

## ARTICLE II.—SCHOPENHAUER AND OMAR KHAYYAM.

NOTHING strikes one more forcibly in reading Schopenhauer's philosophy than the splendid consistency of his pessimism. It is rare, indeed, that one finds a writer who has the courage and the candor seriously to elaborate a whole system of thought, logically leading up to the conclusion that the world is absolutely the worst possible. Jonathan Swift was a consistent pessimist, both in his writings and in his life; he regularly kept his birthday as a day of fasting and mourning; but Swift has left no philosophical system. Carlyle often spoke like a pessimist, but his pessimism was not inseparably connected with the order of the world; it sprang simply from a belief that the tendency of the age was bad. A great many writers are pessimists—or think they are—in times of special misfortune, or when absorbed in unusual trains of thought. Lyrical poetry is often pessimistic, because it is so often the outcome of a melancholy mood, or the expression of unsatisfied yearning. In a general acquaintance with Shakspeare's plays, we should never class him as a pessimist; but some of his sonnets are steeped in pessimism. Perhaps there is no one, who has not at some time, for a long or short interval, been a pessimist; who has not keenly felt what the Germans call *Weltschmerz*; but the peculiar characteristic of Schopenhauer is that he is a pessimist in cold blood. His system is just the reverse of that of Carlyle, who cried out against the age and the men of the age, but who believed in a beneficent order of the universe and in the divine potentiality of human nature; it is altogether different from the pessimism of the Book of Ecclesiastes, which recognizes the vanity and suffering of life, but finds the key to the mystery in fearing God and keeping his commandments. Schopenhauer's pessimism is coldly philosophical, one might almost say mathematical. Except in places where he flings mud at the professors of philosophy, his book nowhere sounds like the tone of a disappointed, soured old man; the writer is evidently in calm equipoise, in perfect possession of his wits. We can easily

imagine him seated before a warm fire, with his dressing gown and slippers on, placidly writing off his theory that the world is a mirror of hell ; that life and suffering mean the same thing ; that consciousness is the grand mistake of nature ; that human existence is a tragedy, with the dignity of tragedy taken away. His temperament may be well described in the words of a biographer of John Randolph : " His was a nature that would have made a hell for itself even if fate had put a heaven around it." The relative goodness and badness of men does not affect Schopenhauer's pessimism. He would say that human character has little enough good in it, but even if it had ten times the amount it possesses, it could attain to no more happiness. The world is so constituted as to make existence in it constant pain ; it is but the manifestation of a blind will, which multiplies itself in millions of forms, each one appearing but a short time, and then expiating the crime of its existence by death. It is far better not to be ; before our sad eyes stands only the nothingness from which we came into the light ; and this nothingness must be the goal of our highest endeavor. Schopenhauer's ethical solution is therefore a complete denial of the will to live ; the only way of salvation is to escape from one's self ; in asceticism one finds, not indeed happiness, but a calm contemplation of existence and a worthy preparation for the heaven of Nirvana.

It is interesting to compare Schopenhauer's system and its ethical solution with the philosophy and teaching of Omar Khayyam, the astronomer-poet of Persia. Both men are greater in literature than they are in philosophy. Schopenhauer's poetic style, with its musical sadness, with its flexibility of movement and brilliancy of illustration, with its sparkling wit and its solemn earnestness, makes him one of the greatest of the prose writers of Germany ; and Omar has contrived to clothe his shallow creed in such a garment of poetic beauty, as to make the body within seem infinitely more stately and imposing than it would appear, if stripped of all adornment. Both writers are complete pessimists in their views of the world ; both are fatalists, believing in the absolute despotism of destiny ; both believe that the soul of man departs into the voiceless night from which it came. A comparison of their

writings will show how closely akin they are in their views of the order of the world. Now, with ideas so similar, it is strange enough to notice that their ethical solutions of the problem are diametrically and totally opposed. Schopenhauer says: "You must escape from yourself by asceticism, by denying the will to live." Omar says, "You must escape from yourself by plunging recklessly into the pleasures of life."

Both Schopenhauer and Omar Khayyam were able to lead independent intellectual lives; each had a sufficient income, which left him free to devote his time to thought. This was probably a misfortune in the case of both men. As many a man is an atheist with a brilliant book in his hand, and a theist as soon as he mingles with others in the active work of life—so men are pessimists in solitary hours when they contemplate the stage of life, and witness what appears to be a great tragedy enacted; it is only when one lives his individual life in contact with others that his pessimism forsakes him, and his life assumes some significance and importance.

Omar Khayyam was born in the latter half of the eleventh century, and the story of his life reads like a romance. When a youth, he agreed with his two most intimate friends, that whichever of them became rich should divide his property equally with the others. One of them became Vizier, and Omar asked simply for a competence, that he might spend his life in intellectual pursuits. His friend did not turn from him in scorn, as we might expect from the romantic consistency of the narrative thus far, but cheerfully granted his modest request; and Omar became a devotee of science and philosophy, giving special attention to astronomy, in which he became the foremost scholar of his time. He must have been a man who took the keenest delight in the intellectual life; yet we find his philosophy simply a poetic version of "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die." This is what he says of his early life:

"Myself when young did eagerly frequent  
 Doctor and Saint, and heard great argument  
 About it and about: but evermore  
 Came out by the same door wherein I went.

With them the seed of wisdom did I sow,  
 And with my own hand wrought to make it grow:  
 And this was all the harvest that I reaped—  
 'I came like water, and like wind I go.'

He seems to have been utterly baffled by the ultimate mysteries of life; to have lost heart before the great enigmas he could not solve, and so to have fled away from himself and from his torturing doubts into a life of gross and sensual pleasure. Perhaps, however, he did this only on paper; as Schopenhauer was a saint only in print. Schopenhauer condemns sensual pleasure.

“He shows the steep and thorny way to heaven,  
Whiles, like a puffed and reckless libertine,  
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads,  
And recks not his own rede.”

So Omar, while telling us that the *summum bonum* is wine and women, may have lived a severely intellectual life.

The three questions which every thoughtful man asks, What am I? Why am I? Where am I going? were ones to which Omar could find no answer.

“Into this universe, and why not knowing,  
Nor whence, like water willy-nilly flowing;  
And out of it, as wind along the waste,  
I know not whither, willy-nilly blowing.

“Yesterday this day’s madness did prepare;  
To-morrow’s silence, triumph, or despair:  
Drink! for you know not whence you came, nor why;  
Drink! for you know not why you go, nor where.”

His philosophy amounts to this: We find ourselves in a world full of physical delights, but which is a complete enigma. By the highest part of our nature we are driven to questionings, which lead us into the darkness and leave us there. When we begin to ask about our origin and destiny, we find we can know absolutely nothing; the past and the future are both blanks; all we know is that the life we enjoy now is short; that we have opportunities for positive pleasure of the senses; these must be seized to-day, or lost perhaps forever. The wise man will grasp them while he has the power, instead of laying up treasures in an impossible heaven beyond the grave.

To a mind whose religious faith has never been shaken, such a doctrine as Omar’s seems utterly contemptible and inexplicable, coming from so profound a scholar; one must have tasted for himself the bitterness of skepticism, before he can

have any charity for the Persian poet. Let us glance for a moment at Schopenhauer's picture of life, to compare it with Omar's :

“It is really incredible how meaningless and void of significance when looked at from without, how dull and unenlightened by intellect when felt from within, is the course of the life of the great majority of men. Every individual, every human being and his course of life, is but another short dream of the endless spirit of nature, of the persistent will to live ; is only another fleeting form, which it carelessly sketches on its infinite page, space and time. And yet, and here lies the serious side of life, every one of these fleeting forms, these empty fancies, must be paid for by the whole will to live, in all its activity, with many and deep sufferings, and finally with a bitter death, long feared and coming at last. This is why the sight of a corpse makes us suddenly so serious.”

Omar says :

“The worldly hope men set their hearts upon  
Turns ashes—or it prospers ; and anon,  
Like snow upon the desert's dusty face,  
Lighting a little hour or two, is gone.

For some we loved, the loveliest and the best  
That from his vintage rolling time has prest,  
Have drunk their cup a round or two before,  
And one by one crept silently to rest.

Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,  
Before we too into the dust descend ;  
Dust into dust, and under dust, to lie,  
Sans wine, sans song, sans singer and sans end !

Yet ah, that spring should vanish with the rose !  
That youth's sweet-scented manuscript should close !  
The nightingale that in the branches sang  
Ah whence, and whither flown again, who knows !

Ah Love ! could you and I with Him conspire  
To grasp this sorry scheme of things entire,  
Would not we shatter it to bits—and then  
Remould it nearer to the heart's desire !”

This view of life, looking upon it as a vain, empty dream, is something like the position taken by the melancholy Jacques in Shakspeare's “As you like it.”

Schopenhauer regards the individual as of little or no consequence, being merely a perishable form of the manifestation of

the eternal Will in nature, the latter alone being immortal. Compare this with what Omar says :

“ Why, if the soul can fling the dust aside,  
 And naked on the air of heaven ride,  
 Were 't not a shame—were 't not a shame for him  
 In this clay carcase crippled to abide ?  
 'Tis but a tent, where takes his one-day's rest  
 A Sultan to the realm of death address ;  
 The Sultan rises, and the dark Ferrásh  
 Strikes, and prepares it for another guest.  
 And fear not lest Existence closing your  
 Account, and mine, should know the like no more ;  
 The Eternal Sáki from that bowl has poured  
 Millions of bubbles like us, and will pour.”

Both writers are thus pessimists in their view of the world ; it is a puppet-show where each figure is moved by an unseen hand, though thinking all the time that it has some individual importance. Schopenhauer says life is a soap-bubble, “ which we blow out as long and as large as possible, although we know perfectly well that it will burst.”

Both are absolute fatalists ; each believes in some force which is the ground of the world of things, and which works itself out regardless of the human race ; blind and deaf to all human cries of agony and pain ; inevitable and inexorable ; of which man is but the plaything. Fatalism rules the world and the actions of men ; and why keep pressing upon ourselves questions we cannot answer, and which always plunge us into despair ? Why struggle childishly when bound with chains ? Why trouble ourselves with conscience, when we are nothing but clay in the hands of the potter ?

Listen to Schopenhauer :

“ It holds good of inward as of outward circumstances that there is for us no consolation so effective as the complete certainty of unalterable necessity. No evil that befalls us pains us so much as the thought of the circumstances by which it might have been warded off. Therefore nothing comforts us so effectually as the consideration of what has happened from the standpoint of necessity, from which all accidents appear as tools in the hand of an over-ruling fate, and we therefore recognize the evil that has come to us as inevitably produced by the conflict of inner and outer circumstances ; in other words, fatalism.”

Compare this with Omar :

“ We are no other than a moving row  
Of magic shadow-shapes that come and go  
Round with this sun-illuminated lantern held  
In midnight by the Master of the show ;

Impotent pieces of the game he plays  
Upon this chequer-board of nights and days ;  
Hither and thither moves, and checks, and slays,  
And one by one back in the closet lays.

The moving finger writes ; and, having writ,  
Moves on ; nor all your piety and wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,  
Nor all your tears wash out a word of it.

And that inverted bowl they call the sky,  
Where under, crawling, cooped, we live and die,  
Lift not your hands to *It* for help—for *It*  
As impotently rolls as you or I.”

Up to this point, we have found the views of both philosophers very similar ; but upon coming to their ethical solution, to their practical teaching as a result of their theory, we find them as far apart as the east is from the west.

Schopenhauer says the problem is to escape from personality, from self-hood, from the domination of will ; and strangely enough he makes this retreat possible only through the intellect, by means of that very consciousness which he says is the mistake of our being ; men of genius are freed at intervals from the will, because of the high order of their intellects, which permits them to be lost in æsthetic contemplation of the Universals, the Platonic Ideas ; to attain to this state of blessedness, all willing and striving for pleasure must be absolutely abandoned ; it is only as one contemplates himself in the third person that he finds any respite from suffering. The wise man will cut off everything that connects him with the world, will resolutely sacrifice all his longings for happiness, and by the example of saints and martyrs, will endeavor to become as unworldly and impersonal as they. This is the way of salvation according to Schopenhauer ; this is the only plan to overcome the world.

Omar would have us do something quite the opposite of this ; in fact, it is just this ascetic principle which he condemns. He

wishes also to escape from self, but in a different sense ; it is to escape from self-introspection, from philosophic meditation, from the subjective life. No answer but a pessimistic one can be given to those questions which the human mind is forever most eagerly asking. Increase of knowledge increaseth sorrow. Why throw away our little space of time, by spending it in sorrowful, anxious pursuit of abstractions that always elude our grasp ? the positive pleasures of life are before us. To see the difference between the teaching of these two pessimists, let us compare two selections.

First, from Schopenhauer :

“ True salvation, deliverance from life and suffering, cannot even be imagined without complete denial of the will. . . . If we turn our glance from our own needy and embarrassed condition to those who have overcome the world, in whom the will, having attained to perfect self-knowledge, found itself again in all, and then freely denied itself and who then merely wait to see the last trace of it vanish with the body which it animates ; then, instead of the restless striving and effort, instead of the constant transition from wish to fruition, and from joy to sorrow, instead of the never-satisfied and never-dying hope which constitutes the life of the man who wills, we shall see that peace which is above all reason, that perfect calm of the spirit, that deep rest, that inviolable confidence and serenity, the mere reflection of which in the countenance, as Raphael and Correggio have represented it, is an entire and certain gospel ; only knowledge remains, the will has vanished.”

Omar's teaching is as follows :

“ You know, my friends, with what a brave carouse  
I made a second marriage in my house ;

Divorced old barren Reason from my bed,  
And took the daughter of the Vine to spouse.

Why, be this juice the growth of God, who dare  
Blaspheme the twisted tendril as a snare ?

A blessing, we should use it, should we not ?  
And if a curse, why, then, who set it there ?

I must abjure the balm of life, I must,  
Scared by some after-reckoning ta'en on trust,  
Or lured with hope of some diviner drink  
To fill the cup—when crumbled into dust !

Oh threats of Hell and hopes of Paradise !  
One thing at least is certain—*this* life flies ;  
One thing is certain and the rest is lies ;  
The flower that once has blown forever dies.



Come, fill the cup and in the fire of spring  
 Your winter-garment of repentance fling ;  
 The bird of time has but a little way  
 To flutter—and the bird is on the wing."

The German's way of salvation is from the will to the intellect ; the Persian's is from the intellect to the will.

Schopenhauer's ethical teaching is greater and grander than Omar's, but neither of them is at all sufficient to meet the needs of human life. Both these extreme doctrines we find represented in the life of Faust as portrayed by Goethe ; and the folly of each course is clearly shown. Faust leads first the life of an ascetic ; it results in a bitter self-inquisition, which very nearly terminates in suicide ; to escape from himself, he then plunges into sensual pleasure, which leads him into crime, and results in the deepest anguish he has yet known. Faust finds the key to the significance of life only in faith in God and in unselfish love for his fellow-men, which is exactly the teaching of Christianity. The outcome of absolute pessimism can never be anything which shall result in a rational or noble method of action. Schopenhauer is as wide of the truth as Omar ; there is no more virtue and goodness in simple asceticism than there is in unrestrained pursuit of pleasure. The teaching of both philosophers becomes an absurdity. A man who keeps his faith in a Divine Intelligence over all the mystery and misery of life, can give us an ethical system which has some foundation ; but a pessimist who looks on life as Omar Khayyam or Schopenhauer regarded it, can never give us any moral teaching which shall cause those chords to vibrate in us, which we recognize as the highest and the purest. Christianity touches them all.

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