

# IMPURITIES: AN AESTHETIC REFLECTION

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**Resumo:** A história das ideias estéticas explorou, desde os seus primórdios, uma incompatibilidade entre estética e perfeição. Isso explica, por um lado, a tensão que encontramos em Platão e Aristóteles entre a teoria prescrita e a prática; mas também, por outro lado, a reivindicação moderna da imperfeição como um atributo da obra de arte em autores como Victor Hugo e Baudelaire. De facto, essa reivindicação só foi possível na esteira da terceira Crítica kantiana, que relançou os fundamentos da estética ao mesmo tempo que afastou a ideia de perfeição como finalidade. Este ensaio propõe que a estética da imperfeição assenta não numa apologia do acaso e do erro, mas antes que a falha nasce no exercício da liberdade máxima aliada a uma máxima exigência. Quer na criação, quer na recepção, a experiência estética implica mover-se num curso arriscado, sem garantias ou segurança.

**Palavras-chave:** Estética da imperfeição; Falha; Risco.

**Abstract:** The history of aesthetic ideas has explored, from its beginnings, an incompatibility between aesthetics and perfection. On the one hand, this explains the tension found in Plato and Aristotle between the prescribed theory and the practice. On the other hand, it also explains the modern claim of imperfection — as an attribute of the work of art — in authors such as Victor Hugo and Baudelaire. In fact, this claim was only possible in the wake of the third Kantian Critique, which restored the foundations of aesthetics while removing the idea of perfection as end. This essay proposes that an aesthetics of imperfection rests not on an apology of chance and error, but that flaw rises in the exercise of maximum freedom linked to a maximal demand. Whether in creation or reception, aesthetic experience implies moving on a risky course, without guarantees or safety.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics of imperfection; Flaw; Risk.

*Imperfection is, paradoxically, a guarantee of survival.*

Tzvetan Todorov

In ancient Greece, organized thought about beauty, similarly to organized thought about scientific as well as moral knowledge, was underpinned by a cosmological worldview, as a logically structured and hierarchized organic system where each part had its own rigorously and naturally determined function (*ergon*). Harmonious and serene, good and beautiful, and above all closed, delimited and as one, the *kosmos* was, then, at one time divine (*theos*) and logical (*logos*). And in the face of this objectivity, it is knowledge that assumes the role of *un-veiling* truth (*aletheia*); to *un-cover* it so as to *see God* (*theoria*). In this way, to read the remarks of Plato and Aristotle on art is also to avail oneself of those lenses through which the world is observed as something of a perfection in itself.

In Plato's *Parmenides*, the contempt betrayed by Socrates for things like hair, mud and garbage (which, according with his persona in the dialogue, we see as they are and, as such, have no corresponding Forms, for they do not partake in the One<sup>1</sup>) clearly signals that resistance to chaos that lies at the heart of the Greek soul. The unacceptable — be it the illogical in the scientific domain, the unjust in the moral or the ugly in the aesthetic one — is always

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1 See PLATO, 1997: 364, 380 and *passim*.

a problem of the multiple, generator of diversity and inherently intriguing. The cleansing operation carried out by Plato in the vast impure fields of literature is thus not surprising. I am thinking, of course, of books II and III of *The Republic*, where *pari passu* an action of erasure and purging of several passages of the best poets — and the best among the best: Homer — is proposed, envisaging an adjustment of literature to the divine order of the cosmos<sup>2</sup>.

In fact, the problem here is substantially a moral one — and, as such, the subject is mostly Justice — because the need to eliminate the faults pointed out in those poetic works results, most prominently, from an imbalance, that is, from an unjustness (*a lack of justice*) relative to the expected moral perfection, in accordance with the above-mentioned cosmological base. This condition of truth to which literature should be subordinate — the behaviour of the gods and heroes in consonance with the irreproachable character one expects from divine and heroic creatures; filial respect owed to one's progenitors; the advantage of punishing those who commit transgressions; fear of the gods — drives Plato to denounce works of poetry. In connection to this moral background, Plato focuses not merely on faults of conception or content, but also on poetry's faults at the level of construction (*poiesis*) and the perceptive experience of them (*aesthesis*). In that regard, there are pressing calls of attention to names, interjections or other verbal motives susceptible of eliciting chills in the audience (spectators, hearers or readers), moving their passions towards the cult of fear and feebleness of mind, straightforwardly condemnable in the view of the ideal city's designers.

Literature, as Plato envisages it, absolutely idealized, does not therefore accommodate appalling realism, a defective or poor counsellor. Keen on submitting everything to the political order as a consummation of the metaphysics of Forms, Plato nevertheless leaves open, here and there, an incompatibility between the perfection of poetry (that is, its conformity to exclusively poetic ends) and the perfection of the ideal city, such divergence resting on the principle of specialization that governs each function performed by the citizens. In fact, Plato acknowledges that the words picked out by Homer and other major poets are indeed *the most poetic*, but it is precisely here one runs into an obstacle: it so happens that «the more poetic they are, the less they should be heard by children or by men who are supposed to be free and to fear slavery more than death»<sup>3</sup>. In another passage, further ahead, Adeimantus is forced to conclude that narration is the pure mode that should be followed by the poet, but soon enough Socrates introduces the caveat that, after all, «the mixed style is pleasant. Indeed, it is by far the most pleasing to children, their tutors, and the vast majority of people», ending up concluding: «But perhaps you don't think that it harmonizes with our constitution, because no one in our city is two or more people simultaneously, since each does only one job»<sup>4</sup>. The outcome of this reply comes right in the following section, with the verdict of banishing poets from the city, with the exception of those who adhere to a strict obedience to the precepts in force<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> See PLATO, 1997: 1015-1035.

<sup>3</sup> PLATO, 1997: 1024.

<sup>4</sup> PLATO, 1997: 1035.

<sup>5</sup> «But, for our own good, we ourselves should employ a more austere and less pleasure-giving poet and storyteller, one who would imitate the speech of a decent person and who would tell his stories in accordance with the patterns we laid down when we first undertook the education of our soldiers» (PLATO, 1997: 1035).

However, this defence of a pure poetry that coincides with an anaesthetic literature has no proven examples to offer. The poet of poets himself, Homer, for centuries considered the educator of Greece and highly esteemed by Plato, is widely quoted as Plato's blue pencil runs callously through the passages that must be eliminated or reformulated, concerning the selection of modes, rhythms and instruments worthy of being listened to, and the criteria of selection follow the same track, with a view to the effectiveness of platonic educational ideology.

Let us now look into the qualitative, yet subtle, leap that takes place in art theory, as we move from the Academy to the Lyceum. We saw how Plato directed his attention towards the sort of object imitated and the form of imitation employed. The same inconsistency observed a while back in *The Republic*, between theory and practice, shall be found again in Aristotle, though with more salient contrasts, given that the tension between the normative theoretical discourse and the descriptivist presentation produces, in the context of the Aristotelian *Poetics* in a more puzzling conflict (and the mere fact that we have a *Poetics* by Aristotle but none by Plato is significant by itself).

According, to Roselyne Dupont-Roc's and Jean Lallot's introduction to their translation of the *Poetics*, Aristotle was aware of that conflict between theory and practice, between prescribed norm and confirmed example, having done what he could in order to attenuate it<sup>6</sup>. Thence, a pronouncement becomes inescapable: «the most cherished tragedies and authors are not those that better comply with the ideal norm»<sup>7</sup>. We return, in fact, to the same difficulty detected in Plato: the theoretical model advocated by Aristotle exists nowhere in practice, since not even the exemplary Homer can satisfy the requirements<sup>8</sup>. Two illustrative cases of that conflict concern, one, the relevant or secondary role attributed to spectacle (*opsis*)<sup>9</sup>, and the other, perhaps more impressive, the golden rule of Aristotelian *Poetics* — namely, the law of necessity and verisimilitude in action (*mythos*) — law which is overcome by the aesthetic effect of wonder (*thaumaston*).

Now, all of the above is framed in this manner because Aristotle conceives the poetic work as a microcosm, teleologically regulated by its own internal, specific laws. And this is the qualitative difference relative to the Platonic theory of art. Although it fulfils its role of *analogon* of the cosmos as such, the artistic object presupposes a teleological functioning in conformity. So, despite placing the emphasis on the final product, Aristotle considers that, to achieve it, the rules of art (*techne*) must be applied<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, Aristotle is quite aware that the trade of the poet as such is a work of language and, consequently, poetic mime-

<sup>6</sup> Cf. DUPONT-ROC & LALLOT, 1980: 13 and *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> DUPONT-ROC & LALLOT, 1980: 12; my translation.

<sup>8</sup> Praises such as the following are, however, frequent: «All of which Homer was the first to employ and employed proficiently. [...] In addition, each [of his poems] excels all epics in diction and thought» (ARISTOTLE, 1995: 119), or this one: «Homer deserves praise for many other qualities, but especially for realising, alone among epic poets, the place of the poet's own voice» (ARISTOTLE, 1995: 121 and 123).

<sup>9</sup> To assess the variation in importance of the role attributed to spectacle, compare 1450b 15-20 with 1462a 15-1462b (see ARISTOTLE, 1995: 53, 55, 139 and 141).

<sup>10</sup> This explains, by the way, the option taken by the translators, Dupont-Roc and Lallot, in going against the tradition by rendering *mimēsthai*, and further lexemes of the sort, not as *imitate*, but as *represent*, shifting the focus from a putative object-model to the produced object.

sis is defined as *representation of human actions through language*. Here is what justifies the philosopher's condescendence toward error (*hamartia*) incidentally made by the poet in that which does not concern his craft — as when he errs in representing a horse when he is not an expert in equestrianism — a flaw incomparably less objectionable than a mistake inherent to the poetic art itself, for in a society where each one has his very well defined role within the hierarchic system, to fail in one's specialty, that is, in the function one serves, is unacceptable<sup>11</sup>.

We have then two distinct types of error — say, the *error in representation* (incidental, external to the object, and thus excusable) and the *error of representation* (poetic, internal to the object and thus condemnable). Aristotle distinguishes, within the *error inherent in poetics*, a series of reprehensible procedures, calling attention to the means of avoiding them<sup>12</sup>. In my view it is more pressing to point out strategic benevolence with which the author of the *Poetics* allows certain slips, as long as — and in this formula lies the reason — those slips are mixed in the right quantity and quality with the virtues of the artist. In other words, and making use of the repertory of taste, Aristotle concedes that certain mistakes can be like the right seasoning in the best food. Observe this passage, where once again it is evident the tension between normative and descriptive poetics is evident: in referring to the irrationality of certain plots, Aristotle holds that «one should not construct plots like this. [...] Even the irrational details in the *Odyssey* about the putting ashore would patently be intolerable if an inferior poet were to handle them; as it is, Homer uses his other qualities to soften and disguise the absurdity»<sup>13</sup>. Such concessions are often closely connected to the wonder (*thaumaston*) that Aristotle considers of primary importance in arousing catharsis in the spectator's mind, a purpose without which tragedy is not fulfilled as such. This effect of surprise is crucial in the history of aesthetic theory, because it works at the core of the receptor's sensibility and aesthetic capacity. Reflections by many distinct figures of Modernity<sup>14</sup>, have dwelled on that effect through different modulations, spanning from disturbance to shock, from novelty to freshness, from the uncommon to the bizarre, from the disconcerting to the reflective... We can say, then, that this is a cornerstone of modern aesthetics.

Proceeding our journey through the foundations of aesthetics in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, I would still like to highlight two references that seem to me decisive: to Horace's *Epistola ad Pisones* and to the treatise *Peri Hupsous* by the Pseudo-Longinus, the latter probably dating from the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D., and thus one century after Horace. In the letter addressed by Horace to the Piso family, the Roman poet lays out a program that puts strong emphasis on the principle of *poetarum limae labor*, encouraging the disapproval of «a poem which many a day

<sup>11</sup> See ARISTOTLE, 1995: 127 and 129.

<sup>12</sup> That is the subject of the penultimate chapter: see ARISTOTLE, 1995: 125-137.

<sup>13</sup> ARISTOTLE, 1995: 125.

<sup>14</sup> Namely, among others, as Joseph Addison in his essays for *The Spectator* (1712-1717), or Diderot, in his several articles on aesthetics (in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century), or Edmund Burke in his *Philosophical Enquiry* (1757), or Friedrich Schiller in his *Letters* and essays (at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century), or William Wordsworth in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), morning on, finally — so as not to be exhaustive — to the Breton of the surrealist manifestos (1924 and 1930) or to Leonard Koren's *WET* magazine (1976-1981).

and many a blot has not restrained and refined ten times over to the test of the close-cut nail<sup>15</sup>. While no doubt, on the one hand, Horace tirelessly underlines the need of time and distance relative to the work, without relinquishing permanent reassessment and the critical eye<sup>16</sup>; on the other hand, he manifests a certain indulgence towards errors, when these are made, one should note, by the poets that master the art<sup>17</sup>. When spelled out, the Horatian argument is the following: when the poet, who inspired by *ingenium*, cultivates art to the highest standards (educating himself intensely in the reading and emulation of the best authors), fails in his work, he fails because he is human, and such an attribute is not alien to, but rather inherent to his condition.

Horace's intransigence in this domain is directed, rather, to mediocre poets who not only commit often the same mistakes but also exhibit their mediocrity through a narcissistic approval of error an intolerance to criticism that demands a return to the text and its reformulation. It so happens, then, that this emphasis on polishing work, on the maturation of the text and on the poet who wrote it, on the humility that should characterize him, and on the incessant possibility of revising the work (in waves of detachment and approximation between subject and object), conjoins, in the end, two ideas that complement each other.

1. That, since the work is susceptible to revisitation and constant revision, there is no place for advocating a perfect work of art. The very demand of keeping time, which is crucial in Horatian poetics, clashes with the idea of perfection: *perfectus*, according to its Latin etymology (combination of the prefix *per-* with the verb *-facio*, meaning *that which is utterly completed, having run its course*<sup>18</sup>). Now, nothing is more at odds with Horace's conception of poetic labour than this idea of closure, completeness, of satisfaction without distress. For to experience distress involves a possibility, the openness — and the adventure — of a rebellious event that eludes closure. On the contrary, to live in distress (because unsatisfied with one's work), seems to be a condition that positively emanates from *Epistola ad Pisones*.

2. (derived from 1.): Every full stop in the work is an artifice, a posture one accepts in the (more or less firm) conviction of the precariousness which is akin to the very condition of the work of art.

Such a lack of guarantee for a poet concerning the value of his work acquires a special influence, in my view, when, at a certain point, Horace (who, since he is classical, advocates the principles of unity and verisimilitude, description and simplicity, subtlety and prudence) puts the following challenge to poets: «Not enough is it for poems to have beauty: they must have charm, and lead the hearer's soul where they will. [...] If you would have me weep, you

<sup>15</sup> HORACE, 1942: 475.

<sup>16</sup> Observe carefully vv. 291-294, partially quoted in the body of the text: «poetarum limae labor et *mora* [...] carmen reprehendite quod non / *multa dies* et *multa litura* coeruit atque praeseptum deciens non castigavit *ad unguem*» (HORACE, 1942: 474; my italics).

<sup>17</sup> See HORACE, 1942: 479ff. Furthermore, Horace grants that works with flaws are successful in their ability to capture the audience's interest: see HORACE, 1942: 477.

<sup>18</sup> The prefix *per-* conveys the meaning of «complete accomplishment of action, closure, perfection» apparent in verbs such as *perdoceo* («to fully teach, instruct»), *perficio* («to fully make, to finish, complete, conclude, execute») and *perfruor* («to enjoy fully, wholly»).

must first feel grief yourself»<sup>19</sup>. This aesthetic congeniality will appear later on, further developed, in the treatise by Pseudo-Longinus, also in the form of an epistle.

Pseudo-Longinus knows that correctness tends to prove fatally ineffective when the purpose is to strike the reader. And so, he praises a writer like Plato, who «is often carried away by a sort of Bacchic possession in his writing into harsh and intemperate metaphor and allegorical bombast»<sup>20</sup> and reproaches Caecilius for preferring Lysias over Plato, given that the former is «immaculate and never makes a mistake, whereas Plato is full of mistakes»<sup>21</sup>. The position assumed by the Greek theorist in this domain is put forward in the following terms:

*Suppose we illustrate this by taking some altogether immaculate and unimpeachable writer, must we not in this very connection raise the general question: Which is the better in poetry and in prose, grandeur flawed in some respects, or moderate achievement accompanied by perfect soundness and impeccability? And again: is the first place in literature rightly due to the largest number of excellences or to the excellences that are greatest in themselves? [...] I am well aware that the greatest natures are least immaculate. Perfect precision runs the risk of triviality, whereas in great writing as in great wealth there must needs be something overlooked. Perhaps it is inevitable that humble, mediocre natures, because they never run any risks and never aid at the heights, should remain to a large extent safe from error, while in great natures their very greatness spells danger*<sup>22</sup>.

Although Pseudo-Longinus forthwith states that blemishes still upset him, he puts forward the same justification that was implicit in Horace but taking it a step further: the flaws we find in great authors, like Homer and others of his stature, Pseudo-Longinus chooses «to call them not wilful mistakes but careless oversights, let in almost casually and at random by the heedlessness of genius»<sup>23</sup>.

The problem we face, thus, is not that of error having only one accidental (and as such specious and unpredictable) condition, which is registered as a flaw in the work, but a quite different problem. The imperfection, a certain kind of imperfection, is engraved on the work at the opportune moment (*kairos*) of creation by the creator endowed with genius. We must thereby understand the Longinian genius in light of his aesthetic theory based on the archetypical category of the sublime. For Pseudo-Longinus, the sublime poetic work, which is the poetic work of the genius, acquires a sort of immunity through the cross-fertilization of natural elements («the power of grand conceptions» and «the inspiration of vehement emotion») and technical skills («the proper construction of figures», «nobility of language» and «dignified and elevated word-arrangement»<sup>24</sup>). Now, greatness of verbal expression and ethical greatness mutually pervade one another, so that if the greatness of the elevated spirit is due to the freedom with which it despises petty issues, like money and other attend-

<sup>19</sup> HORACE, 1942: 459.

<sup>20</sup> LONGINUS, 1995: 265.

<sup>21</sup> LONGINUS, 1995: 267.

<sup>22</sup> LONGINUS, 1995: 267 and 269.

<sup>23</sup> LONGINUS, 1995: 269; my italics.

<sup>24</sup> See LONGINUS, 1995: 181.

ing evils (the desire of fame, lust or arrogance...<sup>25</sup>), likewise, at the appropriate moment of creation, the poet uses that freedom in laying the groundwork of his verbal work. It is from that freedom that the power to err emerges. And I make the caveat that we are not speaking of just any freedom, a kind of post-modern *anything goes*, in which chance is left to chance, as is encouraged in contemporary *glitch art*. Nothing more remote than a certain eulogy of blunder, claiming «the glory of imperfection»<sup>26</sup>, tending to fall into an original extravagance that, as was keenly observed by Kant<sup>27</sup>, should be avoided through the counterbalance of originality by the exemplariness of the created object; this is the case if we wish to deal in works of genius, works which are worthy of memory and thus unyielding to the passage of time — a chief arbiter in the treatise of the Pseudo-Longinus. We speak, rather, of a condition that only the rare few can assume because it is, as a bulwark, a renouncement to the immediate and the accessible; that is, of a spirit relentlessly compelling the models, profoundly knowledgeable of the potentialities of their raw-material; of an experienced and mature sensibility; of a capacity for enthusiasm and its aesthetic contagion as well as ethical exemplariness. This, one must agree, is neither negligible, nor for just anyone. It requires a great amount of effort and dedication, besides natural talent, and on that point all the classical authors I mentioned are in agreement, despite variations in what elements they emphasize within the same question.

In the tradition of Christian thought, the idea of perfection on which the Graeco-Latin culture rested will remain, although with significant variants that introduce, in the concept, the dynamism and the excess from the perspective of a negative theology<sup>28</sup>. Perfection still relates to an object external to man, and towards which he must direct his gaze. The object he produces will always be a reflection, or a *mirror*, to use the expression consecrated by Abrams in his classic *The Mirror and the Lamp*. This order of ideas will persist until modernity, when an effective «revolution against the rule of perfection and finality»<sup>29</sup>, occurs a revolution in which the aesthetic sphere had played a preeminent role.

Nevertheless, in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, precisely in 1750, the establishment of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline by Baumgarten, a follower of the dogmatic rationalism of Leibniz and Wolf, rests on an operation in which the legitimization of *aesthesis* as a source of knowledge is diminished with the consideration that the gnoseological foundation of sense experience is of an inferior kind, and this leads to reasonings such as the following: «The object of aesthetics is the perfection of sense knowledge as such, that is, beauty. It must avoid the imperfection of sense knowledge as such, that is, ugliness»<sup>30</sup>. And this is because, for Baumgarten, beauty consists in the «phenomenal evidence of an object's perfection»<sup>31</sup>. In fact, we are squarely opposed to the position manifested by Victor Hugo less than a century later, when, in his Preface to *Cromwell*, he calls attention to

25 Cf. LONGINUS, 1995: 299ff.

26 KESSELS, 2016: 5-6.

27 See KANT, 2000: 186ff.

28 On this subject, see FOSS, 1946: 25ff.

29 FOSS, 1946: 76.

30 BAUMGARTEN, 1988: 121; my translation.

31 PRANCHÈRE, 1988: 11; my translation.

*the thread that frequently connects what we, following our special whim, call «defects» to what we call «beauty.» Defects — at least those which we call it — are often the native, necessary, unavoidable condition of qualities. [...] Such a blemish can be the inevitable consequence of such beauty. This rough stroke of the brush, which offends my eye at close range, completes the effect and gives relief to the whole. Efface one and you will efface the other. Originality is made of such things. Genius is necessarily uneven. [...] and then, once more, there are defects which take root only in masterpieces; it is given only to certain geniuses to have certain defects<sup>32</sup>.*

In fact, the primacy of romantic originality here alluded to would not have been possible without the decisive contribution of Kant and, in particular, the Copernican revolution he carried out and from which onwards the idea that sensibility is an inferior kind of knowledge stopped making sense. As key moment in the history of aesthetics, the Kantian philosophy will significantly propitiate the consecration of modern man as a source of knowledge, accepting his sensory limitation and at the same time assuming himself as full-fledged creator.

In what concerns the imperfection of the work of art, Kant not only corrects the rationalist dogmatism of Leibniz and Wolff origin, which considered the sensory world as inferior to the intelligible one (as it was in Platonism and Christian theology), but also the other side of the argument, that of the sensualists, all of whom ended up converging in this particular point. In fact, an empiricist like David Hume is quite assertive in his attack on artistic blemishes. At a given point of his article *Of the Standard of Taste* (1757), before enunciating the criteria of taste, Hume declares:

*Many of the beauties of poetry, and even of eloquence, are founded on falsehood and fiction, on hyperboles, metaphors, and an abuse or perversion of terms from their natural meaning. To check the sallies of the imagination, and to reduce every expression to geometrical truth and exactness, would be the most contrary to the laws of criticism; because it would produce a work, which, by universal experience, has been found the most insipid and disagreeable. But though poetry can never submit to exact truth, it must be confined by rules of art, discovered to the author either by genius or observation. If some negligent or irregular writers have pleased, they have not pleased by their transgressions of rule or order, but in spite of these transgressions: they have possessed other beauties, which were conformable to just criticism; and the force of these beauties has been able to overpower censure and give the mind a satisfaction superior to the disgust arising from the blemishes<sup>33</sup>.*

In his turn, just like the Pseudo-Longinus, but now with a philosophical support that was not feasible until then, Kant defines genius ascribing it the quality of the flaw<sup>34</sup>. It is because «genius is the exemplary originality of the natural endowment of a subject for the free use of his cognitive faculties» that he

<sup>32</sup> HUGO, 1963: 452; my translation.

<sup>33</sup> HUME, 1965: 7-8.

<sup>34</sup> It is never too much to reinforce this pivotal idea of Kantian aesthetics, which gives the title of section 15, the «Analytic of the Beautiful»: «The judgment of taste is entirely independent from the concept of perfection» (KANT, 2000: 111). This because the judgement of taste is not determined by any concept.



*is an example, not for imitation (for then that which is genius in it and constitutes the spirit of the work would be lost), but for emulation by another genius, who is thereby awakened to the feeling of his own originality, to exercise freedom from coercion in his art in such a way that the latter thereby itself acquires a new rule, by which the talent shows itself as exemplary*<sup>35</sup>.

It is in this context that, like Victor Hugo, the German philosopher condemns those who copy, that is, the false creators who instead of genuinely creating merely imitate, echoing here a distinction between first and second-rate creators, which we already observed in the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in the work *De gl'Heroici Furori*<sup>36</sup>, published by Giordano Bruno in 1585, where the Nolan philosopher distinguishes those poets who imitate from those who invent: the former stick to following precepts, while the latter are the true creative geniuses. Kant points out the distinction between the true models and the epigones. The imitating occurs when

*the student copies everything, even down to that which the genius had to leave in, as a deformity, only because it could not easily have been removed without weakening the idea. This courage is a merit only in a genius, and a certain boldness in expression and in general some deviation from the common rule is well suited to him, but is by no means worthy of imitation, but always remains in itself a defect which one must seek to remove, but for which the genius is as it were privileged, since what is inimitable in the impetus of his spirit would suffer from anxious caution*<sup>37</sup>.

This retraction spurred by fear of failure is thus unbecoming of the genius, who enjoys a privileged freedom in the play of the faculties when he commits to the act of creation. It is not that the genius cannot tremble, but that fear cannot imprison him, or else he is not anointed, a rare species of nature, as Kant defines it. Note that error, according to Kant, despite its undesirability, in since it is the result of a risky operation carried out in the work of genius, consists in a side effect whose expurgation may compromise the aesthetic idea<sup>38</sup>. The Kantian argument makes use here of belligerent notions — such as risk, danger, insecurity and courage — already presented by the Pseudo-Longinus when the subject is the imperfection inherent in the works of geniuses<sup>39</sup>. Either accidental or parallel, the flaw bursts from genial impetus. It is often the result not of negligence refined by intuition, but of a sudden lack of control spurred by the thirst of overcoming, like the violin string that breaks in the middle of a Paganini *Capriccio*, or the wrong note on the trumpet in a torrential improvisation. The mistake may be, then, the diadem of artistic excellence. In this sense, nothing comes so close to and, paradoxically, is so far removed from the aesthetics of imperfection as the musical genre of the *étude*. Accompanying the technical evolution of the instrument, and taking advantage of it, the *étude* feeds, at least, on the urge to improve and it seeks, at most, to achieve virtuosity. Incapacity is thus resisted to the point of immodesty; the stain of embarrassment

<sup>35</sup> KANT, 2000: 195-196.

<sup>36</sup> See BRUNO, 1965: 82-84. There too he anticipates Kant in another principle, when he states that «poetry is not born of the rules», on the contrary, «the rules derive from the poetry» (BRUNO, 1965: 83).

<sup>37</sup> KANT, 2000: 196.

<sup>38</sup> See KANT, 2000: 196.

<sup>39</sup> See LONGINUS, 1995: 267, 269 and 271.

revolves so as to gape in pride. As a «form of the inflation of the many»<sup>40</sup>, the excessive is its mark, and for there to be excess there has to be risk. The feat occurs not *against*, but *with* the risk of failure, *in tandem* with it. On the other hand, the profound (and unspeakable) desire of the *étude* lies in a lofty contempt for technique in overcoming all difficulties it may present to the performer. Imperfection is thus not a reckless disregard, because it is unprepared, but a negligence that involves enhancing the most qualified technical domain, an unforeseen creative potential, distilled from maximum control.

To venture. To run the risk. To be in danger. The resistance thus activated pervades the work soliciting from the subject who approaches it the same proof of resistance: a proof in two occurrences and two objects (in the text that resists it and in the interpreter who resists it). An imperfect perfection that takes risks and cannot but *lead* one into taking risks. After all, the courage that the Pseudo-Longinus ascribed to the writer of genius, the writer of the sublime, is not merely the prerogative of the artist. The proof, the *feat*, befits also the subject of the reception in the exact sense in which, as Victor Hugo wrote, «for colossal books there must be athletic readers»<sup>41</sup>. In setting his poetico-aesthetic proposal on an epistemological ground (romantic art paints life as it is), the Preface to *Cromwell* puts the emphasis on *mixture* as a result of a dialectical phenomenology. Against classical unity — uniform, monotonous and predictable —, modernity, as a time of synthesis, fosters the multiform, the always living.

The impurities evoke the contamination effect, of a residue identified as alien to the body in which it settles and, at the same time, adheres to. In a work of art, the object is pervious to such residues. Imperfection's perfection resides in that character which is inextricable from the flaw. It is not a dark point that, by contrast, stresses the intensely bright spots, but is in itself a powerful, blinding radiance of light, that displaces and imbalances. The flaw lends itself as the Barthesian *punctum*, that detail towards which the eye drifts without ceasing to be, however, the singularity it is and perceived as such<sup>42</sup>. «What is not slightly deformed has an air of insensitivity — hence it follows that irregularity, that is, the unexpected, the surprise and the amazement are an essential part and the characteristic of beauty»<sup>43</sup>, the poet who has lit the fuse to the tradition of rupture tells us<sup>44</sup>. An excessive light that brings forth resistance, the anguish of an active waiting, just like that we undergo when, faced with a perfect cadence at the end of a piece, we wish to believe that the music is not yet over at that point: because it cannot end that way, because it requires resolution, even when it is delayed, it does not come at all, it is postponed or discarded. The point that interrupts, suspends, a disautomatization claiming our attention and with it the suspension of unitary time. Viktor Shklovsky has termed as *estrangement* (*ostranenie*) the poetico-aesthetic principle attached to art's purpose of leading «us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition» given that

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<sup>40</sup> MOYSAN, 2014: 177.

<sup>41</sup> *apud* SAINT GIRONS, 2005: 7; my translation.

<sup>42</sup> See BARTHES, 1981: 40-43.

<sup>43</sup> BAUDELAIRE, 1968: 625; my translation.

<sup>44</sup> On the «tradition against itself», see the excellent book *Children of the Mire* (PAZ, 1991: 1-18).

By 'estranging' objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and 'laborious'. The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity. The artefact itself is quite unimportant<sup>45</sup>.

In this phenomenology of aesthetic reception, I point out particularly the obscuring of form and the foundation of time, the *durée* in a Bergsonian sense. *What has already become has ceased to interest*; form is to be *obscured*. The poetic work, in that sense, consists in a double labour of creating the formula — the figure — so as to subsequently erase its track. The reader will be thrown into that unknown, *strange* place, where he will linger, feeding an unremitting anguish before the circumstance of his experience. Precisely in *De l'Imperfection*, that magical book written in the end of his life, Greimas calls our attention to the place where such wonderment that strikes the subject and transforms him irrupts, the *fracture* that pitches against «the stony dream» of classical beauty, petrified and unproductive, an «aesthetics of *grace*», full of a moving aura of vulnerability and care<sup>46</sup>. In being perceived as an element of dispersion, the flaw moves an expectation: in place of the safety of the one, the uncertainty of a wait that does not keep itself is offered. It is an *exercise of waiting*. One needs to expect the unexpected, and more than that: to nurture that wait. Everything takes place in that pained moment, expressed by Lyotard through the question *Is it happening?*<sup>47</sup>. The work always in process; the wait wrought by that peaking anguish and attention. In that suspended and immeasurable instant, suspended beyond measure, a boundless intensity transports the subject-object of the experience into an anastatic sphere. Of the singularity of what may happen, something eludes understanding and the subject is thrown into an *agitation*, that activity of the mind that Kant connects with the experience of the sublime. The fecundity of the flaw lies in revealing the sensible phenomenon. Hence, we may ask: is the paradox not instead *the aesthetics of perfection?*<sup>48</sup> When Greimas writes that «*Imperfection appears as a springboard projecting us from insignificance towards meaning*»<sup>49</sup>, that meaning is everything but *the* meaning. To be projected towards meaning is to risk the adventure of a drift, that of the precariousness of the attempt at meaning. No promised land, no guaranteed result. Art hardly lends itself as a palliative: and perhaps that is in fact its greatest consolation. Imperfection, like a failing heart, can be the criterion of happiness for a work of art. And that is something we should not deny it.

<sup>45</sup> SHKLOVSKY, 1991: 6.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. GREIMAS, 1987: 13ff., 17, 33; my translation.

<sup>47</sup> LYOTARD, 1991: 92 and *passim*.

<sup>48</sup> On imperfection as an aesthetic value and the seeming paradox of the aesthetics of imperfection, see HAMILTON, 2000: 171 and *passim*.

<sup>49</sup> GREIMAS, 1987: 99; my translation.

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