

Points of View, Aldous Leonard Huxley

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Ancelin, Bishop of Belley, 'was wont to say: "I for my part can look indifferently upon any woman whatsoever; but I forthwith flay them all." Whereby he meant that he mentally withdrew their skin and contemplated the foul corruption that lurked within.'

Swift's celebrated remark about the woman he had seen flayed in a dissecting room belongs to the same family of ideas—a most respectable family, which can trace its descent at least as far back as Boethius. The Dean of St Patrick's had a genuine Father of the Church in him. One side of him was own brother to that formidable Odo of Cluny, whose comments on the fair sex are so justly famous. The following translation emits but the faintest tinkling echo of those prodigious thunders of the Latin original. 'If men,' writes Odo, 'could see beneath the skin, as the lynxes of Boeotia are said to see into the inward parts, then the sight of a woman would be nauseous unto them. All that beauty consists but in phlegm and blood and humours and gall. If a man consider that which is hidden within the nose, the throat, and the belly, he will find filth everywhere; and if we cannot bring ourselves, even with the tips of our fingers, to touch such phlegm or dung, wherefore do we desire to embrace this bag of filth itself?'

Listen now to Michelet. I make no effort to render the almost hysterical lyricism of the original, but translate quite literally.

'An incomparable illustration from Coste and Gerbe's handbook' (Coste was a professor of embryology, Gerbe an anatomical draughtsman) 'shows the same organ (the matrix) under a less frightful aspect, which yet moves the beholder to tears . . .

'Gerbe's few plates (for the most part unsigned)—this unique and astonishing atlas—are a temple of the future which, later on, in a better age, will fill all hearts with religion. One must fall on one's knees before daring to look at them.

'The great mystery of generation had never before appeared in art with all its charm, its true sanctity. I do not know the astonishing artist. I thank him none the less. Every man who has had a mother will thank him.

'He has given us the form, the colour, nay, much more, he has given us the morbidezza, the tragic grace of these things, the profound emotion of them. Is it by dint of sheer accuracy? or did he feel all this? I know not, but such the effect is.

'Oh sanctuary of grace, made to purify all hearts, how many things you reveal to us!

'We learn, to begin with, that Nature, prodigal as she is of outward beauties, has placed the greatest within. The most thrilling are hidden, as though engulfed, in the depths of life itself.

'One learns, moreover, that love is something visible. The tenderness lavished upon us by our mothers, their dear caresses and the sweetness of their milk—all this can be recognized, felt, divined (and adored!) in this ineffable sanctuary of love and pain.' [A]

Well, well, well . . .
[A]

From Michelet's L'Amour.

The end