of the photographic, which gives ephemeral and tiring satisfaction. The moment cannot compete with the representation of the teleological reality temporally developed.

Even if their theories are diametrically opposed, Informalists and Hyperrealists are very similar: the “spirit” of the Informalists, anticipated without a body, does not exist and the spirit of Hyperrealists, defective of body, exists in an ambiguous manner.

The informal work consists in incommunicability. The photographic work stands on the threshold of communicability, but only has an apparent means of access thereto.

In-depth analytical knowledge is the tool of the conscience and makes it possible to feel the world of others in substantial unity with ourselves. And for whom is art intended if not for others, in the dimension of the artist's personality?

Therefore, the term sacred cannot be applied to every copy of the instantaneous, but rather to every portrayal of any form which has a historical and natural purpose, i.e. which has a finalistic structure recognizable by reason. And when the comprehensibility of a work depends on a verbal rational explanation, as in the case of informal works, it is the verbal explanation which is the work of art, inasmuch as it is formally finalized, rather than the work itself.

And only ethical artists, through their work, know how to unify the apparently separable values of a living being in a work of art, as they feel the vibration of life in the body. With this, artists regain the credit of facts, which was taken away from them by venal art criticism and by the venal market. The credit of facts is given back to artists who, in creating their works, experience the "sacred", i.e. the inseparability of vital values. The person who does not experience the "sa-

cred” can speak of “pure” spirit; he can speak of religious rituals and subjects, of social themes and problems and of the history of art. No-one and nothing can replace the ethical artist who feels the vibrations of the “sacredness” of the living and portrays it in the substance of his work.

Now, to respond to the augury that faith and art will talk to one another once again – I will say that the dialogue is prevented by the loss of the “sacred”. The loss of the sacredness of the body theorised by informal, docetic and heretical idealistic dualism.

If the body is rejected because it is in conflict with the spirit, who will converse? The “pure spirit” alone?

Today, idealist dualism is the basis of a powerful negation of the “sacred” and of faith, as it leads one to believe that in order to ascend to the spirit, it is necessary to demonize the body, thus also throwing into confusion the artists who can no longer converse.

Do false atheists and false believers, who have arrived at the negation of the sacredness of the body, deserve damnation? I don’t think so: agents of evil believe that they are acting in the



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name of good, and whether one is a believer or not is of no consequence. God is the reason for the existence of both good and evil, therefore those who do not know that they are at fault cannot be at fault.

Nature denies or acknowledges functionality in the sphere of the species without us knowing the reason why.

Not everyone is allowed to distinguish the useful sacred from the useless. We are all “differently abled”, we are what we are. For this reason, the error of the negation of the “sacred” can also be traced to the unfathomable divine nature which has denied a person the ability to distinguish good from evil and therefore compels that person to deny his/herself, to deny the form of his/her body and the body of the world, and to deny the “sacred”. The ethical man is left with the duty of not promoting evil. The duty remains of promoting the “sacred” without the fear of seeming surpassed by desecrated openings.

And it remains certain that, in the negation of the sacredness of the form, the language of dialogue is negated. Without form, negation is also negated. It is certain: saving the error is promot-

ing the separation between art and faith. Saving Hegel is saving one's own vanity disguised by spirituality, it is saving the worldliness of the error, it is promoting the everybody's evil.

Today, we are made to believe that the loss of the "sacred" is an intellectual opening, but it is merely the exercising of power on the people. And the will to power is organized in the "market" which is the violence of those hungry for money.

And if the philosopher of art, and the theologian, are at fault, the market takes advantage.

The answer to the first question cannot but be: ethical artists are a hindrance to the aims of the "market" fuelled by error. For this reason, the "sacred" is not promoted, even if it is the load-bearing structure of everybody's life. And, in any case, the "market" of error is not of fundamental importance.

Only the "sacred" constitutes our history. The error burns itself out. The truth, dear artists, as you are already seeing, cannot be hidden by anything.

Mario Donizetti

Bergamo 2011

EAN 9788896607473

© 2012 Mario Donizetti
Finito di stampare marzo 2012
Corponove Editrice - Bergamo
www.corponoveeditrice.it

