

***EDGAR  
SALTUS***



***THE PHILOSOPHY  
OF DISENCHANTMENT***



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# **The Philosophy of Disenchantment**

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# CHAPTER I.

## THE GENESIS OF DISENCHANTMENT.

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The trite and commonplace question of contentment and dissatisfaction is a topic which is not only of every-day interest, but one which in recent years has so claimed the attention of thinkers, that they have broadly divided mankind into those who accept life off-hand, as a more or less pleasing possession, and those who resolutely look the gift in the mouth and say it is not worth the having.

Viewed simply as systems of thought, the first of these two divisions is evidently contemporaneous with humanity, while the second will be found to be of purely modern origin; for from the earliest times man, admittedly and with but few exceptions, has been ever accustomed to regard this world as the best one possible, and through nearly every creed and sect he has considered happiness somewhat in the light of an inviolable birthright.

Within the last half century, however, there has come into being a new school, which, in denying the possibility of any happiness, holds as first principle that the world is a theatre of misery in which, were the choice accorded, it would be preferable not to be born at all.

In stating that this view of life is of distinctly modern origin, it should be understood that it is so only in the systematic form which it has recently assumed, for individual expressions of discontent have been handed

down from remote ages, and any one who cared to rummage through the dust-bins of literature would find material enough to compile a dictionary of pessimistic quotation.

For these pages but little rummaging will be attempted, but as the proper presentation of the subject demands a brief account of the ideas and opinions in which it was cradled, a momentary examination of general literature will not, it is believed, cause any after-reproach of time misspent.

To begin, then, with Greece, whose literature has precedence over all others, it will be remembered that in former days, when the citizen expended the greater part of his activity for the common good, the poets in like manner sang of national topics, the gods, the heroes, and the charms of love. There was, therefore, little opportunity for the expression of purely personal ideas, and the whole background of the poetry of antiquity is in consequence brilliant with optimistic effect. Nevertheless, here and there, a few complaints crop out from time to time. Homer, for instance, says that man is the unhappiest wight that ever breathed or strutted, and describes his ephemeral existence in a wail of gloomy hexameters.

Then, too, there is the touching Orphean distich, which runs:—

"From thy smile, O Jove, sprang the gods,  
But man was born of thy sorrow."

Pindar in one of his graceful odes compared men to the shadows of a dream, while the familiar quotation, "Whom

the gods love die young," comes to us straight from Menander.

With the peculiar melancholy of genius, that in those favored days seems more a presentiment than the expression of a general conception, Sophocles, in his last tragedy, says that not to be born at all is the greatest of all possible benefits, but inasmuch as man has appeared on earth, the very best thing he can do is to hurry back where he came from.

In spite, too, of the general tendency of thought, sentiments not dissimilar are to be found in Æschylus and Euripides, while something of this instinctive pessimism was expanded into a quaint and national custom by the Thracians, who, according to Herodotus, met birth with lamentations, but greeted death with salvos and welcoming festivals.

With but few exceptions the early philosophers considered death not as a misfortune, but as an advantage. Empedocles taught that the sojourn on earth was one of vexatious torment, an opinion in which he was firmly supported by Heraclitus, and even Plato, whose general drift of thought was grandly optimistic, said in the "Apology," "If death is the withdrawal of every sensation, if it is like a sleep which no dream disturbs, what an incomparable blessing it must be! for let any one select a night passed in undisturbed and entire rest, and compare it with the other nights and days that have filled his existence, and then from his conscience let him answer how many nights and days he has known which have been sweeter and more agreeable than that. For my part I am sure that not the ordinary

individual alone, but even the great King of Persia would find such days and nights most easy to enumerate."

The doctrine of Epicurus held, in substance, that the moment it was no longer possible to delight the senses death became a benefit, and suicide a crowning act of wisdom. The teaching of the Socratic school and its offshoots amounted, in brief, to the idea that the only admissible aim of life was the pursuit and attainment of absolute knowledge. Absolute knowledge, however, being found unattainable, the logical culmination of their doctrine was delivered by Hegesias, in Alexandria, in the third century before the Christian era. This disciple of Socrates argued that as there was a limit to the knowable, and happiness was a pure illusion, a further prolongation of existence was useless. "Life seems pleasing only to the fool," he stated; "the wise regard it with indifference, and consider death just as acceptable." "Death," he added, "is as good as life; it is but a supreme renunciation in which man is freed from idle complaints and long deceptions. Life is full of pain, and the pangs of the flesh gnaw at the mind and rout its calm. In countless ways fate intercepts and thwarts our hopes. Contentment is not to be relied on, and even wisdom cannot preserve us from the treachery and insecurity of the perceptions. Since happiness, then, is intangible we should cease to pursue it, and take for our goal the absence of pain; this condition," he explained, "is best obtained in making ourselves indifferent to every object of desire and every cause of dislike, and above all to life itself. In any event," he concluded, "death is



advantageous in this, it takes us not from blessings but from evil."[\[1\]](#)

This curious mixture of pessimism and theology was, it is said, delivered with such charm of persuasive grace and eloquence that several of his listeners put his ideas into instant practice, and that the city might be preserved from the contagion of suicide, King Ptolemy felt himself obliged to prevent this seductive misanthrope from delivering any further harangues.

Literature has the same tendency to repeat itself as history, and as the Romans took much of their culture and many of their ideas from Greece, the tone of their principal writers is only dissimilar to those already quoted in that with the fall of their religion, the decline of the empire and the universal intoxication of the senses, the pessimist element became somewhat accentuated. It would be an idle task, however, to attempt to cite even a fraction of the cheerless distress which pervades the Roman classics, and it will perhaps suffice for the moment to note but a passage or two, which bear directly upon the subject.

Seneca, for instance, whose insight was as clear and whose understanding was as unclouded as any writer with whom the world is acquainted, sent his letters down the centuries freighted with such ideas as these: "Death is nature's most admirable invention." "There is no need to complain of particular grievances, for life in its entirety is lamentable." "No one would accept life were it not received in ignorance of what it is."

Pliny, also, is very quotable. "Nature's most pleasing invention," he says, "is brevity of life." And he adds, "No

mortal is happy, for even if there is no other cause for discontent there is at least the fear of possible misfortune."

Then, too, Petronius, the poet of the Roman orgy, opening and closing his veins, toying with death, as with a last and supreme delight, is of familiar, if repulsive, memory.

English literature is naturally as well stocked with individual expressions of distaste for existence as that of Rome. The poets, nearly one and all, from Chaucer to Rossetti, have told their sorrow in a variety of more or less polished metre, and even Macpherson was careful, in dowering his century with another bard, to put thoughts into Ossian's verse which would not have been unfitting in a Greek chorus.

In speaking of the world, Chaucer had already said,—

"Here is no home, here is but a wilderness,"

when Sir Thomas Wyatt, enlarging on the theme, repeated,—

"Wherefore come death and let me dye."

The delicate muse of Samuel Fletcher found—

"Nothing's so dainty sweet, as lovely  
melancholy,"

and Shakespeare's depressing lines on the value of life are familiar to every schoolboy.

Dryden wrote,—

"When I consider life, 't is all a cheat;  
Yet, fooled with hope, men favour the deceit,  
Trust on and think to-morrow will repay;  
To-morrow's falser than the former day."

All of which was afterwards summed up in the well-known line,—

"Man never *is* but always *to be* blessed,"

while Thomson noted—

... "all the thousand, nameless ills  
That one incessant struggle render life."

Keats, and especially Byron, wrote stanza after stanza of enervating sadness. Moore's dear gazelle is nowadays a familiar comparison. Shelley's tremulous sensibility forbade his finding any charm in life, and we none of us need to be reminded that Poe's soul was sorrow-laden.

But the poets are not alone in their tale of the deceptions of life; the moralists and essayists, too, have added their quota to the general budget, and it is not simply the value of life that has been questioned by many of the best writers; there has been also a certain surprise expressed that man should care to live at all. Indeed, the "I see no necessity" of the wit, to the beggar imploring aid that he might live, is the epigram of the thoughts of a hundred scholars.

In France, pessimism cannot be said to have been ever regarded otherwise than as an intellectual curiosity. The Frenchman, it is true, not infrequently lapses into a cynical indifference; yet the value of life is as a rule so evident to

him, that he seldom vouchsafes more than a passing shrug to any theory of disparagement. In the first place, death, to which the hat is gravely raised, has never been in France a polite or welcome topic; moreover, French literature, while lawless enough in other respects, has left its readers generally unprepared to view the world as a fiasco, in which misery is the one immense success. The trouvères and troubadours sang to the mediæval châtelaine little else than the praise of love, with here and there the account of some combat, to show what they might do were they put to the test. Later, Villon told gently of the *neiges d'antan*, Ronsard aimed a dart or two at fate, and Rabelais's laugh was sometimes very near to tears; but, broadly speaking, the French asked of their writers little else than wit,—if they could not give them that, then should they hold their peace.

The delicate irony of *Candide* had, therefore, when appreciated, something almost novel in its savor; and, indeed, it may fairly be said that it was not until the blight of Byron had been cheerfully translated, that the French were in any measure prepared to understand Rolla and the pathetic beauties of De Musset's verse. Pascal, Helvetius, and other writers of desultory depression had of course already appeared. Maupertuis had found no difficulty in showing that life held more pain than pleasure, while Chamfort's conclusions on the same subject were as luminous as they were gloomy; and yet it is difficult to say that the gall with which these authors dashed their pages served otherwise than as a condiment to fresher and less flavored works. Baudelaire, the poet of boredom, praying for a new vice that should wrest life into some semblance of

reality, was in consequence almost a novelty, and not a perfectly satisfactory one at that. It is therefore only within the last ten years or so that pessimism has in any wise attracted the notice of French thinkers, and the attention which has recently been paid to it is due partly to Leconte de Lisle, and partly to a surge of German thought.

During the eighteenth century the majority of the scholars who represented the culture of Germany were faithfully following the optimist theories of Leibnitz and Wolf. The doctrine that the world was the best one possible, supported as it was by official theology and strictly in accord with the deism of Pope and Paley, was very generally and unhesitatingly accepted. Indeed, there is no apparent reason why it should not have been. The Minnesingers doubtless had formulated some few complaints, but then these literary vagrants had already begun to form part of mythology, and besides, poets are all more or less prone to discontent and voluble of sorrow. Beyond the classics of Greece and Rome there was, therefore, no precedent for pessimistic thought. German literature, strictly speaking, did not begin until Lessing's advent, and before that the theatre, with its Hans Wurst and its Pickleherring, had offered only a succession of the broadest farce.

The calm and quiet which the Germans then enjoyed was ruffled, if at all, only by some confused echoes of the *obiter dicta* which Voltaire's royal disciple was pleased to disseminate, but it is probable that the better part of this ferocious gayety was drowned in crossing the Rhine, and, in any event, it was too delicately pungent to do more than disturb the placid current of their thought.



Later, when Kant appeared, the effect of his philosophy was very much like a successful treatment of cataract on the eyes of the whole nation. "Happiness," he insisted in the "Kritik der Urtheilskraft," "has never been attained by man, for he is unable to find contentment in any possession or enjoyment, ... and were he called upon to fashion a system of happiness for his fellows he would be unable to do so, for happiness is in its essence intangible." "No one," he added elsewhere, "has a right conception of life who would care to prolong it beyond its natural duration, for it would then be only the continuation of an already tiresome struggle."

After this the teaching of Leibnitz slowly disappeared, and though a certain amount of optimism necessarily subsisted, the tendency of thought veered to the opposite direction. Fichte, Kant's immediate successor, declared, in direct contradiction to Leibnitz, that this world was the worst one possible, and was only consoled by thinking he could raise himself by the aid of pure thought into the felicity of the "supersensible." "Men," he says, "in the vehement pursuit of happiness grasp at the first object which offers to them any prospect of satisfaction, but immediately they turn an introspective eye and ask, 'Am I happy?' and at once from their innermost being a voice answers distinctly, 'No, you are as poor and as miserable as before.' Then they think it was the object that deceived them, and turn precipitately to another. But the second holds as little satisfaction as the first.... Wandering then through life, restless and tormented, at each successive station they think that happiness dwells at the next, but when they reach it happiness is no longer there. In whatever position they may find themselves there

is always another one which they discern from afar, and which but to touch, they think, is to find the wished delight, but when the goal is reached discontent has followed on the way and stands in haunting constancy before them."[\[2\]](#)

Schelling expressed himself more guardedly. As professional pantheist, he seemed to think that anything not rigidly vague and inaccessible was inconsistent with his philosophy. Still there was probably a secret revolt, some propelling impulse to deny his own syllogisms, and to bathe for once in some clear stream of common sense. In the "Nachtwachen," which he published under the pseudonym of Bonaventura, this incentive is evidently, though unsuccessfully, at work. It may be that the force of habit was too strong, but at any rate this rhapsody, which was intended to be a confession of the combat that he had waged with his belief, and a recognition of the immedicable misery of life, brings with it something of that impression of delirium which Poe and Doré not infrequently suggest.

Nor was Hegel hostile to pessimism; he regarded it as an inevitable phase of universal evolution, and indeed its dawn as a science had then already broken.

Meanwhile the poets had not been idle. Herder and Schiller had already attested the bitterness of life to unreluctant ears, and the number of suicides that were directly traceable to the appearance of Werther and his sorrows was instructively large. This phase of sentimentalism, which immediately preceded the riotous rebirth of the Romantic school, was not without its influence on Heine's verse, and in some measure affected the literary tone of the day.

It would, however, be erroneous to suppose that the poets of this epoch were more agitated by the impression of universal worthlessness of life than were their classic predecessors. The distress of Werther, as that of Lara and of Rolla, was not the pain of suffering humanity; it was in each case merely the poet's complacent analysis of his own exceptional nature and personal grievances; it was the expression of the inevitable surprise of youth, which notes for the first time reality's unsuspected yet yawning indifference to the ideal, and the stubborn disaccord between aspiration and fact. It was indeed very beautiful and elegiac, and yet so fluent in its polished melancholy that somehow it did not at all times seem to have been really felt. In any case, it was not a theory of common woe, and lacked that clear conception of the universality of suffering, which the less exalted minds of the philosophers had already signaled, but for which no one as yet had been able to suggest a remedy.

It was about this time that an action was being instituted against humanity by a young Italian, the Count Giacomo Leopardi, and the muffled discontent which for centuries had been throbbing through land and literature was raised by his verse into one clear note of eloquent arraignment.

Now, in most countries there is a provision which inhibits a judge from hearing a cause which is pleaded by one of his connections, for it is considered that the scales of justice are so delicately balanced, that their holder should be preserved from any biasing influence, however indirect; for much the same reason, there are few communities that permit a man to sit in judgment on his own case. Some

knowledge of Leopardi himself, therefore, will be of service in deciding whether the verdict which he brought against the world should be accepted without appeal, or returned as vitiated by extraneous circumstances.

Leopardi passed a joyless boyhood at Recanti, one of those maddeningly monotonous Italian towns whose unspeakable dreariness is only attractive when viewed through the pages of Stendhal. The unrelaxing severity of an austere and pedant father curbed, as with a bit, every symptom of that haphazard gayety which is incident to youth. At once precocious and restive, deformed yet inflammable, he was necessarily enervated by the exasperating dullness of his life, and chafed, too, by the rigid poverty to which his father condemned him. As he grew up, his mind, richly stored with the wealth of antiquity, rioted in a turbulence of imagination which, unable to find sympathetic welcome without, consumed itself in morbid distrust within, and led him at last from fervid Catholicism down the precipitate steps of negation.

He was not much over twenty before excessive study had well-nigh ruined such health as he once possessed. The slightest application was wearisome both to eye and brain. He wandered silently about the neighboring forests, seeking solitude not only for the sake of solitude, but also perhaps for the suggestions, at once soothing and rebellious, which solitude always whispers to him who courts her truly. At other times he sat hour by hour in a state as motionless as that of catalepsy. "I am so much overcome," he wrote to a friend, "by the nothingness that surrounds me, that I do not know how I have the strength to answer your letter. If at this

moment I lost my reason, I think that my insanity would consist in sitting always with eyes fixed, open-mouthed, without laughing or weeping, or changing place. I have no longer the strength to form a desire, be it even for death."

The Muse, however, would have none of this; she flaunted her peplum so seductively before him that, a little later, when he had been visited by some semblance of returning health, he resisted no longer, and delivered himself up to her, heart and soul.

The present century, especially during its earlier decades, has been racked with a great glut of despondent verse; but no batch of poets, however distressed, has been able, at any time, to catch and cling to such a persistent monotone of complaint as that which runs through every line of Leopardi's verse. To quote De Musset:—

"Les plus désespérés sont les chants les plus  
beaux,  
Et j'en sais d'immortels qui sont de purs  
sanglots."

His odes, his adjurations to Italy, and his elegies are, one and all, stamped with such unvarying and changeless despair, that their dominant motive seems not unlike that tower which René, finding alone in the desert, compared to a great thought in a mind ravaged by years and by grief. His theory of life never altered; he resumed it in a distich,—

... "Arcano é tutto  
Fuor che il nostro dolor."



It may be said, and with justice perhaps, that it was the invalid body, aggravating and coexisting with a mind naturally morbid, that afterwards wrote of the *gentilezza del morir*, but it was the thinker, conquering the ills of the flesh, who later whispered to the suffering world the panacea of patience and resignation.

In Leopardi there is none of the vapid elegance and gaudy vocabulary of French verse; technically, he wrote in what the Italians call *rime sciolte*, and he charms the reader as well through a palpitant sincerity as evident and continuous inspiration. Now, the educated Italian turns naturally to rhyme; any incident holds to him the germ of a sonnet, and there is perhaps no other country in the world so richly dowered with patriotic canzoni as this joyously unhappy land. But of all who have sounded this eloquent chord, not one has done so with the masculine originality and fervor of expression that Leopardi reached in his ode to Italy, in which, in a resounding call to arms, he exclaims:—

"Let my blood, O gods! be a flame to Italian hearts."

Italian hearts, however, had other matters to attend to, and Leopardi's magnificent invocation was barely honored with a passing notice. For that matter, his poetry, in spite of its resonant merit, has, through some inexplicable cause, been generally ignored; and while it resembles no other, it has never, so to speak, been in vogue.

As has been seen, he was a lover of solitude; indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that he was glued to it; and in the isolation which he partly made himself, and which

was partly forced upon him, he watched the incubation of thought very much as another might have noted the progress of a disease. A life of this description, even at best, is hardly calculated to awaken much enthusiasm for everyday matters, and it was not long before Leopardi became not only heartily sick of the commonplace aspects of life, but contemptuous, too, of those who lived in broader and more active spheres.

Poetically untrammelled, and of advanced views on all subjects, he regarded erudition as the simple novitiate of the man of letters, or in other words, as a preparation which renders the intelligence supple and pliant; and in one of those rare moments, when the timid approach of ambition was seemingly unnoticed, he caressed the pleasing plan of attacking Italian torpor with reason, passion with laughter, and of becoming, in fact, the Plato, the Shakespeare, and the Lucian of his epoch. To Giordani, his mentor, he wrote: "I study night and day, so long as my health permits; when it prevents me from working, I wait a month or so, and then begin again. As I am now totally different from that which I was, my plan of study has altered with me. Everything which savors of the pathetic or the eloquent wearies me beyond expression. I seek now only the true, the real, which before was so repulsive. I take pleasure in analyzing the misery of men and things, and in shivering as I note the sinister and terrible mystery of life. I see very clearly that when passion is once extinguished, there subsists in study no other source of pleasure save that of vain curiosity, whose satisfaction, however, is not without a certain charm."

But Leopardi was so essentially the poet that, in spite of his growing disdain of the pathetic and the eloquent, he became not infrequently the dupe of his own imagination. That which he took for the fruit of deduction was probably little more than ordinary hypochondria, and in turning as he did to other work, he was never able to free himself entirely from the jealous influence of the muse.

He was, from a variety of causes, very miserable himself, and his belief in universal misery amounted very nearly to a mania. His logic reduced itself to the paraphrase of an axiom, "I am, therefore I suffer," and the suffering which he experienced was not, he was very sure, limited solely to himself. It was, he considered, the garment and appanage of every sentient being. In this he was perfectly correct, but his error consisted in holding all cases to be equally intense, and in imagining that means might be devised which would at once do away with or, at least, lessen the evil. Patience and resignation he had already suggested, but naturally without appreciable success; indeed, the regeneration of man, he clearly saw, was not to be brought about through verse, and he turned therefore to philosophy with a fixity of purpose, which was strengthened by the idea that he could work therein another revolution. This was in 1825. Leopardi at that time was in his twenty-seventh year, and the task to which he then devoted himself was, he said, to be the sad ending of a miserable life. His intention was to run the bitter truth to earth, to learn the obscure destinies of the mortal and the eternal, to discover the wherefore of creation, and the reason of man's burden of misery. "I wish," he said, "to dig to the root of nature and seek the aim of the mysterious

universe, whose praises the sages sing, and before which I stand aghast."

Forthwith, then, in the "Operette Morale," Leopardi began a resolute, if poetic, siege against every form of illusion. His philosophy, however, provoked no revolution, nor can it be even said that he discovered any truth more bitter than the old new ones, which antiquity had unearthed before him. His work, nevertheless, sent the old facts spinning into fresh and novel positions, and is to be particularly admired for the artistic manner in which it handles the most stubborn topics. The starting point of each of his arguments is that life is evil; to any objection, and the objections that have been made are countless, Leopardi has one invariable reply, "All that is advanced to the contrary is the result of illusion." "But supposing life to be painless," some one presumably may interject, whereupon Leopardi, with the air of an oracle, too busy with weighty matters to descend to chit-chat on the weather, will answer tersely, "Evil still."

It is useless for the practical man of the day, who knows the price of wheat the whole world over before he has tasted his coffee, and who digests a history of the world's doings and misdoings each morning with his breakfast,—it is useless for him to say, as he invariably does:—Why, this is rubbish, look at modern institutions, look at progress, look at science; for if he listens to Leopardi he will learn that all these palpable advantages have, in expanding activity, only aggravated the misery of man. In other words, that the sorrows of men and of nations develop in proportion to their intelligence, and the most civilized are in consequence the most unhappy.

Indeed, Leopardi's philosophy is nothing if not destructive; he does not aim so much to edify as to undermine. According to his theory the universe is the resultant of an unconscious force, and this force, he teaches, is shrouded in a vexatious mystery, behind which it is not given to man to look. In one of his dialogues, certain mummies resurrect for a quarter of an hour and tell in what manner they died. "And what follows death?" their auditor asks, eagerly. But the quarter of an hour has expired and the mummies relapse into silence.

In another fantastic scene, an Icelander, convinced that happiness is unattainable, and solely occupied in avoiding pain, has, in shunning society, found himself in the heart of the Sahara, face to face with Nature. This Icelander, who, by the way, singularly resembles Leopardi, had found but one protection against the ills of life, and that was solitude; but wherever he wandered he had been pursued by a certain malevolence. In spite of all he could do, he had roasted in summer and shivered in winter. In vain he had sought a temperate climate: one land was an ice-field, another an oven, and everywhere tempests or earthquakes, vicious brutes or distracting insects. In short, unalloyed misery. Finding himself, at last, face to face with Nature he took her to task, demanding what right she had to create him without his permission, and then, having done so, to leave him to his own devices? Nature answers that she has but one duty, and that is to turn the wheel of the universe, in which death supports life, and life death. "Well, then," the obstinate Icelander asks, "tell me at least for whose pleasure and for what purpose this miserable universe