CHAPTER SEVEN

OPTIMIST AND PESSIMIST

WHEN a reader sees these two words, he may conclude that in the present chapter at least we need not spend time defining terms. Everyone knows what an optimist and a pessimist are, and has heard as many jokes about them as he has about Pat and Mike. The optimist sees the doughnut, the pessimist the hole (and calls it the whole). To the pessimist the glass is half empty; to the optimist it is half full. The pessimist says, "I suppose there is no more milk in that pitcher." The optimist says, "Pass the cream, please."

The contrast is universally recognized as typical of two kinds of personality. In the Middle Ages, when temperamental traits were thought to be caused by the preponderance of one or another bodily fluid or humor, two of the four common types were the sanguine and the melancholy. A sanguine person, whose character was governed by an excess of red blood, was ruddy of complexion, hearty and genial of manner, always hopeful that things would turn out for the best. In the melancholy person or malcontent, whose body contained more black bile than any other fluid, hope was blasted before it could take root, and only misfortune was
anticipated. The two types delight in reviling each other, and epithets like sourpuss, knocker, and wet blanket are exchanged for Rotarian, backslapper, and Pollyanna.

But if this is what a reader first thinks of when he sees the title of the present chapter, then the need to define our terms is even greater than usual. How is the subject connected with philosophy at all? Is not the contrast one of habit and emphasis, perhaps a mere physical difference, hardly referable to external facts? Obviously every person or group meets with both good and bad fortune, and so is justified in expecting either. All of us are subject to regularly alternating moods of elation and depression, due perhaps to an excess or exhaustion of chemical energy in the body or to the action of endocrine glands whose functioning is little affected by our philosophy of life. Knowing this, how can we say that any choice is involved or that one attitude is preferable to the other? In fact, as we think about the matter we fall into an absurd dilemma. Which way should we want to feel, when either attitude is likely to yield to the other in a short time? When we are happy, then we may soon expect depression; when we are most downcast, relief is in sight. Therefore it seems that no one can be really hopeful or foreboding, because either attitude is tempered by the knowledge that it will shortly change.

Though this dilemma is ridiculous enough, it is less so than it sounds at first. An attempt to philosophize about hope and despair must take it into account along with everything else, but must not stop with it. Such an attempt is a legitimate philosophic problem, and is often found in literature. To see more clearly what the problem involves, let us first clear the ground by excluding certain ideas and showing what the two terms, philosophically considered, do not mean.

In the first place, the difference between optimism and pessimism is not the same as that between happiness and
unhappiness. The paradoxical nature of the problem appears in the fact that an optimist is frequently sad, while a pessimist may thoroughly enjoy life. This is explainable in two ways. There is an inevitable discrepancy between what a person expects and what he gets. If his hopes are high, they are sure to be disappointed; if they are moderate, he may be pleasantly surprised. Therefore it is not strange that a person's happiness may vary inversely as his optimism. Moreover, the gap between reason and emotion plays a part here just as it does in ethics. Happiness or the lack of it is an emotional matter, and the most carefully reasoned system of philosophic pessimism may emerge from the brain of a man with a happy temperament that remains unaffected by his thinking. Such a happy pessimist was the poet A. E. Housman. Conversely, his predecessor Tennyson, whose avowed philosophy was one of progress upward and onward forever, was a melancholy person who tormented himself for years over the premature death of a friend and who, when he was his natural self, wrote lines like "Break, break, break On thy cold gray stones, O sea." Optimism may have little to do with happiness.

Nor is the distinction the same as that between self-satisfaction and discontent. Our lack of clarity about this appears in the twist given to the word booster by the American service-club legend. Logically, if a person needs a boost, he is not so high as he would like to be and wants someone to help him climb; the word implies a need for improvement. But when the Zenith Chamber of Commerce uses the word, they don't really mean boost; they mean flatter. They want to be told that Zenith is the best little old town in the good old U.S.A., and any suggestion for improvement is knocking. Then they make the confusion complete by calling themselves an Optimists' Club. Such an attitude represents a false and shallow optimism. Most of the time it is a cover for little understood feelings of inadequacy or unacknowledged guilt.
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The rational optimist need not assert that present conditions are good, but only that improvement is possible and attainable; and it is this that the pessimist refuses to admit.

If these contrasts represent inaccurate use of the two terms, what is their real meaning? From the point of view of philosophy, what are optimism and pessimism? For our first clue we must refer to our original definition of philosophy and recollect that it must always be inclusive, must take account of everything, must view the universe as a whole. Our judgment, then, must not be limited by time or space. Pessimism does not mean merely that the outlook is dark for oneself as an individual, for his nation or his race, or for any particular period of history. It must refer to the structure of the entire universe and must conclude that that structure is such as to nullify the possibility of attaining ultimate good. Thus it follows logically our discussion of metaphysical theories. Having asked what is the nature of reality, a philosopher may next inquire whether reality is good or bad. If he concludes that the total sum of actual and potential good outweighs the sum of actual and potential evil, he is a philosophic optimist; if he comes to the opposite conclusion, he is a philosophic pessimist.

But what does he mean by good and bad? By what standard can he judge the universe? Perhaps reality is so arranged as to promote the welfare of inorganic matter, or insects, or gods, rather than human beings. If so, has he any right to find fault with it? This question the philosopher must answer in the affirmative. Value is meaningless unless it refers to some standard; and for a human thinker that standard must be the development of human personality. If there is no place for this in the universe, then, from the only point of view possible to our minds, the sum of evil outweighs the sum of good. Therefore we must add to our definition by making human values such as intelligence, love, beauty, justice, the standard of judgment. Does the universe take
account of these values? For the human race in general, is life now worth living or is there some chance of its being made so? If we conclude that there is inherent in reality the possibility that human values can maintain and develop themselves, we are optimists; if not, we are pessimists.

We are now ready to study some illustrations of these points of view in literature, both in their extreme forms and in attempts to balance the two. As before, we shall select a few of many possible examples, but this time shall arrange them in historical order, because it is interesting to observe the continual alternation between the two philosophies. Though every era contains both of them, one usually predominates enough to give the age its characteristic temper; and each one gives way fairly soon to its opposite. Sometimes the cycles have an objective cause such as scientific discoveries or political crises; occasionally the change comes with no apparent reason, as leaves fall in the autumn even before a frost has loosened them. Now and then, to our surprise, we find that attention to similar facts produces opposite reactions in different periods. And at all times there is much overlapping and uncertainty. With these things in mind, let us trace some of the fluctuations between optimism and pessimism that have occurred in the last two centuries.

The eighteenth century is a good starting-point, because it set the stage so clearly for a reversal from one view to the other, and because it shows how a rational philosophy may be distorted by wishful thinking. In general outline it represents a swing from optimism to pessimism. A brief mention of its character has already been made in Chapter Six. The proudest boast of the eighteenth-century gentleman was that he was civilized. He lived not only in an enlightened age, but in the Age of Enlightenment, the culminating era toward which all nature had been striving from the beginning of time, the final exaltation of reason and banishment of super-
stition and barbarism. He felt sorry for future ages because they had nowhere to go but down. He hoped that many institutions of the time could be fixed in their present form. The English language, for example, had obviously reached the highest perfection of which it was capable. No tampering with it was permissible, and the small clique of literary leaders frowned on new words, syntactical experiments, or variety in verse forms. The suggestion was made that an English Academy be created for the purpose of freezing the language just at it then was.

All this is recognizable as one of the kinds of false optimism previously discussed: the optimism of self-satisfaction. It gained prestige, however, by adopting a highly respectable philosophical background, furnished principally by the German mathematician Gottfried Leibniz. A rationalist like Descartes and Spinoza, Leibniz developed a metaphysic according to which all reality is composed of countless separate units of force called monads. Each monad is a little universe in itself, and the infinite number of them are arranged in order of clearness, beginning with the dullest and most confused units of inorganic substance and working up through sentient and rational monads to the perfect super-monad at the top—the omnipotent, omniscient, all-inclusive unit of force which is God. All monads are eternal, never created and never destroyed. Thus the universe is a harmonious whole consisting of infinite gradations from lowest to highest.

Upon this beautifully logical system Leibniz based his optimistic belief that the universe is so arranged as to take account of human values. God, the super-monad, is perfect in purpose as well as in power. His purpose is to produce a universe which will include the greatest possible variety and freedom consistent with the harmony of the whole structure, and so to allow for the greatest possible development of human personality. This highest development could not come
about if there were no evil or struggle in the world. To develop himself, man must have stubborn matter to reduce to form, obstacles to overcome, selfish impulses to fight against. Otherwise he might have technical perfection but no human values. Therefore God's purpose for the world is fixed by the law of moral necessity. Though, being omnipotent, he might have brought about various other kinds of worlds, actually his moral perfection led him to choose a kind in which the proportion of good and evil is best fitted for the life of human beings. Therefore Leibniz confidently announced that things as they are constitute "the best of all possible worlds."

It was an unfortunate phrase. Judged against the background of Leibniz's metaphysical system it is not an illogical conclusion and is an example of genuine philosophic optimism as previously defined. Taken by itself, however, it sounds like smug complacency. It could easily be interpreted as meaning that present conditions were already perfect and could not possibly be improved upon. Since this idea accorded exactly with what the eighteenth-century aristocrat already thought of his society, the phrase caught the fancy of the time and was widely popularized. Moralists, divines, and poets, whether or not they had ever heard of Leibniz, expanded and distorted it to demonstrate that everything was exactly as it should be and no one need worry. The metaphysical optimism was extended into the realm of morals, and writers like the Earl of Shaftesbury defended the status quo of human nature as being the best of all possible moralities. Man is by nature good, they said, endowed with an innate moral sense similar to a kind of instinct. If only he would act according to this instinct instead of trying to reason out problems of conduct, all would be well, because the graded, harmonious universe would see to it that his spontaneous emotions were the proper ones. Not even the satirists denied the perfection of nature or of man's moral instinct, but rather attacked their contemporaries for not following it. By relying on the moral sense, then,
one could reproduce in himself the harmony and proportion of the whole cosmos. Unfortunately that moral sense turned out to be the social customs of eighteenth-century high society, and the best possible world was one in which the lower classes were kept properly subordinated. This was not what Leibniz had meant.  

Much eighteenth-century literature gives evidence of this rather shallow optimism. A good example is Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*, written in 1732-1734, which is, as the title indicates, a philosophical essay in verse. In his preface, Pope says that he chose verse instead of prose because in that medium he could express ideas more tersely and pointedly. This he succeeds in doing; his heroic couplets are clear, polished, and brilliant, and many lines such as “Hope springs eternal in the human breast” are constantly quoted. His object is to “vindicate the ways of God to man,” and he foresees no difficulty at all in the matter, because, to quote again from the preface, “The science of Human Nature is, like all other sciences, reduced to a few clear points.” This sweeping confidence is typical of the period. The poem is written in the form of four Epistles to Pope’s “guide, philosopher, and friend” Henry St. John, Lord Bolingbroke. The four discuss the nature of man in connection respectively with the universe, himself as an individual, human society, and happiness. Epistle I, on man’s relation to the universe, will illustrate the common-sense optimism of the time.

That Pope intends it to be true philosophic optimism appears in his emphasis on the place of human values in the universe. At first glance it appears that there is no place for such values in the realm of natural law, and men often complain of the injustice of their lot; but this feeling results from too narrow a view of life, and is easily remedied by looking at the whole picture. In describing God’s plan for the world, Pope makes use of an idea called the “chain of being.” According to it all existence is arranged in an orderly
sequence, beginning with inorganic matter at the bottom, and proceeding by imperceptible gradations through the plants, lower and higher animals and man, up to spiritual beings like angels and eventually God. This sequence came about because the benevolent creator, wishing to share the benefits of existence as widely as possible, must inevitably produce every conceivable kind of being. At some point in the scale, then, must appear a being having just the powers and limitations that man has. To wish it otherwise is logically impossible; the only sensible course is to accept man's middle state as harmonious with nature's plan. It is apparent that this chain of being is similar to but not identical with Leibniz's graded monads. In Pope's words:

Of systems possible, if 'tis confest  
That wisdom infinite must form the best,  
Where all must fall or not coherent be,  
And all that rises rise in due degree;  
Then in the scale of reas'ning life 'tis plain  
There must be, somewhere, such a rank as Man.  

Here is an echo of Leibniz in "the best of all possible systems," and the too easy conclusion that man's lot is right because in the whole system man's lot as it is could not avoid appearing somewhere. The same argument would prove that all is well in the lot of an angleworm and that nature takes account of vermicular values because at some point in the chain of being there must be an angleworm. Indeed, Pope accepts this by implication, and goes on to show that nothing should ever wish to be of a different nature or performing a different function from the one it actually does.

What if the foot, ordained the dust to tread,  
Or hand to toil, aspired to be the head?  
What if the head, the eye, or ear repin'd  
To serve mere engines to the ruling mind?  
Just as absurd for any part to claim
To be another in this general frame;
Just as absurd to mourn the tasks or pains
The great directing Mind of All ordains.³

Nevertheless the human race will not resign itself to its lot, and obstinately complains that the misfortunes it suffers are excessive and undeserved. In answer to this complaint Pope furnishes several consolations that he hopes will help reconcile man to his lot. The first is that man's query is always, why was I created so weak, blind, and finite—why was I not given greater powers and opportunities? It would be more sensible, he says, to reverse the question so as to ask, why was I not created even weaker, with still more trivial powers? Though one is as hard to answer as the other, the second form of the question makes us optimistically aware of our blessings. If we still complain, then we should consider another and stronger consolation: we are not permitted to foresee the future. If we could foresee it, we might be overwhelmed by the suffering that lay in wait for us; but this we are spared, and are given the opportunity always to indulge in hope. Thus the lamb, unaware that he is to be led to the slaughter, plays happily in the meadow up to the last minute. This argument is so double-edged and gives away the optimistic game so completely that it is hard to believe in Pope's serious use of it.

Somewhat more effective is the following argument, which is made a corollary to the "chain of being" idea. In the total plan of the universe, each animal is given certain compensations for its weakness, such as size, armor, swiftness, protective color, or shrewdness. Man alone is given reason, a gift so great that it makes up for all other deficiencies. With it he ought to be satisfied, but the possession of reason has made him so proud that he thinks he should have everything else at the same time, and is never content with anything short of omnipotence. If he would think impartially, he would realize that many of the powers he wants would not be good
for him. Why can't he see or hear more than he does? Simply because more acute senses would produce pain instead of pleasure. With a stronger sense of touch, he would "smart and agonize at every pore"; with more sensitive hearing, he would be stunned by continual noise. Therefore man should reconcile himself to the fact that such powers and gifts as he has are those ideally adapted to his nature.

Who finds not Providence all good and wise, 
Alike in what it gives and what denies?

Pope succeeds admirably in summing up and expressing in aphoristic form the popular, fashionable philosophy of his day. In the conclusion of his first epistle, he makes use of another famous phrase which goes to a much greater extreme than Leibniz's "best of all possible worlds." Summarizing his contention (that human dissatisfaction must spring from an imperfect knowledge of the universal plan, he writes:

All Nature is but Art unknown to thee; 
All chance, direction, which thou canst not see; 
All discord, harmony not understood; 
All partial evil, universal good: 
And spite of Pride, in erring reason's spite, 
One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right.*

Again, this is not what Leibniz had meant. To him, the world had been chosen as the best of many possibilities because it contained a balance of good and evil; to Pope and Shaftesbury, it was because everything was as it should be. When such an attitude makes philosophy nothing but a defence of the status quo, a period is ripe for reaction, and accordingly a new point of view opposing this type of optimism developed shortly after the middle of the century.

It appeared partly as a mere change of fashion in literature. Poets of the mid-century, forerunners of Romanticism, began to abandon the conventional life of the drawing room
and the custom of writing verse essays for more emotional subjects. As we have seen, they began contemplating nature, and they did so in a mood of melancholy foreign to the neo-classic writers. They would sit on a hilltop, in a country graveyard, or in a moonlit garden, and there ruminate on the sadness of human life, sentimentalizing on the smallness of man in the universe. One group of them have even been dubbed the "Graveyard School," which produced poems like Robert Blair's *The Grave*, Edward Young's *Night Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality*, or, most famous of all, Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*. Amid a setting of twilight bells, yew trees, and moping owls complaining to the moon from ivy-mantled towers, Gray comments with quiet sadness on the fate of the common people here buried, who lived their obscure lives like desert flowers or jewels hidden in ocean caves, with no chance of developing their talents. This mood of sadness grew in favor until it reached the theatrical intensity of Byron's *Childe Harold*. However, though it is an interesting symptom of the change in fashion, it is not in itself pessimistic literature, because it is too personal and subjective a type of melancholy to be concerned with the place of human values in the universe. These poets, reacting to nature with sentimental dejection, gained fame and considerable pleasure by bemoaning their lot; but what they expressed was personal despondency rather than a philosophical point of view. Pessimism and melancholy are not necessarily the same.

In fact, when the real reaction came it was neither melancholy nor sentimental. In the year 1759 appeared two books, one in France and one in England, which used satire or rational argument to oppose the optimism of self-satisfaction and to defend a certain amount of pessimism as being of real value in the conduct of life. One was Voltaire's *Candide*, the other Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*. They are typical of their authors. The former, entirely in the vein of satire, is impish
and mercurial in style, narrating in an apparently matter-of-fact manner a series of wild adventures and changes of fortune which toss its hero from rags to riches and from death to life every few days. The latter is a serious, deep-toned philosophical novelette, with an air of authority, in Dr. Johnson's clean, weighty, Latinized style, bearing down with the pressure of a literary dictator on the facile assumptions that human life is good. Both are short; both are interesting reading.

*Candide* is the story of a candid young man, gentle, honest, simple-minded, and eager to learn, who is reared in happy ignorance of evil and of the facts of life in general, and who experiences more disillusionments than usually befall a dozen people. That he should find his education inadequate is surprising, for he has been carefully tutored by a profound optimistic philosopher named Dr. Pangloss, who is the oracle in the castle of Baron Thunder-ten-Tronckh where Candide lives. Pangloss teaches the subject of metaphysico-theologo-cosmolonigology. He bases his philosophy on the principle of sufficient reason (a Leibnizian phrase), from which he demonstrates that there is no effect without a cause and that in this best of all possible worlds the Baron's castle is the best castle and his wife the best of all possible Baronesses. Here is his line of reasoning:

'Tis demonstrated that things cannot be otherwise; for, since everything is made for an end, everything is necessarily for the best end. Observe that noses were made to wear spectacles; and so we have spectacles. Legs were visibly instituted to be breeched, and we have breeches. Stones were formed to be quarried and to build castles; and My Lord has a very noble castle; the greatest Baron in the province should have the best house; and as pigs were made to be eaten, we eat pork all the year 'round. Consequently, those who have asserted that all is well talk nonsense; they ought to have said that all is for the best.5
When Candide logically concludes that the principle of sufficient reason dictates his falling in love with the Baron’s daughter, he is expelled from the castle and sets out on a series of travels in which he meets Dr. Pangloss in various unlikely places, always interpreting everything for the best. For example, when they are caught in the Lisbon earthquake, Pangloss consoles the homeless citizens by saying: “All this is for the best. For, if there is a volcano at Lisbon, it cannot be anywhere else; for it is impossible that things should not be where they are; for all is well.” For many months, against the evidence of his senses, Candide faithfully adheres to this teaching and explains away all human suffering as necessary in the best of all possible worlds.

Ultimately, however, as the facts which refute Pangloss pile up in larger and larger numbers, Candide begins to wonder if he has been deceived. Not only is he himself unhappy, but his search for social justice and personal goodness has failed at every turn. “I have traversed half this globe,” he says; “I have seen fraud and calumny triumphant: my sole intention has been to be serviceable to mankind, yet I have been constantly persecuted. . . . All must be right, because Pangloss said so; nevertheless I am the most miserable of all possible beings.” This change of heart is intensified by the influence of an old man named Martin, an avowed pessimist who travels with Candide and discusses moral and physical evil with him. Martin states his philosophy in one of the phrases which we used above to describe pessimism. “I have always told you,” he says, “that everything is for the worst; the sum of evil greatly exceeds the sum of good.” Any dispassionate observation of the world, he feels, will confirm this view. Both good fortune and moral virtue are noticeable because they appear so rarely in the midst of such ubiquitous evil. He points out that in nature and in human society strife and warfare are the rule, and that the world is so constructed as to place the human values of generosity and co-operation
under an initial handicap which they seldom overcome. Every family is suspicious of a neighboring family, every state of its adjacent states. The strong oppress the weak, who cower before them while secretly plotting their downfall. The economic system is so unstable that there is no way to provide employment except by having a war every few years. When a man does achieve success, he arouses envy among his friends and lives in fear of losing whatever he has. Even he who appears most happy is devoured by secret griefs and disappointments. In short, the possibilities of goodness are denied to human life by the very terms of its existence.

The combination of Martin's influence and his own experiences wear down Candide's faith to the point where he can no longer be optimistic. In Dutch Guiana one day he comes upon a Negro lying on the road, half naked, his right hand and his left leg missing. He has worked in the sugar mills, where the grindstones frequently cut off a laborer's hand, and when he tries to run away cut off his leg. And that, he remarks grimly, is the price paid for the sugar white people eat in Europe. When Candide cries out that this is too much, and that in the end he will have to renounce optimism, his valet Cacambo inquires what optimism is. "Alas," says Candide, "it is the mania of maintaining that everything is well when we are wretched." Eventually a curious thing happens. When experience finally outweighs Pangloss's teaching and forces Candide to admit that he is now a pessimist, he at once, to his surprise, becomes much happier than he has been since his youthful days in the Baron's castle. The evil in the world no longer worries him, since now he need no longer reconcile it with a preconceived optimistic theory; and he decides to cultivate his garden and stop troubling himself about things as they are. The reader is left with a feeling that this attack on optimism is one of the gayest and most vivacious of books, and that it is the optimists themselves who are the sad specimens.
This is not the effect of our second example, Johnson's *Rasselas*, which is a serious analysis of optimism rather than a satire. Again we have a hero innocent of all knowledge of the world and confident that anything he discovers will be good. In order to account for the innocence, Johnson chooses a setting as remote as he can think of, isolated from European civilization and protected by impassable mountains from foreign contamination. Rasselas is the young prince of Abyssinia, the "happy valley" where no evil threatens. Had Johnson lived in the days of bombing planes, he might have despaired of finding even a Pacific island remote enough for his purpose. However, Rasselas, dwelling in his Shangri-La, is not satisfied to stay there; he unreasonably longs to escape over the mountains in order to find the happiness of the great world of which he has heard. He has an artist friend named Imlac (corresponding somewhat to Martin in *Candide*), who has traveled widely and who warns him from experience that the search is fruitless and that he would do better to remain at home. Partly through Imlac and partly in his own person Johnson utters many aphorisms on the essential misery of life.

There is so much infelicity in the world that scarce any man has leisure from his own distresses to estimate the comparative happiness of others.

Human life is everywhere a state in which much is to be endured and little to be enjoyed.

We are long before we are convinced that happiness is never to be found, and each believes it possessed by others, to keep alive the hope of obtaining it for himself.

Nevertheless Rasselas and his sister Nekayah succeed in escaping from the happy valley, and travel over Europe in search of contentment. They associate with all classes of
people, and find everywhere the same cruelty, fear, and secret grief which impressed Candide. They talk to young and old, rich and poor, shepherds, hermits, politicians, philosophers, theologians, and ordinary middle-class families. None of these people are really happy. They are unfortunate victims, sometimes of an unjust social system, sometimes of their own neuroses, often of pure chance. Inevitably, then, Rasselas and Nekayah, admitting their failure and the soundness of Imlac's views, return with relief to the happy valley, cured permanently of any desire to leave it.

The book is a quiet, dignified protest against the falsification inherent in eighteenth-century life. It includes no direct satire of optimism, and does not counsel despair. Rather it advocates the realistic acceptance of evil and suffering, the attempt where possible to mitigate its effects, and where this is not possible its patient endurance. Dr. Johnson's point of view is well summed up in a passage from one of his essays which assumes that the prevailing mood has already changed and asks how the new pessimistic feelings can best be met so as to avoid despair.

That life has many miseries, and that those miseries are sometimes at least equal to all the powers of fortitude, is now universally confessed; and therefore it is useful to consider not only how we may escape them, but by what means [they] may be mitigated and lightened, and how we may make those hours less wretched which the condition of our present existence will not allow to be very happy. The cure for the greater part of human miseries is not radical but palliative. Infelicity is involved in corporeal nature and interwoven with all our being [a resonant Johnsonian sentence!]; all attempts therefore to decline it wholly are vain; the armies of pain send their arrows against us on every side, the choice is only between those which are more or less sharp, or tinged with greater or less malignity; and the strongest armour which reason can supply
will only blunt their points but cannot repel them. The great remedy which Heaven has put in our hands is patience, by which, though we cannot lessen the torments of the body, we can in a great measure preserve the peace of the mind, and shall suffer only the natural and genuine force of an evil without heightening its acrimony or prolonging its effects.

Both this sonorous passage and Voltaire's happy flings at optimists represent a healthy reversal from the assumption that whatever is, is right. As the eighteenth century ended, people's attitudes toward life were violently disturbed by the French Revolution, the collapse of freedom into Napoleon's dictatorship, the world war, and the rapid progress of the Industrial Revolution. In its approach to the question of optimism and pessimism, the nineteenth century had almost to make a new start. What its new assumptions were and how they also proved equivocal and contradictory will be the subject of the next section.

The nineteenth century was a more complicated and contradictory period than the eighteenth. Yet in the midst of all the intellectual ferment that took place, the age was dominated by one main idea, an idea so startling and yet so satisfying and enlightening that it occupied the attention of almost every writer. That idea was evolution. The notion that the world is not a fixed structure but a process of development is now so familiar that it is hard for us to realize the enthusiasm, horror, and widespread turmoil that it aroused. This excitement was spread through most of the century. Though the main impact followed Darwin's publication of the *Origin of Species* in 1859, the idea had been in the air for several decades before and had influenced many authors. In 1809, Lamarck had proposed a theory of biological selection of organs to fulfill an existing need, but his views found little favor. As early as 1819 the idea is found poetically
expressed in Keats's unfinished poem *Hyperion*, where the point is made that every species or organism, after fulfilling its function, must by nature's law yield to a more advanced species better adapted to its environment.\(^7\) Since this is set forth by means of an allegory about the war between the Titans and the Olympian gods, the clear evolutionary idea was little noticed; but there is no mistaking it. To Keats the process was not one to be lamented, however much the declining species might dislike it. To other writers, however, the evolutionary theory seemed to remove all possibility of fixed or trustworthy values in the world. Its influence was consequently double-edged, with the same concept leading sometimes to optimism and sometimes to pessimism. In general and with many exceptions, it may be said that an earlier optimistic interpretation has gradually yielded to a prevailing pessimistic one.

We may first examine how the idea led to optimism. It is well known that Darwin's theory was enthusiastically popularized by Thomas Huxley and Herbert Spencer, who regarded it as the key to all knowledge and extended it to cover not only biology but almost every field of knowledge such as history, ethics, linguistics, art, and sociology. To these men the great value of evolution was that it emphasized the fact of progress in the world, that it was eternally eliminating errors and finding better adaptations to life, and that it furnished scientific authority for the belief that everything was getting better all the time. The period seemed to furnish much evidence for this view. Science and industry were rapidly raising the standard of living; soon poverty, overwork, and unemployment would vanish; new ideals of freedom were finding justification in the startling material progress of the United States; democracy and liberalism would soon cover the world; and it was clear that war was outdated and would soon be abolished.

Progress, then, was the magic word. But how did it take place? From the evolutionary point of view, obviously
through the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest; and therefore struggle and competition were hailed as the great forces for improvement in the world. Unlike the complacent optimism of the eighteenth century, which tried to peg a perfect civilization at its present zenith, the strenuous optimism of the nineteenth rejoiced that whatever existed was constantly being replaced by something better, and that the struggle was made certain by the nature of things to bring about a constant series of improvements.

Such a point of view is partly the result of great physical energy. One of the best examples of it was Robert Browning, a man of enormous vitality and confidence, who, when he was forbidden to marry the invalid Elizabeth Barrett, carried her off to Italy and almost cured her by the contagion of his personality. Browning’s philosophy illustrates the contemporary reliance on development by struggle and endless progress. His happiness lies in eternally striving without ever reaching a goal. After man has exhausted his powers in the struggle of life, then he is merely on the threshold of continued effort in the life to come. His reach must always exceed his grasp. Existence, either present or future, is a joyous affair, not because it lets you win anything but because it grants you the opportunity of eternal effort. “Struggle is happiness” was Browning’s formula. And the really optimistic element in this lay in the fact that by the structure of the universe struggle is everywhere present in it; and since struggle is universal, so is happiness. As long as a person never arrives and never abandons the possibility of progress, he can be happy.

Life is probation, and the earth no goal
But starting-point of man: compel him strive,
Which means in man, as good as reach the goal.  

This is an idea enticing in its neatness. Human nature is such that it can win happiness not by fulfilling its desires, but by striving to fulfill them. Its proper satisfaction comes from the expenditure of energy. Though most people are deceived into
thinking that they put forth effort in order to get something, they really do the work for the sake of the effort itself. The more effort, the more happiness. Therefore, since the successful overcoming of an obstacle leads them to relax the struggle and rest on their oars, for the best life the obstacles should be difficult, even insurmountable. The formula now becomes: the more failure, the more happiness! (To struggle without ever reaching a goal is itself the highest goal of human life; best of all, it is a goal which anyone can attain for the asking. There is plenty of struggle to go around. As Hotspur said, "Out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety," so Browning distills optimism from the very discouragements of life.

The best poem to read in illustration of this idea is *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, an assertion of the satisfactions of old age in contrast to the follies and dreams of youth, of the building of a complete life by a long effort to mould those dreams into a coherent pattern. The characteristic of life which the Rabbi prizes most is its never-satisfied doubt, its eternally unanswered questions, the aspiration toward the unattainable that distinguishes man from animals. We seldom realize how fortunate we are in possessing a divine restlessness that never lets us be content; for the contentment resulting from a cessation of effort is illusory and ashes in the mouth. Since this is so,

Then welcome each rebuff
That turns earth's smoothness rough,
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go!
Be our joys three parts pain!
Strive, and hold cheap the strain;
Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never grudge the throe!

For thence—a paradox
Which comforts while it mocks—
Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail:
What I aspired to be
And was not, comforts me:
A brute I might have been, but would not sink i' the scale.

We should observe in these stanzas that Browning makes an extension and a reversal of emphasis in the eighteenth-century idea of the chain of being. The middle state of man, said Pope, halfway between worm and God, is cause for our gratification; instead of complaining that we are no higher, let us rejoice that we are no lower. While agreeing with this, Browning goes a step farther and bids us rejoice because, even though we may fail to rise to a higher point in the scale, we are at least able by our own efforts to keep from falling inertly to a lower one. In general it may be said that, whereas eighteenth-century optimism was static, nineteenth-century optimism was kinetic. This was undoubtedly an improvement, although the ordinary person with somewhat less than Browning's energy tends to feel as if the poet were whipping up a cheering section at a game. But under this philosophy the nineteenth century proceeded to evolve with feverish enthusiasm.

A generation after Browning, when this confidence had begun to recede, a new and brilliant advocate of strenuous optimism appeared in the person of Bernard Shaw, whose view of Christianity we have seen. Since Shaw's life has now covered almost a century and he is regarded as practically timeless, it may seem surprising to locate him in the generation following Browning. It may seem surprising also to call him an optimist; he has attacked so many existing conditions and destroyed so much humbug that he must disapprove of most of the conditions of human life. But the attacks are all part of the struggle, the existence of which proves that life is good. Any expression of despair, which he calls the vanity-of-vanities attitude, makes him impatient. His principal objection to Shakespeare is that he thinks Shakespeare is a pessimist.
He opposes the romantic point of view in literature by calling it the root of modern pessimism.

Shaw's brand of optimism is typically strenuous in that it welcomes the expenditure of energy as man's highest good. In the preface to *Man and Superman*, which he writes in the form of a letter to Arthur Bingham Walkley, he describes the greatest joy of life to be the discarding of a hedonistic desire to be happy in favor of using up all one's energy to co-operate with nature's evolutionary purpose and throwing oneself with abandon into the service of this cosmic force. If one is worn out thereby before he dies, that is better than husbanding his powers for petty, selfish ends. In one of his dramatic reviews, he tells an anecdote that illustrates the same point. Long ago, he says, when he was caught in a crowd at the theater door, he discovered that the only way to get through the bottleneck was to dive into the very worst of the jam. If he was being crushed nearly to death, he was confident of success; but if the discomfort relaxed, then he knew he was being forced to one side and would never get in. Therefore, in spite of its discomfort, the focus of struggle is the real source of human happiness. Accordingly the worst sin is indifference, despair, relaxation. In the play *Heartbreak House*, old Captain Shotover would be glad to invent a machine that would destroy the human race, because he sees his children indulging in indolent and aimless pleasure-seeking, frittering away their lives without plan or purpose, and then complaining sentimentally that life has no meaning. Instead of trying and failing, this society is simply drifting.

But what is the purpose for which man's energy may profitably be used? This question Shaw answers at great length—in fact, at the length of a hundred pages of preface and three hundred pages of drama. The play is *Back to Methuselah*, published three years after World War I. It associates Shaw with the idea of evolution which had stimulated nineteenth-century optimism; man's only hope, he says,
is to evolve into something better before it is too late. But his is not the same evolution that had thrilled Huxley and Spencer. To Shaw, Darwinism is anathema because it denies the existence of any purpose toward which an organism may struggle. He insists that it relies upon chance alone, ignoring will or consciousness. By chance mutation some new organ is developed. Perhaps it turns out to be useful to the species, perhaps not; if it does, then it remains because it has survival value. Hence the whole process is fortuitous, fatalistic, blind, indifferent; Shaw will have none of it. An idea which had seemed excitingly hopeful to one generation may in the next become a source of pessimism.

Shaw, however, did not abandon either evolution or optimism. By postulating a change in the technique of the process based on a hint by Lamarck a half century before Darwin, Shaw throws his support to a generally rejected theory called "creative evolution," which means simply evolving with one's eyes open. Instead of blindly casting about in all directions and occasionally taking advantage of a lucky accident, nature proceeds by both conscious and subconscious effort to the attainment of a goal. First a need arises; the organism confronted with it sets out by deliberate experiment to meet it; if the necessity is keen enough, the life force incarnate in the individual or the species will find the answer. Co-operating with the eternal life force, then, is the great purpose for which man can exhaust all his energies and provide himself with the opportunity for struggle which is his best chance for happiness. When God is defined as eternally unfulfilled purpose, heaven is ours for the asking as long as we strive to promote that purpose, whether or not we meet with objective success. In these ways the optimism of the nineteenth century was dominated by the evolutionary theory.

Before observing how the same theory also led to pessimism, let us note the objections which a pessimist would raise
against the two main optimistic tenets: namely, the value and happiness of struggle and the argument of progress. Concerning the former, he would begin by pointing out that the benefits of struggle usually appeal most to people who have been victorious in it (people of strong vitality and a combative spirit). For the value of it to appear, there should be at least some slight chance of winning the fight. If the odds are completely against one from the start, the effect produced is more likely to be hopeless despair than the happiness which the optimist finds in it. And these hostile odds do confront a large minority of the human race, who are so hedged about by lack of ability or social pressure that they have very small chance of making progress. In the second place, struggle, even when exhilarating at the moment, is an unsatisfactory basis for lifelong happiness because it depends on a state of emotional excitement that cannot be consistently maintained. To depend on it is as foolish as to stake one’s happiness on getting drunk, whereby one may induce first hilarity and then oblivion, but not contentment. Indeed, to the pessimist the pleasure of struggle seems a form of intoxication. As Housman pointed out, as long as a man can keep excited by means of liquor, love, or fights he may live pleasantly enough, but occasionally he is forced to sober up and think. Finally, as the pessimist’s strongest argument, he would say that constant conflict is not one of the highest human values, which ought to seek co-operation instead of competition. If the world is so arranged as to take account of human values, then it dare not rely on struggle as the central source of happiness. To idealize conflict is merely to make the best of a bad job.

The second basis of nineteenth-century optimism was the contention that, whether because of or in spite of the evil and conflict in the world, the human race is steadily progressing. Things may be bad; but they have improved and will improve. Naturally this argument seems less convincing in the middle than at the beginning of the twentieth century: but
even then it did not satisfy the pessimists. First, the fact of progress itself is open to doubt, unless one assumes carelessly that any change is an improvement, which is as illogical as saying that whatever is, is right. Constant changes occur; but they are as likely to destroy human values as to foster them, to enhance evil as to enhance good. Machine technology and medicine have become more and more efficient; so have wars. Yet underneath all these fluctuations human nature seems hardly to have changed at all. It is misleading, then, to assume progress as a fact. Next, even if progress does occur, it is so slow that any value it has is only for the distant future, not for the millions of individuals working toward it and suffering for it. Furthermore, even reaching whatever far-off, divine event may be the goal of progress would be a defeat, because it would terminate the very process on which the optimist bases his case, and because none of the goals that humanity has from time to time attained has ever satisfied it. Such arguments warn us that nineteenth-century optimism is not a self-evident proposition.

As we turn to the positive side of nineteenth-century pessimism, we find that the foundation for it was laid early in the century by a philosopher who has been influential ever since. In 1818 Arthur Schopenhauer published *The World as Will and Idea*, which at the time attracted little attention but grew rapidly in favor during the next thirty years. It is one of the most readable and interesting of philosophic systems. We may examine first his metaphysical theory, next the nature of his resulting pessimism, and lastly an example of his influence in literature.

The title of Schopenhauer’s book implies that his metaphysic is a form of idealism. Denying the existence of matter, he believes that the world around us has reality only in the sense that we perceive it—the world is our idea. But beyond this is another, ultimate reality, the thing in itself which makes up the essence of all existence; and this reality is will,
the driving force that not only appears as a phenomenon but is itself the substance and motive power of all phenomena. "It appears in every blind force of nature and also in the preconsidered actions of man; and the great difference between these two is merely in the degree of the manifestation, not in the nature of what manifests itself,"11 Thus at the bottom of the scale, farthest removed from awareness, are blind inorganic forces like gravity and atomic energy; next come the unconscious organic growth of plants, the instinctive and semi-conscious striving in animals and young children, and the conscious desires of adult man. All these are the same in that they are various outward appearances of the same reality: the will to live, to exist for no external or ulterior purpose other than existence itself. This cosmic will is the same thing which Shaw calls the Life Force, except that Shaw regards it as conscious and purposeful, Schopenhauer as blind and aimless. It is eternal, with no beginning or end, as any ultimate metaphysical entity must be. It seeks no goal but its own random striving, and objectifies itself continually in the sweep of a planet through space, the penetration of a root into the ground or a stem up to the light, the animal impulses of hunger and sex, or the gnawing desire to own a bigger car than one's neighbor. Mind is its servant, to help fulfill its behests. There is no escape from it, for nothing else exists.

Though such a metaphysical belief accords well with the theory of evolution and especially with the emphasis on the struggle for existence, Schopenhauer draws from it different conclusions from the optimistic ones we have already seen. To him the fact that all nature is an eternal conflict of will seems completely evil and destructive of human values. For what it amounts to is a civil war, a strife of the universe against itself and of its parts against one another. "Every grade of the objectification of will fights for the matter, the space, and the time of the other." One type of matter struggles
to impose itself on others through mechanical, chemical, or organic changes; one species of animal can live only by the destruction of some other species; human beings fight continually not only against bacteria, vegetable poisons, or beasts of prey, but against the wills of other human beings. (Thus the universe, far from being coherent, is by its inner nature at odds with itself.)

From this internal schism of the will Schopenhauer draws his most pessimistic conclusions. What does it make of human life? Merely an endless alternation between pain and ennui, leading to a hopeless end. Many of our desires we never fulfill. If occasionally we do attain one, then either we find that it does not satisfy us as we had hoped it would, or we become bored because life is now empty and meaningless. Always the restless will drives us out on some new painful quest. The only definite, positive experience we have is pain; for pleasure is a negative experience, the temporary deliverance from a painful want. Pain is protracted, but happiness is necessarily brief because the attainment of a desire is at once followed by ennui—that is, renewed pain. When nothing exists but the will, such a sequence is inescapable.

Worst of all, perhaps, is the idea that the will is foredoomed to defeat from the outset. No victory can ever be hoped for. Since death is inevitable, the struggle for existence is lost before it begins. All the activity of the will in any of its manifestations succeeds only in frustrating or destroying some other of those manifestations without saving itself in the process. To survive, a man cuts down a field of wheat and kills a pig for food. Since the wheat and the pig were both growing, striving parts of the universal will, the universe has negated itself by the act. Yet it does no good, for the man is unable to preserve his existence for more than a short time. “The life of our body,” says Schopenhauer, “is only a constantly protracted dying, an ever postponed death: . . . in the same way, the activity of our minds is a constantly deferred
ennui." His system is typical of the nineteenth century in its
dynamic character, its recognition of change and energy in
the world. But it leads to the picture of all life as a destruc-
tive and futile war, aimless and internecine in character, with
universal pain and defeat as its only possible outcome.

It is true that Schopenhauer makes one small qualifica-
tion in the picture given above. Though escape from the will
is ultimately impossible, a certain measure of temporary relief
can be achieved. When the will developed the human mind
as an instrument for attaining its desires, it overreached itself.
The mind sometimes becomes so efficient an instrument that
it turns against its master and proclaims its own freedom by
denying the will itself. When this occurs, it brings about a
cessation of wishing and striving, and a condition of pure
subjective existence free of desire. It may occur in two ways:
through art and through asceticism. A true artist contemplates
beauty for its own sake, without desire; and when any man
becomes absorbed in looking at a sunset without at the
moment desiring anything at all, he is then an artist, and
feels a sense of peace and relaxation from effort quite different
from the boredom that follows the actual attainment of a
desire. Still more significant is the existence of ascetics, human
beings who deliberately deprive their will of what it wants
and achieve freedom by withdrawing from the struggle for
existence.

In this way Schopenhauer intended to relieve to a slight
extent the extreme pessimism of his philosophy. Whether he
succeeded is doubtful. If we once grant his premise that will
is the one and only metaphysical entity, then any escape from
it would seem to be impossible. The contemplation of the
artist and the self-denial of the ascetic may easily be inter-
preted as fulfilments or sublimations of their unconscious
desires. In that case the pessimism remains unalloyed. At any
rate it is the pessimistic picture and not the exceptions to it
that have been influential on later writers.
To illustrate this type of pessimism in literature we may cite the work of Thomas Hardy, whose attitude toward nature and toward the conditions of human life frequently resemble Schopenhauer's. The setting of his tragic novels is the Wessex district of southern England, a region of farmland alternating with sombre moors. His love of this land and of the farm and village people who inhabit it appears in all the novels, which contain many vivid pictures of stars, frosty downs, sheep-shearings, bonfires on Guy Fawkes Day, county fairs, and tavern scenes. But this natural setting, whether beautiful or cheerless, always reflects the underlying indifference and hostility of man's environment, the manifestation of a blind force which takes no account of human intentions. As John Cowper Powys points out in *Enjoyment of Literature*, Hardy's view of nature is the opposite of Wordsworth's. The latter derived comfort, hope, and inspiration from a wooded hill or a pleasant valley; but Hardy is always aware of the fact that nature is divided against itself, that in the most peaceful spot a deadly conflict rages as plants and animals kill one another in order to survive, and that this destructive energy of nature, though perhaps merely blind, nevertheless functions just as if it were a malevolent God hostile to his own creations.\(^\text{12}\)

Into this struggle for existence, against his better intentions, man enters with the cards stacked against him from the beginning. He must contend against other men and against an evil fate which delights in frustrating the best men just as a hurricane may blow down the tallest trees in the forest. As long as a person is content to remain a peasant, close to the level of nature itself, he may live out his life with no more than the ordinary vicissitudes that come to any living thing. But let him exhibit intelligence or ambition, let him develop more sensitive feelings or a more complex personality, and he is relentlessly cut down. The appearance of typically human values in Hardy's world leads at once to their destruction by the life force. This happens, for example,
to Clym Yeobright and Eustacia Vye in *The Return of the Native*, to Michael Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, and to Jude Fawley in *Jude the Obscure*. In each case it occurs through the intrusion of an ironically evil piece of bad luck into some crisis in the character's life.

A typical instance is the visit of Mrs. Yeobright to her son in *The Return of the Native*. Clym, who has married Eustacia Vye against his mother's opposition, is now working as a furze-cutter and living in a cottage on the heath. After a long struggle with herself, Mrs. Yeobright decides to ignore her pride and show her good will by making the first advances to her daughter-in-law. Her intentions are thus of the best; she is acting on the human level of unselfishness rather than on the natural level of revenge. Walking across the heath on a hot August day, she arrives exhausted at her son's house, sees Clym enter, sees Eustacia's face looking out at her from behind the curtain, and then receives no answer to her repeated knocks. In anguished humiliation she retraces her six-mile walk, is overcome by the heat, and dies as a result of her journey.

In no way could this disaster be regarded as Mrs. Yeobright's fault. She did what she could, and drew the only possible conclusions from the evidence. But what are the real facts behind so damning an appearance? They are simple, natural, and fatal; no hostile deity could have planned them more perfectly. After entering the house tired from a long day's work, Clym falls asleep in the living-room. Soon an old friend of Eustacia's, of whom Mrs. Yeobright disapproves, calls to see her, and while the two are talking the knock comes at the door. Seeing her mother-in-law through the curtain, Eustacia hastily takes her friend out the back door; though she is not responsible for his presence and does not welcome it, she dislikes to stir up further rancor by letting Mrs. Yeobright see him. As they reach the door they both hear Clym move about in the room and say, "Mother." At
that Eustacia, instead of answering the door as she had intended, waits in order to give Clym and his mother a chance to be alone for a few minutes. Then, to her horror, she finds that Clym, half awakened by the knocking, has merely turned over, uttered the single word in a dream, and slept on. Mrs. Yeobright is gone.\textsuperscript{13}

As Hardy relates this incident, it gives a powerful, even eerie, impression of malignant fate cutting down human values. Everyone, with the best intentions, is deceived by circumstances, and the affair has serious consequences in leading to an estrangement between Clym and Eustacia. It is typical of Hardy's view that man is a being caught in the wheels of uncontrollable forces.\textsuperscript{14} At the lower levels of his existence, he may remain so unaware of his predicament that he can feel some temporary enjoyment of life; but as soon as he evolves into a fully intelligent creature, he can regard life as nothing more than an experience to be endured.\textsuperscript{15} Despair varies directly as intelligence, and man's existence becomes a conflict between the blind will-to-live and the conscious will-not-to-live. Though the will-to-live, the instinctive tool of the life force, has thus far prevailed in most people, the intellect is gaining ground as man becomes more aware of his dilemma, and will ultimately win. Life will deny itself. Here, for example, is part of Hardy's description of Clym Yeobright:

\begin{quote}
In Clym Yeobright's face could be dimly seen the typical countenance of the future . . . . The view of life as a thing to be put up with, replacing that zest for existence which was so intense in early civilizations, must ultimately enter so thoroughly into the constitutions of the advanced races that its facial expression will become accepted as a new artistic departure . . . .

The truth seems to be that a long line of disillusive centuries has permanently displaced the Hellenic idea of life . . . . That old-fashioned revelling in the
general situation grows less and less possible as we uncover the defects of natural laws, and see the quandary that man is in by their operation.\textsuperscript{14}

This pessimism of Hardy’s is unrelieved even by the small qualification which Schopenhauer makes: the possible sublimation of the will in the disinterested contemplation of beauty or its denial in a life of asceticism. In Hardy the panorama of evolution and the ceaseless surge of the life force inspire only the reflections that happiness is but an occasional episode in the general drama of pain, and that wisdom to do comes only when there is no longer zest for doing.

Though it has been said many times that the literature of the twentieth century is predominantly pessimistic, much of it should more accurately be called disillusioned. The partial breakdown of the capitalistic system and the occurrence within thirty years of two world wars, a serious depression, and the discovery of unimagined instruments of destruction have been enough to disillusion any era. Many writers have emphasized the sordid evils of industrial society, the maladjustments of man in the machine age, the petty materialism of modern life, and the unsuspected monsters which Freudian psychology has revealed as lurking in the subconscious mind. But the fact that the world has fallen into trouble, though it may lead to pessimism, does not necessarily do so. Philosophic optimism or pessimism should be independent of place or time, above the vicissitudes of an individual or an era, concerned only with the fate of human values in the universe as a whole. From the books which have attempted to take this point of view, we may conclude our discussion by observing three contrasting examples.

The first is Eugene O’Neill’s play \textit{The Hairy Ape}, published in 1922, which is sometimes regarded as a left-wing production on the struggle between labor and capital, but
which has much wider implications. Employing a series of brief contrasting scenes, filled with symbolic and expressionistic stage devices, it is unusually effective in arousing the emotions of an audience. Though it contains some incoherence and some obscure symbolism, it succeeds in portraying one aspect of what Joseph Wood Krutch called the modern temper. Modern man, according to Krutch, has evolved too far beyond the natural world ever to be satisfied to return to the relative security of nature, but at the same time has discovered no welcome in the universe for his new, typically human values. He is therefore caught in the dilemma of having to relinquish those values or perish. In the concrete, symbolic language of literature *The Hairy Ape* expresses this idea with clarity.

Its chief character, Yank, is a physically powerful, uneducated, but intelligent stoker on a transatlantic liner. The story relates how, uprooted from a complacent satisfaction in his job, he is driven on a quest for the meaning of his life and falls into a state of more and more pathetic bewilderment. At first he is proud of his strength, contented because he is doing an important job better than anyone else could do it. It is he who makes the ship go, he who is the power behind the steel. Without him the great engines would be inert and helpless. But when a supercilious heiress, daughter of a steel magnate, descends to the stokehole on a slumming expedition and looks at Yank with a face of terrified loathing as if he were a hairy ape in the zoo, his complacency is so shaken that he cannot rest until he finds out where he really belongs among human beings. In the scenes that follow he is ignored or discarded by various classes of society, repeatedly called an ape, and imprisoned by steel instead of being its master. In desperation he finally visits the zoo to see this gorilla of which he reminds everyone, and is killed by the ape which he has himself released from its cage. If he ever belongs anywhere, it is only in death.
It is at first tempting to interpret the play as an allegory of labor ground down by the machine age. The fact that Yank is a proletarian treated with contempt by the sneering rich girl, and the constant use of references to steel as a symbol of the whole industrial system which turns out to be Yank's master, lend force to this interpretation. On the other hand, two pieces of evidence show that O'Neill's intention was not to make the play one concerned primarily with class conflict.

The first is that Yank never participates in that conflict, and is prevented from doing so on the one occasion when he tries to. The character of Long, the communist stoker, is introduced to show how far Yank is from feeling class hatred. For Long's soapbox orations against the "Blarsted capitalists" Yank has at first nothing but contempt. When Long points out that the rich girl's attitude is typical of her class and then shows Yank the parade of overdressed, pasty-faced idle rich coming from church on Fifth Avenue, he is momentarily won over to class consciousness and sets out to join the IWW and blow up the steel works. His naive violence defeats itself, however; the IWW secretary takes him for an inept labor spy and has him ejected. Thus he is denied a place in his own class also, and his problem is not that of a laborer fighting capital but that of an individual shut out from human society.

The second evidence of this fact is the characterization of Mildred Douglas, daughter of the steel baron. Though her function in the plot is merely to disillusion Yank by appearing suddenly in the stokehole, her character is developed more fully than is necessary for this purpose. Superficially she is spoiled and unpleasant, intolerably and needlessly rude to the Second Engineer who is escorting her, sarcastic to her aunt, untruthful and tricky, demanding to visit the stokehole for a new thrill to relieve her boredom, flaunting her wealth by refusing to change her white dress because she has fifty others and will throw this one into the sea if it gets dirty. Yet all this is part of a defensive pose, a rather pathetic reaction
against a world in which she feels out of place. Underneath it she has a groping sincerity which she lacks the energy to carry out in action. The intense competition in which her father and grandfather engaged to make their millions has sapped the vitality of the stock, and she is burned out by the blast furnaces, "a waste product in the Bessemer process." If he had been writing a leftist play, O'Neill would hardly have taken such pains to show Mildred's complex motives. He is showing rather that Yank's maladjustment permeates all degrees of society, that rich and poor alike are lost in the world, and that, whether apelike or apathetic, they are all seeking vainly for a place to belong.

In the final scene, when Yank talks to the ape itself, the meaning of the play is revealed: (there is no satisfying place for man in the universe, either in the world of nature or in his own human society.) Inarticulate and unaccustomed to expressing himself, Yank feels this idea dimly but is long unable to put it into words. As he talks to the ape his mind gradually clears, the words come to him, and he realizes for the first time the full extent of the dilemma. The ape is lucky, he says, because he can't think or talk or look into the past or worry about the future. Yank pretends to think and talk, and almost succeeds—almost but not quite. That is the joker in the whole business. And then he says the words which at last reach the heart of the matter, all the more effectively because of the crudeness of the expression. "I ain't on oith and I ain't in heaven, get me? I'm in de middle tryin' to separate 'em, takin' all de woist punches from bot' of 'em." 16 Slowly and painfully man has worked himself up from the ape, searching for a life that will have in it values the ape can never know. In doing so he has cut himself off from the world of nature and cast aside the security furnished by unthinking adaptation to nature's pattern. He can never again find satisfaction in returning to the animal level. But in the process he not only has failed to reach a fully human
existence, but has created tensions and maladjustments which will forever thwart his determination to become completely human. He is caught in the middle, and there is no place for his values anywhere. Logically enough, Yank is killed by the ape: (vainly aspiring man is destroyed by the nature that he has unsuccessfully tried to transcend.)

This first example of the twentieth-century point of view is a symbolic expression of pessimism. The other two are somewhat more complicated and introspective. Instead of affirming a single point of view, they inquire into the causes of modern pessimism, estimate its good or evil effects on individuals who are exposed to it, and study the bases which our contemporaries have for finding meaning or lack of meaning in life. By coincidence these two novels were both written just before and at the opening of World War I, and both published in 1915. One is Joseph Conrad's Victory, the other Somerset Maugham's Of Human Bondage. Both will repay many careful readings.

Anyone's first reaction to Conrad's novel may well be, "Where is the victory?" The story ends with a slaughter as wholesale as that in an Elizabethan tragedy. With one minor exception every character dies by murder, suicide, or accident, and the final quiet verdict is that there was nothing to be done about it. Whether faithful or treacherous, sympathetic or malignant, all are destroyed impartially by the situation into which they have been drawn. It is a conclusion to incite pessimism; yet somehow it does not do so. Though a reader may be left breathless and emotionally exhausted, he is not depressed, nor does he feel that the highest human values have been ruled out of the universe. For this there are two reasons. One is that, however subtle and ironic a form it may take, the victory really is there. The other is the interesting fact that one of the causes of the catastrophe is pessimism itself.

It is a habit of Conrad's to combine victory and defeat
are particularly striving, but in the process gain something else that is quite unexpected. So it is with Axel Heyst and Lena, the two main characters of *Victory*. Heyst is a well-to-do, highly educated, urbane man who, for reasons we shall see later, sets out to live a life independent of the world, wanders aimlessly for a time, and then settles down alone on the little island of Samburan. Lena, a child of the streets and product of a broken home, is a player in a cheap traveling orchestra which happens to be performing in Sourabaya at a time when Heyst is there. Observing that Lena is being harshly abused by her employers, Heyst allows his human sympathy to counterbalance his determination to remain aloof from everyone, and breaks his resolution by taking Lena with him to Samburan. The elopement engenders malicious gossip about Heyst, and leads to a further invasion of his independence when a gang of scoundrels land on the island in search of the fabulous treasure which they have been told Heyst is guarding there. When the unarmed Heyst can neither eject them nor convince them of their mistake, Lena has the opportunity she has craved—to demonstrate her gratitude and win Heyst's full affection. Having succeeded in estranging the bandits from each other, she is on the point of securing the weapon which will win the game when she is killed because of Heyst's innocent and accidental revelation of her presence. Before dying, she succeeds in removing the faint doubt of her trustworthiness which Heyst has never quite banished from his mind.

In this situation, let us sift out the respective victory and defeat. What Lena wants most is to be of some real use to the self-contained Heyst, to live with him on the island in complete mutual confidence. In attempting to bring this about, she loses her life. But at the last moment she succeeds in overcoming his doubt and aloofness, and dies knowing that he has given her his absolute trust, that there is no longer a barrier between them. What happens to Heyst is similarly equivocal. His aim is to live detached from the world. When
his emotions overcome his decision, this aim is defeated; the world invades his detachment and destroys his life on the island. But likewise at the last moment, he perceives that his ideal of aloofness has been a false one, and that the giving of his unqualified trust to another person is a source of happiness of which he has never dreamed. We should note that there is a surprising element of philosophic optimism in this ending. Whereas the defeats are physical or anti-human (death and the frustrated desire to escape from society), the victories involve the particularly human values of generosity, trustworthiness, and mutual faith. In the world which Conrad creates, these values are victorious.

This is the first reason for not calling so sombre a story pessimistic. The second one follows from the careful background that Conrad builds up for his hero. The principal aim of Heyst's life is to avoid human contacts, to wander from place to place without striking roots, to remain always independent of mankind. What could impel a person to plan and carry out such a program? In Heyst's case it is the influence of his father, the only close companion he has ever had. Through his son's recollections, the portrait in the cabin, and excerpts from his books, Conrad clearly portrays the elder Heyst, a pessimistic philosopher whose ideas have a general resemblance to Schopenhauer's. The three years of his 'teens during which Heyst lived with his father influenced permanently his attitude toward life. With pitying scorn for the fate of mankind, but a stern affection for his son, the old philosopher taught him too early in life how the nature of the universe robs man of both hope and dignity. "Man on this earth is an unforeseen accident," he said, "which does not stand close investigation." Comparing the world to a factory and mankind to workmen in it, he pointed out that they are all paid in counterfeit money. He showed that human beings have developed values which the universe always frustrates, and that the character of the world by any human standard
is infamous. "It excuses every violence of protest and at the same time never fails to crush it, just as it crushes the blindest assent." Accordingly he advised his son to avoid some of the worst tortures of life by keeping aloof from it, to mistrust all action and every human tie, to expect nothing and never yield to the temptation of entering the stream of life. Heyst's life, therefore, is directly conditioned by the philosophy of pessimism.

What is the result? After following his father's advice for several years, Heyst eventually infringes it because his sympathy with people in trouble is too deep to let him ignore them. At once he is caught in the human entanglements from which his father had tried to save him. And the important fact is that the kind of life he has led makes him particularly unfitted to meet the emergency. If he had had the normal experience that develops knowledge of human nature, if he had learned by trial and error to distinguish between those who can be trusted and those who cannot, then he might have won the game. But he had always assumed that he should trust no one at all, and expect nothing from life. The philosophy of pessimism keeps him from giving to Lena the confidence that his emotions prompt him to feel; his nerve centers are so anesthetized by the habit of distrust that at the moment of crisis he does nothing and has no faith in Lena. When he becomes fully aware of this fact, he can no longer live. Just before his suicide he exclaims in anguish, "Woe to the man whose heart has not learned while young to hope, to love—and to put its trust in life!"

This paradox may symbolize one phase of the twentieth century's heritage from the pessimism of the nineteenth. We have been warned not to expect too much, not to trust a universe which will certainly frustrate us. The present age learned that lesson so well that it was almost paralyzed when the crisis came. The detachment of Heyst bears a real resemblance to the pre-war isolationism of America. Neither could
maintain it, but both were rendered less able to survive because of it. Thus pessimism generates further and deeper pessimism by undermining the ability of an organism to adapt itself to circumstances. And from this point of view Conrad's tragic novel is a penetrating analysis of the evil effects of that philosophy.

Having said this, however, we are confronted by another paradox. Though Conrad demonstrates the enervating effect of pessimism, he does not deny its truth. Throughout the novel his attitude is that of a double negative rather than an affirmative. Heyst says, woe to the man who does not trust in life. He never says, fortunate is the man who does trust in life. And this cautious and tentative attitude is evidence of the depth to which mistrust of life has penetrated modern thinking. Though Conrad's novel is a more complete and profound analysis than O'Neill's play, it is permeated by the same modern temper which feels that man's despair is rendered more deadly by the very fact that he is conscious of the paralyzing effect which despair has on his adaptive power.

Still another aspect of this complex twentieth-century philosophy appears in Maugham's novel Of Human Bondage. Though it is generally regarded as a pessimistic book, it only partially deserves the label. Its picture of the changing fortunes and opinions of a modern man is marked by philosophic breadth and inclusiveness, and by a notable endeavor to avoid a dogmatic attitude. Perhaps it is significant that Maugham borrowed his title from the fourth book of Spinoza's Ethic, where bondage means slavery to the emotions, and that this is followed by a fifth book called "Of Human Liberty," which means the freedom of the intellect to rescue man from the passions. By analyzing the bondage, Maugham is exercising the freedom. That he is in fact portraying his own personal experiences appears from his account of its writing in his book of memoirs called The Summing Up.
Philip Carey, the hero of *Of Human Bondage*, is a kind of Everyman. On many a page the reader has an uneasy sense that Philip is himself, and wonders how Maugham can know so much of how he feels. In intensified form Philip's emotions are identical with those which most young persons assume are unique in themselves, just as Philip is sure he is different from everyone else. Many people have found the puncturing of this delusion to be one real value of reading the book. It is at the same time disturbing and comforting because we are so close to it. Instead of the imaginative effort required to put ourselves in the place of a brawny stoker or a detached wanderer in the South Seas, we find no difficulty in reliving Philip Carey's life.

The universality of Philip's character appears especially in his sensitiveness, his naivety, and his romantic ideals, three traits of which most people possess more than they admit to themselves. Philip starts life with the handicap of a club-foot. Serious as this is, the real difficulty is not the lameness itself so much as its psychological effect in making him feel different from others and sure that others are always talking about him and ridiculing him. Everyone has this feeling to some degree: he is too tall or too short, too fat or too thin, he has protruding ears or a speech defect, and it is obvious that the world talks about nothing else. Philip unconsciously compensates for this blemish by adopting the pose of a martyr and extracting morbid pleasure from inflicting pain on himself. He finds escape also in reading numerous romantic novels, preferably those beginning with two solitary travelers skirting a dangerous chasm, and naively expects the events of his life to correspond to these romantic situations. When they do not, he is disillusioned, as the rest of us are. All together he is a normal, if prolonged, adolescent.

Disillusionments and exploded ideals, if frequent and severe, may lead to real pessimism; and so they do with...
Philip. He possesses a set of values which he sees disappear one by one, and eventually comes to feel that the world has no place for human values. This process we may illustrate briefly, to show again its universal human character. An early ideal to disappear is that of friendship. Among the hostile or indifferent boys at his school, one fellow named Rose treats him in comradely fashion. Pathetically grateful, he becomes Rose's chum and anticipates a lifelong brotherhood. Not realizing that Rose is a happy-go-lucky boy who wants to be nice to everyone, Philip grows violently possessive, resents the slightest attention to another, and is desolated by the inevitable collapse of the friendship. His conclusion, of course, is that no friend is to be trusted; and he has lost a value. Another one evaporates when he goes to Paris with romantic notions of the perfection of art and the picturesqueness of bohemian life. The young artists whom he meets laugh at his idealization of Watts and Burne-Jones; in turn their idols of the moment are soon replaced by new fads. No one dresses like a bohemian artist except Americans from the Middle West who have their pictures taken in brown velveteens and basque caps. The artist's life, far from picturesque, is often one of sordid poverty leading to suicide.

Though it takes longer to disillusion Philip with religion, ethics, and philosophy, the process is complete. His first religious doubt comes when, after he prays with naive faith that his club-foot be healed, the miracle does not occur. Then he observes with interest that his clergyman uncle is a selfish and petty man who practices nothing of what he preaches. The real break comes when he is in Heidelberg, where he perceives that a free-thinker can be more kindly and tolerant than a conventional believer, and so casts off all religion with a sense of relief. Though at the time it does not occur to him to question his moral code, that also goes when one of his Paris friends, the hedonist Cronshaw, demonstrates that all ethical systems are relative and man-made, and that indi-
Individual pleasure is the only standard. Later Philip becomes interested in philosophy, tries to formulate a tentative code of his own, and then is doubly disillusioned. The more he reads the more he is convinced that the great philosophers are merely projecting their own temperaments into the universe, and that he may choose at will among them because none is any more true or false than another. Finally, the philosophy that he painfully works out for himself turns out to be useless to him. When he is caught in a crisis of emotion, his reason is helpless to guide him. Instead of following his code, he yields to his passions while despising himself for doing so, and becomes just the sort of victim of his aimlessly striving will that Schopenhauer described most of mankind as being.¹⁹

From these and many other disappointments, Philip acquires a strong conviction of the futility and meaninglessness of life, the typical bases of pessimism. Passing in review one after another of the people he has known, he is struck by the fact that many of them have accomplished nothing either for themselves or for others, and that it does not matter to anyone whether they are alive or dead, or whether they ever lived. This idea is most strongly impressed on him one night at a public dance hall in Paris, where the crowd of dancers suddenly appears to him as hideous and pathetic animals desperately seeking a moment of pleasure to escape from the overwhelming dreariness of their lives.²⁰

Against this cumulative evidence of human futility, Philip persistently searches year after year for a meaning in life. In Paris, Cronshaw sardonically tells him that if he looks carefully at a Persian carpet the meaning of life will be revealed to him. Philip thinks of this occasionally as the years go on, but can make no sense of it until just after the death of one of his friends. As he sits one day in the British Museum, looking at some gracefully carved Greek tombstones, thinking of the uselessness of his friend's life, and watching the hurry-
ing crowd of sightseers, the answer suddenly comes to him: life has no meaning. It may have a pattern just as the Persian rug has; but the pattern, whether simple or intricate, is not functional and has no purpose beyond itself. If so, then all human values and purposes are man-made and have no place in the universe; Philip has reached a philosophically pessimistic conclusion.

It has been asserted that this is the final meaning of the book, but such a conclusion is not confirmed by the evidence. From the form of Maugham's statement of Philip's reaction to the idea, we may infer that it is not the end of his search. In deciding that life is meaningless, says Maugham, "Philip thought . . . he was casting aside the last of his illusions." Yet, though he never abandons the idea, he later comes to interpret it in a new way, and to qualify his conclusion about human values.

The reader should not lose sight of the fact that, while Philip is passing through his disheartening experiences, he is also exposed to another set of influences which counteract them. Sometimes the very values which he seems to have lost forever are revived by some unexpected event. Having decided that friends are not to be trusted, he proceeds to distrust them; after he loses all his money on the stock market and is half starving, he will not appeal for aid to his one friend Thorpe Athelny because he is convinced Athelny will discard him now that he is down and out. To his surprise Athelny, with nothing to gain by it, gives him shelter and helps him find a job. A lost value has mysteriously come to life again. This process, which one might describe as dis- disillusionment, recurs several times. Disappointed in the French art he had followed, Philip awakens to a respect for the idealistic yet powerful art of El Greco. Certain that chance governs man's life and that one's decisions are of no importance, he drifts by chance into a profession which suits him exactly and at which he proves adept; it occurs to him
that, much as he hates to admit it, he may have found the right place for himself in life. Instead of the romantic illusions and depressions of love, he finds in Sally Athelny a woman with whom he can be, not passionately absorbed, but placidly happy. Evidence on the positive side of the picture accumulates.

The final change in Philip comes when he sloughs off the defensive pose that he has unconsciously kept for many years: the pose of self-sacrifice and martyrdom. As in Conrad's novel, this involves both victory and defeat. When Sally tells him that she fears she is pregnant, he decides after a long moral struggle that he will nobly sacrifice all his plans for travel and adventure in order to marry her. Puffed up with this decision, he learns that she is not pregnant after all. No sacrifice is needed. But instead of being relieved, Philip is dismayed. Suddenly it dawns on him that he has been rationalizing all the time, and that he has decided to marry Sally not for noble reasons but because he wants to. The simplest pattern of life, in which a man is born, works, marries, has children, and dies, appears to him to have a value to which he has been blind. To be sure, life has no meaning or purpose external to itself; that he never ceases to believe. But now he feels that it may have an inherent meaning within itself, that the process of living is a self-justifying one. All his life, hedged about by restrictions, he has longed for freedom. Now he finds that, without knowing it, what he has wanted all the time is human bondage.

"It might be," Maugham says of Philip at this point, "that to surrender to happiness was to accept defeat, but it was a defeat better than many victories." Again the approach to a possibility of optimism is tentative and equivocal; yet it comes closer than Conrad's and from a different angle. Matter-of-fact and undogmatic, lucid and relaxed, Maugham's novel has an almost universal appeal. Those who reread it most frequently find it most comforting. The twentieth
century has been too severely buffeted to appreciate the complacency of the eighteenth or the exuberance of the nineteenth. But it has not yet decided that the sum of evil always exceeds the sum of good, or that the nature of reality makes it impossible for human values to maintain and develop themselves.