

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

by Theodore Dalrymple (April 2014)

The epidemiology, sociology and psychology of bad taste interest me because there is so much of it about. Bad taste is the shadow-side of self-expression, as it were; indeed, it often seems as if it is the *only* side of it. This is one of the reasons I so favour reticence as a trait, at least in the modern world. Take but reticence away, and hark what bad taste follows!

I happen lately to have been reading about a personage who strikes me more as a specimen of the worst possible taste than as a real person, namely the late Simon John Beverley, alias Sid Vicious. It is dangerous, though, to allow oneself ever to think of anybody as a mere specimen, however horrible whatever he might supposedly be a specimen of, for that way inhumanity lies. Even the most depraved person is precisely that, a person, and one must never permit oneself completely to forget it.

Normally, of course, I would not read about an uninteresting person such as Sid Vicious. I have a fairly simple attitude to rock music, of which Mr Vicious was some kind of exponent, the same in effect as President Coolidge's to sin: I am against it. Ideally I would like to start a Society for the Suppression of Rock Music, but I suspect it would have approximately the same practical effect as the Society for the Suppression of Vice founded in the early Nineteenth Century, namely nil. Suffice it to say that whenever I hear that the youth of a country is employing rock music to rise up against dictatorship, I rally at once to the cause of the dictator. Civilisation can survive dictatorship, but it cannot survive rock music.

Let us, however return to the sad (and bad) case of Mr Vicious. I read about him because I intended to write an essay about a murder committed by a man who admired Mr Vicious' life and work, and it seemed to me that this was a fact of some significance in the case. How could any person of the slightest human decency or aesthetic discrimination admire such a figure as Mr Vicious? I quickly learned that it was impossible, inconceivable.

Mr Vicious, some people will remember, was accused in 1978 of having killed his girlfriend, Nancy Spungen, in Room 100 of the Chelsea Hotel in New York. Both were aged 20 at the time. A few months later, while celebrating his release from prison on bail, Mr Vicious died of an overdose of heroin. He was never brought to trial, and as a result all kinds of wild exculpatory theories have been circulated by those weak-minded or bad enough to be his

admirers

Poor Mr Vicious! He was early instilled by his British mother with a philosophy of life at once stupid and horrible, at least if reports are true. 'You are you,' he told him, 'you can do anything you like... You should be able to do what the f... you like.' The crudity of both the form and content of this philosophy of life, if it deserves that title rather than that of attitude to life, hardly needs emphasis. His mother's rider, that in doing what the f... he liked he should not hurt others, was about as effective as a paper tissue to shelter from a monsoon.

Unhappily, Mr Vicious, singularly lazy and untalented (such skill as he acquired on the guitar he learnt in an afternoon) but with the ambition, or daydream, to become a rock star, encountered an unscrupulous and cynical entrepreneur of ugly youth nihilism and self-pity who saw in young Mr Vicious the potential to be really nasty and uninhibitedly transgressive, and thus make a lot of money for him. Never inclined to refinement, either by upbringing or temperament, Mr Vicious (the adoption of such a name being a true indication of his proclivities) devoted himself to the promotion of ugliness both moral and aesthetic. He drank to excess, took drugs, wrote a few horrible 'songs,' dressed in black rags, exposed himself in public, cut himself up, fought with others over nothing, swore constantly, smashed hotel rooms, and in general behaved as appallingly as his somewhat limited imagination could conceive. His every gesture, his every movement, was ugly in the extreme. The worse he behaved, the better from the point of view of publicity: for in an antinomian world, notoriety and fame are one. A persona assumed for long enough, however, soon becomes indistinguishable from a real. Mr Vicious soon lived up to his name.

Squalor became an ideology: nothing was real unless it was squalid. Here was the squalor not of the mediaeval saint indifferent to the world, its comforts and its usages, but a squalor of self-indulgence unconstrained by thought for others or even for oneself in five minutes' time. Irrespective of whether or not Mr Vicious killed his girlfriend – I think that he did – his whole life was, in a way, exemplary, a bad example being a good example when reflected upon rather than imitated. No minimally sensitive or sensible person could take it otherwise than as a perfection of evil.

It therefore came to me as something of a surprise when I read the two letters that Mr Vicious wrote to the murdered girl's mother, Mrs Deborah Spungen, after his arrest, and which were included in the latter's memoir of her daughter, *And I Don't Want to Live this Life*. This title is itself taken from a poem written after the murder by the accused:

But now you're gone there's only pain.

And nothing I can do.

And I don't want to live this life

If I can't live for you.

This is banal, no doubt, the level of poetry one might expect to find in a greetings card of some description, but it is not crude in the way that the life of Mr Vicious had always hitherto been crude.

The letters were also better written and more refined than I would have expected. They are not, of course, literary masterpieces, as very few letters are; but neither are they the sort of crude grunts reduced to semi-literate writing that one would have predicted. Here is a paragraph:

Frank [the father of the victim] said in the paper that Nancy was born in pain and lived in pain all her life. When I first met her, and for about six months after that, I spent practically the whole time in tears. Her pain was too much to bear. Because, you see, I spent practically the whole time in tears. But she said I must be strong for her or otherwise she would have to leave me. So I became strong for her, and she began to stop having asthma attacks and seemed to be going through a lot less pain.

Irrespective of its sincerity, this letter was that of someone who knew better than the way he and the victim had chosen to live. (The sincerity, or at least the durability, of the sentiments expressed in the letter may be doubted by the fact that Mr Vicious soon found himself another girlfriend and continued, though charged with Nancy Spungen's death, to lead a drug and drink fuelled life, in precisely the same milieu as that in which he had moved before: no bethinking himself in the bowels of Christ there, then. Admittedly he was still only twenty, but a catastrophic event such as the near-disembowelment of a girlfriend in one's room might have been expected to exert a greater effect on his subsequent lifestyle.)

My point is not so much that there was a more refined or better person deep within Mr Vicious that was trying to emerge from his crude carapace, but that he *knew* that the way that he was living was bad: evil would not be too strong a word for it. No man does wrong knowingly, said Socrates, but he had not had the advantage (I won't say pleasure) of meeting or reading about Sid Vicious: for the latter did wrong knowingly, self-glorifyingly in fact.

The question is 'Why?' And why was he, and is he still, admired? He was no artistic genius of the type to whom licence has often been granted, rightly or wrongly, by admirers, the good of

the work more than cancelling out the evil of the life. His only discernible talent, as far as I can see, was a certain ruthlessness, an uncompromising willingness to forgo self-respect. Why would anyone want to imitate or emulate this, given the appalling moral and aesthetic consequences of doing so?

I think the answer is twofold: egotism and mental laziness. The egotism provokes the desire to cut a figure in the world, no matter what it might be. 'There is,' said Oscar Wilde, with his typically frivolous perspicuity, 'only one thing worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.' He did not foresee a world in which everyone would *want* to be famous for quarter of an hour, even if, *pace* Andy Warhol, they could not be. To melt unseen or unremarked into a crowd because one did not think one was worthy of notice became, for many, the worst wound imaginable to their self-esteem, a quality that they nursed as it were a gaping and unhealing wound. Fame at all costs was better than anonymity, fame being a kind of afterlife that guaranteed a meaning to the banality of everyday life.

In the absence of talent, however, and of the willingness to work and study (the only way talent can be brought to fruition), transgression and outrage are the only way to fame. Mozart was once described as taking dictation from God, a kind of Mohammed of music, but in his famous letter to Joseph Haydn, dedicating to him his six quartets, and full of filial piety, he said that the quartets had taken him much hard and patient study. True, hard and patient study alone could not have resulted in such wonderful works (here, surely, was the source of Salieri's animus towards him, if he really had any such, for we are rarely altogether without ill-feeling towards those more talented than ourselves, especially in our chosen fields); but genius without effort would also have remained fallow.

Lust for fame, the desire at all costs not to remain anonymous (the worst of all fates for an egotist), combined with an absence of talent, results in unscrupulousness, not only in the field of music but in all fields. The effect is particularly dire in fields that have hitherto required aesthetic accomplishment, however, for aesthetic accomplishment requires discipline, study and the like to achieve, even for the most prodigiously talented. Impatience born of laziness supervenes; only ever greater transgression can assure fame or notoriety (which are the same thing in a degraded culture).

Not everyone has the courage of their degradation, however; those who do not have the courage become admirers and hangers-on, fans and pale imitators, rather than originators or further transgressors. They are to Mr Vicious as Marie Antoinette was to real shepherdesses; they are not quite willing to take the consequences of their own bad taste and ill-will towards anything better.

Nevertheless, they have an effect by sheer weight of numbers, perhaps even greater in the aggregate than that of the original transgressors. They turn what was once a transgression into a norm or a convention. Mr Vicious' mode of dress, hideous and deliberately ugly, was once so outrageous or extraordinary that he was remarked everywhere he went and even attacked for it; soon it raised no eyebrow.

By no stretch of the imagination could the way he dressed be regarded as progress, not even in the strange, technical sense of the Victorian Rational Dress Society. On the contrary. But ugliness is much easier to achieve than beauty, as destruction is easier than construction. It is true that the result of great effort is not necessarily beauty; but the result of lack of effort is always ugly. And that is why ugliness is so tempting to mankind.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is [*here*](#).