

## PESSIMISM AND DEPRESSIMISM

### *A Critical Estimate of our Literary Spenglers*

J. B. PRIESTLEY

**W**E are always being told that since the War there has been a great wave of pessimism in literature, a wave that has flooded Germany, set the boulevards awash, invaded England, and by no means left America untouched, in spite of the fact that there have been no ruins and short rations in the United States. If by pessimism we merely mean the complete absence of all optimistic views of this life, then the statement is true enough. Rose tinted spectacles are not the fashion among the new arrivals in literature. Many of them appear to have attended that school celebrated by the Mock Turtle and the Gryphon, that school where reeling and writhing were taught. Even those brilliant young men, such as Paul Morand in France and Aldous Huxley in England, who have a fine sense of the comic and invite you to laugh with them, never give you the impression they are enjoying themselves. There is wormwood in their laughter and you feel that they would be genuinely relieved if they could only muster up sufficient courage to burst into tears. If the pessimist is simply the person who does not present a rosy view of things, then pessimism is certainly taking possession of literature at the moment.

But true pessimism needs to be more narrowly defined, and in the body of work so loosely labeled, there are really two very different attitudes of mind, working on two distinct levels, and the confusion between them is very mischievous. The difference between these two attitudes is a difference in kind and not merely a difference in degree. The man who can not distinguish between them is not merely confusing Kreisler and the fiddler from the nearest cinema, he is confusing Kreisler with the local dustman. On one level there is true pessimism, and on the other there is that lower spirited and far more disheartening attitude of mind that, — for want of a better name, — I can only call depressimism. If Hamlet, who mistook his genius, had taken at last to authorship instead of fencing matches, he would have been an admirable specimen of the pessimist. Old Timon, on the other hand, was rapidly moving toward depressimism, in which he

would have had Thersites and one or two more for company, when the end came and removed him from the temptation of authorship. But so many new books are written in his mood that sometimes I fancy he must be still alive and scribbling hard under half a dozen different names.

If you are an incorrigibly sentimental optimist, you are, of course, in no position to tell the difference between true pessimism and depressimism. You will shrink back appalled from any view of life that is not covered by the rose-pink mist that is so familiar and comforting. If that mist is not present, then there is pessimism and all is horror. But if you are a sensible person, with a mind not reduced to such a disastrous condition, you will have noticed that this so called pessimistic literature affects your mind in two very different ways. The true pessimist does not dishearten his stout, sensible readers. Sometimes he leaves them exhilarated and at the worst he only leaves them somberly but not unpleasantly meditative.

But in this great body of work generally and loosely labeled as pessimism, there is a vast mass of writing that produces only one effect (unless it is so silly that it is wildly amusing), and that is the effect of acute depression. It leaves you with the impression, not that life is terribly dangerous, a voyage on a beautiful, doomed ship, but that life is simply not worth living, is a long crawling up a sewer. There is the hand of the depressimist. If he catches you when you are still young and tender, he depresses you by offering a crude libel of a world about which you have not yet made up your mind. If you are older and know his version for the foul libel it is, he still depresses because the company of a mean, little mind must always be damping to the spirit. It is as if you were being buttonholed for an hour or two by some moaning village idiot.

William James made a famous distinction, for philosophical purposes, between the tender minded, the idealists, and the tough minded, the realists. In literature, we might very well make a division into three: the tender minded, or the optimists; the tough minded, or the pessimists; and the mean minded, or the depressimists. They offer us respectively the literary equivalents of rose water, iron water, and ditch water. The optimists can look after themselves and need not concern us, being in no danger of being mistaken for anything but what they are. It is, however, high time that the depressimists were fenced off from the pessi-

mists, for it is dangerous to the public health when no difference is observed between iron water and ditch water. Some will refuse the necessary tonic, and others will swallow the filthiest draughts because they imagine they are salutary. Let us examine, then, these two attitudes of mind and discover why there is a gulf between pessimism and depressimism.

The true pessimist in literature is one who believes that life is tragic because whatever is noble and beautiful in it is doomed by the very fact of its nobility and beauty. Life is a gaming table, heaped with glittering coin, but the dice are loaded. The universe in its march from an unknown starting point to an equally unknown destination is either indifferent or even hostile to the things we cherish. Our values are not the values of the universe, whatever these might be. It is here that the pessimist parts company with the optimist, who believes that there is some supreme power, — no matter what name may be given to it, — which loves where we love and is the guardian of that truth, goodness, and beauty which give significance to this life. To the optimist, evil is a kind of mischievous dream, flickering on for an hour or two, while good is the great reality. But to the pessimist evil itself is a terrific reality, and our values, our little notions of truth, goodness, and beauty, though supremely important to us, only a pitiful dream. They are, however, all that we have, all that gives significance to this life, and we can not but persist in clinging to them. The alternative is nothing but a lapse into mere comfortable swinishness. The pessimist has a stronger sense of the significance of our values than the easy optimist, but he is forever faced by a terrible dilemma, like a man who holds it intolerable that he should not go out and fight and yet knows in his heart that if he does he must inevitably lose. To pessimism, life is the lost battle of truth, beauty, and goodness.

I can not help suspecting that most pessimists began life as unusually radiant optimists, their hands almost grasping the rainbow, and then received a rude shock. They have nobler natures than the common run of men and therefore ask more of life. Existence in terms of little compromises with the flesh and the devil is repugnant to their proud and sensitive spirits. We can say of them what De Quincy, very finely, said of Coleridge and declare that they began by wanting better bread than can be made of wheat. Life is tragic because this bread alone is fit to eat, and all the wide cornfields of the world can not give us more

than a mouthful of it, just sufficient to make us hunger for more and hunger in vain. Nearly all the pessimists, or those writers who, like Shakespeare in his tragic period, have passed through long moods of pessimism, come to see some active hostility in the universe to whatever is noble in humanity, as if a jealous and malevolent deity should forever make haste to crush the struggling little god in the clay of man.

Thus it comes about that the best must suffer most in this world. To be more finely tuned than the ordinary is to invite disaster. The pessimist sees all life as most of us have come to see such an immense catastrophe as the Great War, and during that War, it will be remembered, the finest young men on every side flung themselves at once into the trenches, to perish some morning among the barbed wire, or, if they held the belief that war was evil in any circumstances, they cried out against it and were promptly jailed for their opinions. There was nothing to choose between these two kinds of spirited and courageous youth. Both were the salt of the earth and both suffered more than the common run of men. None of these young men was responsible for the disaster, but they had to pay the price of other men's folly and their own great generosity of spirit, and so they were blown to pieces in No Man's Land or were left to eat out their hearts in prison. Meditating on these things, we all catch something of the pessimist's point of view.

His mode of expression in literature must necessarily be the tragic, even though it only takes the form of short lyrics as in *A Shropshire Lad*, in which we hear the voice of an unmistakable pessimist. He will probably reflect that grim irony which he finds in life itself, which is an ironic spectacle because, according to him, the greater your capacity for real happiness, the less you are likely to have and the more you will be compelled to suffer. He sees youth marching out magnificently under the colors of truth, beauty, and goodness, unaware of the fact that the battle is lost before it has begun. He sees the girl to whom love is either one long, happy dream of passion and constancy and loving-kindness or nothing, and he knows that already she has bared her breast for the stroke of the dagger. He sees the young man who puts all his trust in life and asks so much from it, who runs gaily on without any idea that disillusion and suffering are being prepared for him at every step. While these spectacles provoke a bitter irony, they also make us aware of the significance of all our actions.

Seen so sharply poised against the black curtain of doom, all the little things of this life appear strangely bright and lovely. That is why the poets of pessimism can be more moving in their account of some common thing or experience than their fellows, as, for example, when A. E. Housman sings his exquisite little song in praise of the cherry-tree in Spring:

Loveliest of trees, the cherry now  
Is hung with bloom along the bough.

That cherry blossom is so rosy white and lovely to the poet because he sees it against the dark background of our destiny. So too, the moments of happiness in the fiction of pessimism, a meeting of lovers, a return home, a night at sea under the stars, have an unusually poignant beauty just because their creator sees them as something precious snatched from miserly circumstance and knows that they will not last and that the tale has another and a bitter end.

This knowledge of the end, making for irony because that end is so grimly different from our happiest fancies, frequently gives the pessimist a certain wide charity in his outlook not always to be found in the optimist. The latter is so certain that all is well, that, as actors say, all be right on the night, that he is apt to be intolerant, just as some wild idealists, slaving away for their vision of human happiness, are apt to be murderous fanatics in their dealings with actual, as opposed to hypothetical, human beings. The optimist, having endless bliss in his pocket, so to speak, as a present for the whole species, can be markedly uncharitable towards individuals, whereas the pessimist, convinced that we are all in the same leaking boat, frequently touches his fiction and drama with a beautiful and boundless pity. That is one reason why his work is anything but depressing to persons not of the rose water habit of mind.

The other reasons are not far to seek. Our finest human values, battling as they are against a hostile universe, are immensely important to him, and his sense of their importance gives an unusual significance to his presentation of life. Frequently there is something tremendously exhilarating in his version of things as a battle against immense odds, in which something unconquered and unconquerable in man soars above the long disaster of his worldly existence. To defy the very stars themselves in their courses, to be uncrushed by the weight of suns, is, to say the

least of it, a grand gesture, making something heroic out of each morning's waking. On the other hand, turning aside to a more subtle and possibly less theatrical pessimism, there is nothing immediately disheartening in the sense of mingled pity and irony he conveys in his presentation of life, which may be terrible but remains full and heroic and significant down to its last strange little detail of word and deed.

It may be said that the pessimist is too morbidly sensitive. No such charge can be leveled against the depressimist, whose failure to grasp the significance of things is due to insensitiveness. Instead of seeing life as a lost battle, he sees it as a dreary farce. Those values that the optimist believes to be the values of the whole universe itself and that the pessimist cherishes, seeing in them man's challenge to the empty or oppressive processes of matter, simply do not exist for the depressimist. The world to him is neither gay and splendid nor terrible and splendid, but simply dull and trivial. It is not merely that he has gone to the sewers to report on what he finds there, for after all that would be something because it is by no means unimportant to know what is going on there; but he has chosen to live in a sewer and to imagine that he is really living in the world outside. Thus the world he reports is a much smaller and duller and meaner world than the one most of us know, and its inhabitants are nothing but miserable, half-witted pigmies, a gross libel on the actual human beings we know.

It is true that a few really great writers, sliding for a little time out of a mood of true pessimism into these depths below, have come close to this monstrous point of view. Shakespeare in his tragic period was undoubtedly a pessimist of the type I have already described, and there was a brief time, during which he wrote *Troilus and Cressida*, when he was in danger of becoming a depressimist. One of our great modern pessimists, Hardy, has turned depressimist once or twice too, perhaps during periods when his enormous vitality has flagged. Conrad, however, who must also be accounted a pessimist, always contrived to escape this danger, or my memory is at fault. It may be that depressimism always menaces the real pessimist at those times when he is tired and dispirited, but a brief descent into this state of mind is one thing and a prolonged acceptance of it quite another thing. The turning out, year after year, of depressimist volumes seems to me one of the most fantastic of all man's queer activities.



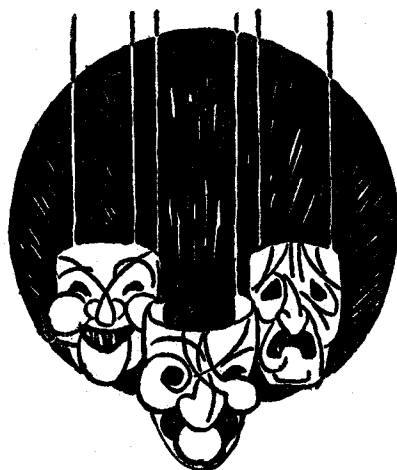
I can not see why the depressimist should want to write at all. If a man finds that life seems to him more exciting, more significant, more various and vivid and multicolored than it does to his neighbors, then whether he sees it as a gay comedy with a happy ending for everybody or a stark tragedy or an engrossing mixture of both, he is amply justified in communicating his vision of it to others. But why a man who finds life smaller and meaner and duller than ordinary people do should want to spend his time describing it is a mystery to me. There is no justification for his existence as an author. He should find some other, — and perhaps healthier, — means of earning a living, take exercise and remember his liver, take pains to know his neighbors and to discover what they have made of life, and keep silent for at least ten years.

At the end of that time, if he has come to the conclusion that life is sufficiently important to be worth writing about, if he has discovered that our existence is strange and beautiful and terrible and droll and tragic, let him take up his pen again. But if he is still under the impression that life is a poor, dull business and that human beings are poor, dull creatures, then let him still keep silent and not offer his libels to people who know more about the world than he does. Art has no use for persons who are half alive, deaf and dim sighted, or permanently soured, for reasons best known to themselves. It is sheer impudence for a man to make nothing of life, or at least less than his readers, and yet publish his account of it year after year. Instead of describing this world in terms of ditches, he would be better employed in digging them.

It is not the purpose of this essay to criticize individual writers, and there is enough depressimism in current literature for any reader to discover for himself. But merely to repel the charge of talking in the air, of describing authors who have no real existence, I will give a concrete example of what I mean by depressimism. There has lately been an attempt, in some literary circles in England, to persuade us that Mr. T. F. Powys is a considerable writer. Mr. Powys's first book, *The Left Leg*, was praised a good deal, chiefly because it was something distinctly new (though some of its tricks were borrowed), and rather amusing as a kind of quaint, obscene woodcut of rural life. It has been followed by other stories in the same manner, stories in which all the people are either half-witted or criminal, dreary catalogues of mean vice and lunacy. Even the obscene woodcut effect, always suggesting

an absurd travesty, has no power to interest now, and the later books are as dull as the droning of a village idiot. Now Mr. Powys is, I understand, quite an estimable person and he is by no means without force as a writer. But if these stories represent his view of life (and if they do not, he should write some that do), I can not understand why he should go on producing them, seeing that his view is so much worse than that of practically all his readers. If he can write only such absurd travesties of country life, it is high time he asked himself either to leave the country and try life in a city for a change or to stop writing altogether.

In the same way, those other contemporary novelists who write about a certain set of people, insincere intellectuals of the type Mr. Aldous Huxley deals in, and so on and so forth, — and find such small pleasure in them that they produce the dreariest chronicles, — should also take themselves to task. They should either try some other and worthier sets of people or, if they are convinced that it is all humanity they have represented, they should lay aside their pens until they have made some further and more important discoveries about life and their fellow creatures. Meanwhile, it is our business to prevent their stealthily bottling and labeling their ditch water and asking us to believe that it is the genuine, curative iron water, to discover Thersites beneath the mask of Hamlet.





# WHAT IS TRUTH?

## *Forum Definitions — Seventeenth Series*

**H**AVING disposed of Bunk last month, we now approach Truth in a spirit of cautious inquiry. But of the contributions as a whole, the Definitions Editor must confess his disappointment, — for which he was not wholly unprepared. Apparently, every one knew Bunk well enough to hail him by his first name and give him a dig in the ribs; but with Truth few seemed to have even a long distance nodding acquaintance. Many threw up their hands, invoking the spirit of Pontius Pilate. More still drew upon the dead letter of authority. All of which is said more in the tone of one who makes mental note of his observations than in the reproving voice of a lamenting Jeremiah, for assuredly, Truth is one of the most difficult of concepts to define.

Was Joseph Seidlin (Alfred, New York) banishing Truth to Never-Never Land when he wrote: "Truth you will find wherever scientists and theologians agree"? Apparently the answer is "Yes", for Hazel S. Schnitzer (Belleville, New Jersey) tells us: "We have the Senate to discover the Truth and the courts to define it."

The best statement of Truth's attributes was submitted by Elinor Lennen (Los Angeles, California): "Truth is that which we ask about, Pilate-wise, not expecting an answer, not daring to wait for it. Many investigate it, few invest in it. Truth would make us free to think, but obligated to act. It is the ideal which makes things real, the real which makes things ideal." If this brilliant enumeration of qualities had been accompanied by an adequate definition, it would have headed the list of prize winners which follows:

1 Truth is that which temporarily has the appearance of permanence. (*J. A. Spencer, Mt. Clemens, Michigan*).

2 "A myth is an untrue story embodying a universal Truth." In a flash that sentence reveals our contradictory uses of "Truth". Imagine brakeman or engineer using "red" to designate indiscriminately red or green! Truth may mean conformity to outer fact or conformity to the aspirations of the soul. Could two things be more different? Like the Russians, we should have separate words for them. We should revive "sooth" for matters of fact and keep "Truth" as an instigator of the soul. That Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic is *so*. That