

The Pleasures of Pessimism

Tim Parks

Why do we read writers who are profoundly pessimistic? And what sense are we to make of their work in our ordinary, hopefully not uncheerful lives?

I am not speaking about the sort of pessimism concerned with the consequences of our electing this or that president, or failing to respond to world famine or global warming, but what in Italy came to be called *il pessimismo cosmico*. The term was coined in response to the work of the nineteenth-century poet and thinker Giacomo Leopardi, who at the ripe old age of twenty-one decided that “all is nothing, solid nothing” and he, in the midst of nothing, “nothing myself.” The only reasoned and lucid response to the human condition, Leopardi decided, was despair: hence all positive action and happiness must always have the quality of illusion.

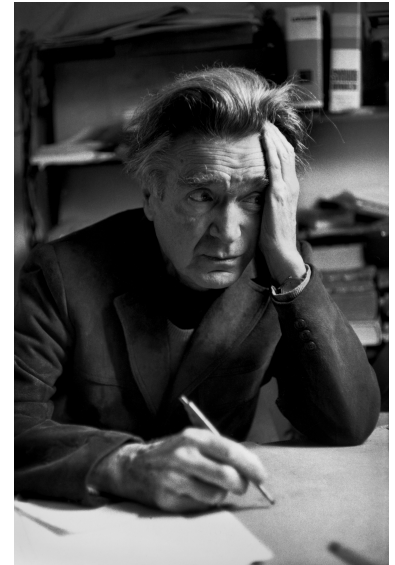
This is existential pessimism of the most uncompromising kind. Who needs it? What could possibly be the attractions?

Toward the end of my graduate course in literary translation I introduce the students to Samuel Beckett, in particular Arsene’s speech in the novel *Watt*. Watt has just arrived at Mr. Knott’s house and since when one servant arrives another must depart, Arsene is leaving. Before he does so, he gives Watt the benefit of a lifetime’s disillusionment in a twenty-page monologue. This is the passage I offer my students:

Personally of course I regret everything. Not a word, not a deed, not a thought, not a need, not a grief, not a joy, not a girl, not a boy, not a doubt, not a trust, not a scorn, not a lust, not a hope, not a fear, not a smile, not a tear, not a name, not a face, no time, no place, that I do not regret, exceedingly. An ordure from beginning to end. And yet, when I sat for Fellowship, but for the boil on my bottom... The rest, an ordure. The Tuesday scowls, the Wednesday growls, the Thursday curses, the Friday howls, the Saturday snores, the Sunday yawns, the Monday morns, the Monday morns. The whacks, the moans, the cracks, the groans, the welts, the squeaks, the belts, the shrieks, the pricks, the prayers, the kicks, the tears, the skelps, and the yelps. And the poor old lousy old earth, my earth and my father’s and my mother’s and my father’s father’s and my mother’s mother’s and my father’s mother’s and my mother’s father’s, and my father’s mother’s father’s and my mother’s father’s mother’s and my father’s mother’s mother’s and my mother’s father’s father’s and my father’s father’s mother’s and my mother’s mother’s father’s and my father’s father’s father’s and my mother’s mother’s mother’s and other people’s fathers’ and mothers’ and fathers’ fathers’ and mothers’ mothers’ and fathers’ mothers’ and mothers’ fathers’ and fathers’ mothers’ fathers’ and mothers’ fathers’ mothers’ and fathers’ mothers’ mothers’ and mothers’ fathers’ fathers’ and fathers’ fathers’ mothers’ and mothers’ mothers’ father’s and fathers’ fathers’ fathers’ and mothers’ mothers’ mothers’. An excrement.

The students’ collective response is always the same, at first perplexity, faint smiles, frowns, widening eyes as the long list of “mother’s” and “father’s” begins, and finally a blend of giggles and incredulity: is “prof” really going to read that list to the end? So the passage becomes an exercise in showing how the most negative of visions can be smuggled into our minds without our hardly noticing, we are so distracted by the form. On my computer the autocorrect function of Word has underlined much of the passage in blue: “avoid repetition,” it suggests.

Not all pessimists have the same fondness for bizarre comedy. To read Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*, Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, or indeed many other fine novelists, is to feel at times that any optimism we might unwisely entertain is being systematically ground into the dirt; anything that can go wrong will. All the same, these works differ from Beckett’s in that unhappiness is the result of adverse circumstance, or a combination of particular character and particular situation. There is, that is, in these novelists, a denunciation of the customs of their times, customs that contribute to their characters’ downfalls. Jude and Sue would not have ended up so badly if people had had a more lenient view of unmarried couples. Jim would never have wound up as he did without the race discrimination which underlies so much of what happens in the book. David Lurie’s story could only happen in modern South Africa. So the reader is permitted to think that such disasters occur to certain people in certain situations, but not of absolute necessity. Precisely the feeling that the happy life is possible, yet has been missed out on, intensifies the distress, but prevents the story from becoming a general, existential condemnation. The reader can close the book with a grim smile, and a “there, but for the Grace of God...”



Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Images
Emil Cioran, Paris, 1984

Pessimistic essayists and philosophers may not cast the same narrative gloom as fiction writers, but the implications of their work tend toward the universal. Indeed, to believe that unhappiness was *merely* a question of immediate circumstance and particular character might be seen as a crass form of optimism. “Our chief grievance against knowledge is that it has not helped us to live,” observes Emil Cioran, dismissing the whole Enlightenment enterprise in a few dry words. Or again: “No one saves anyone; for we save only ourselves, and do so all the better if we disguise as convictions the misery we want to share, to lavish on others.” Or again, “Being busy means devoting oneself to the fake and the sham.” And: “Trees are massacred, houses go up—faces, faces everywhere. Man is *spreading*. Man is the cancer of the earth.”

Here there is no question of a certain person making certain mistakes in certain circumstances. Here we have an across-the-board dismissal of the very idea of progress or improvement, or engineered happiness. So why do we, or some of us, read such material, and read it *with appetite*? Is it perhaps a perverse form of indulgence? Self-pity even? Leopardi noted,

the pleasure the mind takes in dwelling on its downfall, its adversities, then picturing them for itself, not just intensely, but minutely, intimately, completely; in exaggerating them even, if it can (and if it can, it certainly will), in recognizing, or imagining, but definitely in persuading itself and making absolutely sure it persuades itself, beyond any doubt, that these adversities are extreme, endless, boundless, irremediable, unstoppable, beyond any redress, or any possible consolation, bereft of any circumstance that might lighten them; in short in seeing and intensely feeling that its own personal tragedy is truly immense and perfect and as complete as it could be in all its parts, and that every door toward hope and consolation of any kind has been shut off and locked tight...

This certainly rings a bell, and the very accuracy of the description brings with it a certain pleasure and relief. How absurd that we do this! “Our pleasures like our pains,” Cioran comments, pushing the disillusionment a step further, “come from the undue importance we attribute to our experiences.”

Perhaps the best way to understand our engagement with pessimism is to observe those occasions when it does *not* attract us, when we put it aside with distaste or boredom. In novels this occurs when we feel the author is *merely* piling on the pain, without our feeling there was anything necessarily fatal about the combination of character and circumstance. A car accident occurs at the point when someone is happiest. Or our hero contracts a fatal disease. So what? We know that there are people who have interminable bad luck. Why torture us with it? We can all forgive, or at least condone, an unconvincing happy ending—*David Copperfield*, for example—for the ambiguous relief it brings, but not an unconvincing unhappy ending, or an ending that seeks to generalize distress from the merest individual accident. We have been made to suffer for nothing.

Recently I went to see Edward Bond’s 1971 play *Lear*, a reworking of Shakespeare’s story that presents a king obsessed with building a wall to protect his kingdom and (in this version) his two daughters, who are intent on marrying the rulers on the other side of the wall. The play amounts to a long denunciation of political violence and subterfuge, and offers no character with whom the spectator might remotely sympathize. People change position constantly but always repeat old mistakes that bear obvious resemblances to the horrors of twentieth-century Europe. Most spectators will be in wholehearted agreement with the playwright’s thesis from the beginning; but there is no pleasure either in the quality of expression (it is unwise to encourage comparison with Shakespeare), or in watching scenes of rape, torture, and execution. The literary symbolism and interminable allusions are heavy-handed. One leaves the theater exhausted and disgruntled. Mulling over this response, I realized that what is positive about *Jude*, or *Lord Jim*, or *Disgrace*, or indeed Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, is that the lives and feelings of the individual characters do seem important, and the trajectories of the stories told, however unhappy, are clear and convincing.

For essayists and philosophers, what we cannot forgive is, first, the suspicion that our writer has a personal axe to grind, and second, perhaps even worse, *dullness*, a lack of panache. The slightest feeling that facts are being manipulated in order to support a position in which, for some spoilsport reason, the author has a personal investment, is fatal. The reader, that is, must recognize that a genuine truth is being acknowledged. Beckett can get away with his long list of “father’s” and “mother’s” because it tells an undeniable truth: mine really is the same earth that all my ancestors walked, the same life all my forebears lived. And it is true, unavoidably, that as one goes backward in time so one’s forebears multiply—two parents, four grandparents, eight great grandparents, sixteen great-great grandparents—so that one’s own life becomes steadily less significant and could be construed as mere repetition.

But why is dullness a problem, if what we care about is the truth? Why does it matter that a pessimist deliver his or her message with *brio*? Here I think we are approaching the key to an aesthetic of pessimism, particularly in essay form.

Modern society, as a whole, tends toward a sort of institutional optimism, espousing Hegelian notions of history as progress and encouraging us to believe happiness is at least potentially available for all, if only we would pull together

in a reasonable manner. Hence the kind of truth pessimists tell us will always be a *subversive* truth. All the quotations I chose from Cioran, almost at random, could be understood as rebuttals of the pieties we were brought up on: that knowledge is a vital acquisition, that we must work to help and save each other, that it is positive to be industrious and healthy, that freedom is supremely important, and so on.

Such a radical deconstruction may be alarming, yet when carried out with panache, zest, and sparkle, it nevertheless creates a moment's exhilaration, and with it, crucially, a feeling of liberty. Reading Leopardi or Cioran or Beckett, one is being freed from the social obligation to be happy. Here is Schopenhauer:

There is not much to be got anywhere in the world. It is filled with misery and pain; and if a man escapes these, boredom lies in wait for him at every corner. Nay more; it is evil that generally has the upper hand, and folly that makes the most noise. Fate is cruel and mankind pitiable.

Espousing this kind of vision might seem like madness, but elsewhere Schopenhauer explains its usefulness:

If you accustom yourself to this view of life you will regulate your expectations accordingly, and cease to look upon all its disagreeable incidents, great and small, its sufferings, its worries, its misery, as anything unusual or irregular; nay, you will find that everything is as it should be, in a world where each of us pays the penalty of existence in his own peculiar way.

Cioran pushes the notion to extremes, and makes it more exciting:

The only way of enduring one disaster after the next is to love the very idea of disaster: if we succeed, there are no further surprises, we are superior to whatever occurs, we are invincible victims.

Invincible victims! Here is a curious optimism lurking at the very heart of pessimism. And notice again how important form is. Life is chaos, a long sequence of uncontrollable disasters, but this idea is expressed with great control and elegance, suggesting heroic adaptation, appropriation even, rather than capitulation; in the midst of disasters we can formulate witty sentences. "No, future here," observes Beckett's narrator in *Worstward Ho*. And proceeds: "Alas, yes." With even greater virtuosity, Robert Lowell, in "Her Dead Brother," creates a punchline by omission when he gives us: "All's well that ends." With these flashes of creativity it's as if a turbulent seascape were fleetingly illuminated by lightning; we are shown our shipwreck *brilliantly*.

The pleasure detonated by these clever devices does not last, of course, which is why one is never enough. Aphorisms of the negative kind are addictive. To read Cioran's *Cahiers* is to see a man obsessed with transforming his negative intuitions into these splendid little firecrackers, repeating and honing and refining one after another until they achieve the maximum effect in the most concise formulation, the brilliance becoming a kind of anesthetic that actually makes it a pleasure to feel the knife turn in an old wound. The form is a triumph over pain.

"Do you believe in the life to come?" Clov asks Hamm in Beckett's *Endgame*. And Hamm replies, "Mine was always that."


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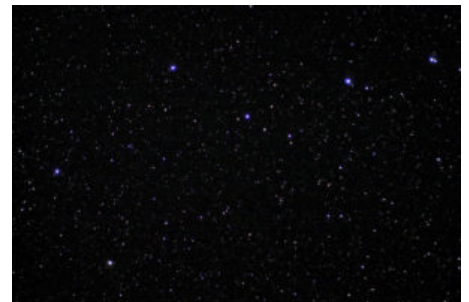
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