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Misanthropic Pessimism

Georges Palante

1914

The pessimism we want to study now is that which we have called misanthropic pessimism. This pessimism doesn't proceed from an exasperated and suffering sensibility, but from a lucid intelligence exercising its critical clear-sightedness on the evil side of our species. Misanthropic pessimism appears in its grand lines as a theory of universal fraud and universal imbecility; of universal nanality and universal turpitude. As the pitiless painting of a world peopled with cretins and swindlers, of ninnies and fools.

The character of this pessimism appears as a universal coldness, a willed impassibility, an absence of sentimentalism that distinguishes it from romantic pessimism, ever inclined to despair or revolt. The mute despair of Vigny is more pathetic than a cry of pain. In Stirner we find frantic accents of revolt, while in Schopenhauer we find a tragic sentiment of the world's pain and a despairing appeal to the void. As for the misanthropic pessimist, he makes no complaints. He doesn't take the human condition as tragic, he doesn't rise up against destiny. He observes his contemporaries with curiosity, pitilessly analyzes their sentiments and thoughts and is amused by their presumption, their vanity, their hypocrisy, or their unconscious villainy,

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by their intellectual and moral weakness. It is no longer human pain, it is no longer the sickness of living that forms the theme of this pessimism, but rather human villainy and stupidity. One of the preferred leitmotifs of this pessimism could be this well-known verse: "The most foolish animal is man."

The foolishness that this pessimism particularly takes aim at is that presumptuous and pretentious foolishness that we can call dogmatic foolishness, that solemn and despotic foolishness that spreads itself across social dogmas and rites, across public opinion and mores, which makes itself divine and reveals in its views on eternity a hundred petty and ridiculous prejudices. While romantic pessimism proceeds from the ability to suffer and curse, misanthropic pessimism proceeds from the faculty to understand and to scorn. It is a pessimism of the intellectual, ironic, and disdainful observer. He prefers the tone of persiflage to the minor and tragic tone. A Swift symbolizing the vanity of human quarrels in the crusade of the Big-endians and the Little-endians, a Voltaire mocking the metaphysical foolishness of Pangloss and the silly naiveté of Candide; a Benjamin Constant consigning to the Red Notebook and the *Journal Intime* his epigrammatic remarks on humanity and society; a Stendhal, whose *Journal* and *Vie de Henri Brulard* contain so many misanthropic observations on his family, his relations, his chiefs, his entourage; a Merimée, friend and emulator of Stendhal in the ironic observation of human nature; a Flaubert attacking the imbecility of his puppets Frederic Moureau and Bouvard and of Pécuchet; a Taine in "Thomas Graindorge;" a Challemeil-Lacour in his *Reflexions d'un pessimiste* can all be taken as the representative types of this haughty, smiling, and contemptuous pessimistic wisdom.

In truth, this pessimism isn't foreign to a few of the thinkers we have classed under the rubric of romantic pessimism, for the different types of pessimism have points of contact and penetration. A Schopenhauer, a Stirner have also exercised their ironic verve on human foolishness, presumption and credulity.

But in them misanthropic pessimism can't be found in its pure state. It remains subordinated to the pessimism of suffering, of despair or of revolt, to the sentimental pathos that is the characteristic trait of romantic pessimism. Misanthropic pessimism could perhaps be called realistic pessimism: in fact, in more than one of its representatives (Stendhal, Flaubert) it proceeds from that spirit of exact, detailed and pitiless observation, from the concern for objectivity and impassivity that figure among the characteristic traits of the realist esthetic. Does misanthropic pessimism confirm the thesis according to which pessimism tends to engender individualism? This is not certain. Among the thinkers we just cited there are certainly some who neither conceived, nor practiced, nor recommended the attitude of voluntary isolation that is individualism. Though they had no illusions about men they did not flee their society. They didn't hold them at a disdainful distance. They accepted to mix with them, to live their lives in their midst. Voltaire was sociability incarnate. Swift, a harsh man of ambition had nothing of the solitary nature of Obermann and Vigny. But there are several among the misanthropic pessimists we just cited, particularly Flaubert and Taine, who practiced, theorized, and recommended intellectual isolation, the retreat of thought into itself as the sole possible attitude for a man having any kind of refinement of thought and nobility of soul in this world of mediocrity and banality

Flaubert, haunted by the specter of "stupidity with a thousand faces" finds it wherever he looks. He seeks refuge against it in the pure joys of art and contemplation. He said: "I understood one great thing: it's that for the men of our race happiness is in the idea and nowhere else." "Where does your weakness come from?" he wrote to a friend. "Is it because you know man? What difference does it make? Can't you, in thought, establish that superb line of interior defense that keeps you an ocean's width from your neighbor?"

To a correspondent who complains of worry and disgust with all things: "There is a sentiment," he writes," or rather a habit that you seem to be lacking, to wit, the love of contemplation. Take life, the passions, and yourself as subjects for intellectual exercises." And again: "Skepticism will have nothing of the bitter, for it will seem that you are at humanity's comedy and it will seem to you that history crosses the world for you alone."

Taine was led by his misanthropic vision of humanity to a stoic and ascetic conception of life, to looking on the intelligence as the supreme asylum in which to isolate himself, to defend himself from universal wickedness, universal stupidity, and universal banality. A singular analogy unites Taine to Flaubert. Taine asks of scientific analysis what Flaubert asks of art and contemplation: an intellectual alibi, a means of escape from the realities of the social milieu.

This deduction is logical. Misanthropic pessimism supposes or engenders contemplative isolation. In order to intellectually despise men one must separate oneself from them, see them from a distance. One must have left the herd, have arrived at Descartes' attitude which "lives in the midst of men like amidst the trees in a forest." Whether we wish it or not, there is here a theoretical isolation, a kind of intellectual solipsism, the indifference of an aristocrat and a dilettante who "detaches himself from all in order to roam everywhere." (Taine)

Let us add that the clear-sightedness of the misanthropic intellectual has, in and of itself, something antisocial about it. To take as the theme for one's irony the common and average human stupidity means treating without respect a social value of the first order. Stupidity is the stuff of the prejudices without which no social life is possible. It is the cement of the social edifice. "Stupidity," said Dr. Anatole France's Trublet, "is the first good of an ordered society." Social conventions only survive thanks to a general stupidity that envelops, supports, guarantees, protects, and consecrates the stupidity of individ-

uals. This is why critical, ironic, and pessimistic intelligence is a social dissolvent. It is irreverent towards that which is socially respectable: mediocrity and stupidity. It attacks respect and credulity, the conservative elements of society.