

DESPAIR

By PAUL EDWARDS

FOREWORD. The people who live with me are patiently aware that I am moody and pessimistic. But I am not commonly given to despair. Then how write an article on the subject? The obvious answer seemed to be to look in the literary works – and they are many – in which the experience is described. For the reasons given below I found that approach invalid.

In despair (!) I searched in the obscurer corners and more turbid depths of my own mind and let my imagination do its worst with what it found there.

Do not expect the results to be attractive. Do not presume them autobiographical. And please do not take as my considered opinion what I plainly state to be the point of view of the despairing.

WITH A FEW pints of midnight oil, the run of a decent library and a more than common talent for selection, it would not be very difficult to knock together a dissertation on 'Despair in the world's literature'. Selecting would be the most ticklish part. Without it one would be pushing hopefully – and before long, despairingly – through most of the literature that exists. One could start with the Epic of Gilgamesh (third millenium B.C.) quoting the comprehensive curses from Enkidu's death bed or Gilgamesh's own lament when he lost the plant of life and his hopes of avoiding the same fate as Enkidu. If with heroic continence one were to keep only to english literature, one would have to start at the very beginning and cite the bleak lay of the *Seafarer* and the almost equally dismal lines of the *Wanderer*.

I used to imagine the anglo-saxon minstrel, adequately primed with mead, chanting lustily about some first class county battle to an audience of sturdy, hearty, wholly extroverted thanes, full of swine-flesh and strong drink and ready for a singsong. Apparently not . . .

. . . Sitting day-long

at an oar's end clenched against clinging sorrow,
breast-drought I have borne and bitterness too.

I have coursed my keel through care-halls without end . . .

and

When each gladness has gone, gathering sorrow
may cloud the brain; and in his breast a man
cannot then see how his sorrows shall end.

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A bit on the sombre side for the festive board, you feel? Yet that sort of thing seems to have been at the top of the charts with our anglo-saxon and jutish immigrants. Meanwhile, the former residents, the celts, were moving out to the highland suburbs or across the sea to Ireland where they entertained themselves with the gay strains of 'The Death of Cuchulain' and 'Deirdre of the Sorrows'.

If you have read less paperbacks than I have, I can only ask you to take my word for it that there's an awful lot of despairing in literature. Not only in the romantics you learned at school – e.g. 'where but to think is to be full of sorrow and leaden-eyed despairs' – but equally in the earliest literature and in twentieth century productions. T. S. Eliot and A. E. Housman are highly quotable here – and will not be quoted. Sartre and Kafka are much to my purpose. Perhaps pride of place goes to Orwell's picture of the future – a boot stamping on a human face . . . for ever!

I am really very disrespectful. My unceremonious style is lacking in respect for great literature, for the theological solemnity of this present publication and, worst of all, for you, its worthy and discriminating reader. And let that be your first lesson about despair . . . It isn't nice. We who despair are necessarily beyond caring what impression we make on you. If we bother to express ourselves we shall do it how we wish. If nothing matters, you and your opinions certainly don't.

And all that literature of despair is phoney. Take the *Sonnets of Desolation* written by the scruple-ridden Hopkins. 'Time's eunuch' he calls himself and bemoans the fact that he could not 'breed one work that wakes'. The eunuch had enough creative urge and indulged it vigorously enough to beget a fine litter of sonnets healthy enough to outlive himself. 'No worst there is none, pitched past pitch of grief'. Either he didn't know what he was talking about, or he was posing. Real grief is often dumb. You don't feel much like putting it into 'sprung rhythm'. Or if grief lets go, you have an uncontrolled, indeed uncontrollable, outburst, not the tightly disciplined, highly sophisticated construction of sonnets.

Tragedy, you don't need me to point out, is sheer make-believe. People doll themselves up in fancy dress, which is always fun, improve their appearance – very necessarily – with grease paint, turn on powerful lights lest we miss the slightest detail, and strut about making solemn, sonorous, cultivated noises. And they enjoy every minute of it. If it is a success, the audience is deeply moved, has its supper and goes to bed all the more contented for having

watched a good tragedy. The theatre takes human misery and, quite literally, makes an entertainment out of it. If there were any sanctity about the human condition, tragedy would be blasphemous. By all means enjoy your Sophocles, your Shakespeare and your Brecht: but don't ask us to see any connection between your entertainment and our despair. Drama is playacting, is make believe, is a game. And the despairing get very little fun out of games, as we drag ourselves through the game of life, where our opponent is also the referee and fouls us as often as it suits him, and frequently awards himself penalties against us while our only wish is to be sent off the field.

So if you want to know about despair – and why you should want to hurry on an unpalatable lesson which life is all too likely to teach you itself, I don't know – turn a deaf ear to all poets, dramatists and novelists. Instead, listen to the abandoned wailing of a child that cannot find its mother, monotonous, inexhaustible, bitter and endless. Not the stuff to compose odes from. But some of us have had our lives botchily tailored from it by the prentice hand of fate.

To the simple imagination of Bunyan, Despair was a giant, big and crudely violent. To me despair is more like disease, not *a* disease, but disease. Disease is but a general term to cover an infinitude of physical afflictions, which vary in their gravity, their painfulness, the area of their attack. Despair, I think, is similarly a general word for many disorders of the spirit, also differing in the gravity, in the quality of the pain they bring and in the area of the spirit which they afflict. Or perhaps blight might be a better name than disease. Yet this misleads because it suggests an attack from an outside agent; whereas despair often springs from the organism itself.

Recently someone (whom God preserve from the faintest touch of despair) presented me with seven handsome roses on tall stems. They were more than rose buds, but their full bloom was yet to come. It never came. Somehow the tall stems refused the water of the vase. The glossy green leaves curled and drooped. The petals darkened and sagged. My roses were dead, their promise thwarted. My disappointment was mild, for the plants still witnessed to a friend's affectionate generosity.

But spare a thought, gentle reader, for the many people the buds of whose hopes so rarely come to flower. Hope is a natural condition. The young man – I dare not speculate about despair in women – looks forward to fulfilment. Even the most neurotically diffident cherishes a secret, obstinate hope that he may one day

prove to be special and become the object of admiration. And life rarely lets the buds come near to flowering.

I have spent years working in a school. Nothing, I sometimes feel, is so evident in the educational system as the ubiquity of failure. At the age of eleven, four out of five of the local primary school children fail their 'eleven plus'. Into our school swarm more than a hundred of the successful, those who are going to have a grammar school education, to take the General Certificate of Education, perhaps to go to the university and on to heights but mistily imagined. By the end of the first year it is plain that many will never cope with this kind of study. By 'O level' time, half of them have learned surprisingly little. This leaves the other half, conscious of belonging to an elite of survivors, ready to battle their way with notebook and ballpoint into the university. About half succeed. Then to my exasperation they largely fade from one's sight. I know that there are some further failures at the university (ten per cent?) and far too many nervous breakdowns. The majority will obtain degrees i.e. twenty per cent of our intake, which was twenty per cent of their age group. Success is for the few.

More horrible to relate, conspicuous success so often turns to striking failure. Our brightest boys, or most 'promising' boys, their 'Oxbridge' awards certifying their high calibre and fitness for great things, leave amid gratifying congratulations and expectations; and three or four years later some of them are no more than good conversationalists, not at all competent to cope with the world, only able to discuss it gracefully. I have seen this so frequently that I often view our most 'promising' boys with mild horror. Are we rearing another attractive cygnet to have it turn into an ugly land-bound duck?

I often wonder whether there is such a thing as success in life. I think that we all fail at different levels. John fails to get his eleven plus; Peter fails to get his professorial chair and is the more disappointed of the two. Patrick fails to get made a foreman. James becomes Prime Minister, cannot solve the country's intractable problems and loses the next election, or is manoeuvred out of office by the friends and comrades he formerly led. Perhaps they are more fortunate who learn to live with failure from the beginning. A reluctant honesty compels me to admit that some illustrious men have died with their laurels untarnished and their worth generally acclaimed. But how few they are. For most of us failure is as sure as death or taxes.

And how real is success? I have sipped it but rarely, and then only in its most dilute forms, and am in no position to comment. But of the men that I have known at close quarters, the most gifted and the most successful are, in their denunciations of life, respectively the most bitter and the loudest. Am I equating disappointment with despair? I classify it as one form of despair because it may turn expectation into unappeasable privation.

Our system of education seems geared to proving to most of our children that they are failures. The 'formation' in a religious order can be even more demoralizing. With splendid optimism the novices are told that they must aim at 'perfection', that it is God's will that they should all be saints, that the 'graces' are there if they will only 'cooperate'. I wish that these novicemasters and instructors would take one honest look round and ask themselves how many saints their province contained at the last census. Do they really think that the present batch of novices is going to turn out differently? They won't. And is this because they will all have failed to 'cooperate with grace'? A nice thought for them all to live with for the rest of their dedicated lives!

I am reminded of the time when as a small boy I was frightened to go down our backyard in the dark. An aunt said firmly, 'Only bad people are afraid of the dark'. After that I knew I was not only a coward, but also bad. The glib phrases about perfection and sanctity demoralize in the same way. Conscious of our very evident lack of sainthood, we know that we are failures, and that it is all our fault. Our vocation to sanctity has died on us through our own neglect – so we are given to understand. It is the more ardent, the more imaginatively responsive to the expectation of sanctity who are the most damaged by the erosion of their hopes. The condition is plainly irremediable; the failure permanent. We can only evade the bitter sense of our loss by ridding ourselves of the original vision. The only anodyne for despair is to forget entirely what we had once hoped for. There is no healing; only amputation.

This cloister blight may attack not so much the hopes of building a solid spiritual edifice to the glory of God out of one's own life, as the hopes that the religious has in his own order as a whole. At the beginning he was taught that his order was a great instrument for sanctification, for sanctifying its members, for sanctifying the world through its members, his own sanctification being but a detail in a magnificent whole, a single building in a great suburb of the City of God, which his order was under contract to build.

He may come to wonder whether they have put up anything more than a slum of pretentious gimcrack facades masking squalid individual shanties. He may see vulgar bigotry instead of zeal, officiousness rather than pastoral care. The affairs of his order may seem to be directed, not with christian wisdom, but with an unpredictable mixture of worldly calculation and sheer fatuity born of ignorance. He may find an atmosphere of enervating complacency where there is room only for astringent humility. The city to be built in worship of the gospel has turned out to be a monumental rubble heap amassed in superstitious reverence for canonical formulae and clerical procedure.

Cloister blight in either form has as its victims only members of a religious order. Any cleric may be infected by a kindred despair in his personal vocation. He once looked forward to years of intimacy with the divine, of holiness fed with satisfying prayer, of holiness deployed in ardent charity, his heart purged of self-indulgence, his mind wholly engaged with matters of lasting spiritual significance, the days of his life like the deftly directed movements of a well-honed sickle through the ripe corn, gathering in an imperishable harvest.

Then the seminary piety, proving too delicate a plant for the hard soil of parish life, withered and died. An entirely different form of prayer needed to be grown from seed. He did not know what kind of seed to use, or how to tend it and there was little time for private spiritual horticulture. He found that temptations to self-indulgence do not evaporate because one has accepted a spiritual mission. They bide their time, for time is on their side. The hour of confidence will leave the door unlocked for them; the hours of discouragement see them invited in. He who had wanted to dwell on the heights finds that his lungs of flesh demand a much less rarified atmosphere; he had fancied that the air on the heights would be exhilarating; he finds that he cannot breathe it for any length of time without discomfort. The mind that was to glow with the light of eternal truths finds the working of a new car much more absorbing than the operation of divine grace, and the cup final a far more attractive event than the second coming. The sickle never seems to have an edge; its movements are clumsy and spasmodic. It is more like a blunt but heavy machete making no impression on the hostile, encroaching vegetation. It is not a harvest-field but a jungle.

The despair of a young priest's hopes, like those of a religious,

may afflict, not his personal vocation, but his confidence in the whole sacerdotal fabric. This experience I need not describe. In our troubled, doubting days, tirades by priests against the hierarchical church are in fashion, but not at fashionable prices, for they are two-a-penny. So I need not rehearse again their sad story.

Clerics and religious are bulking too large in this essay. The lay christian can be a prey to the same disastrous blight. Not so much about his or her personal sanctification, because they never received anything like the same encouragement to expect it, and no-one suggested that their way of life was a formula meant to produce it; rather the contrary. Yet a vision glimpsed in retreat, a desire kindled in reading or in religious discussion, may have drawn them on to a personal quest for solid holiness. More frequent prayer would bring them nearer to God; examination of conscience and firm purpose of amendment would eradicate their shortcomings, the reception of the sacraments consolidate the kingdom of God within them and dress their 'days to a dextrous and starlight order'. Months later, perhaps years, they settle once again for a dismal acceptance of their own weaknesses, for lives governed by a toleration edict, by an unsigned but well observed concordat between the materialistic and the spiritual, with religious observance a quit-rent duly but unenthusiastically paid to life's landlord.

And once again 'disillusion' may strike not so much at his own spiritual ambitions as at his vision of the whole Church. The vision may warp so that the successors of the apostles turn into pompous functionaries – the pomp being much more real than the function – by turns insufferably complacent and fretfully querulous, their dogmatic pronouncements in inflated language as tiresome as they are unhelpful. Paternal in that they treat their people as infants, zealous in a narrow, institutional fashion, they become an uninspiring distraction from the things of the spirit.

Need I pile on the agony and drag the reader through the rest of this devastated landscape, where liturgy has become a tedious tawdry routine, where words such as 'grace' are hollow sounds, and Catholic morality an elaborate gothic hopscotch whose rules are quite divorced from considerations of good and evil? Superficially the landscape is full, not of the horrific but the inane, not the terrible but the tedious and the sham. But this was the site of the New Jerusalem. And our hearts raced that our eyes might behold its glory.

It might be fairly alleged at this point that I am describing loss of faith rather than despair, that I am not distinguishing between

faith and hope. I am not much troubled by the allegation. I am glad to bring out the intimate involvement of the two. I have seen enough of definitions and distinctions to be unimpressed by the amount of light they cast. Faith is like a plant, hope, the zestful anticipation that flowers on it, the blossom. Until the fruit arrives our joy is in the flower.

If charity means anything like love in the secular sense of the world, its loss also spells itself out in despair. To be unloved and unloving is a worse incapacity than blindness or dumbness or lameness. Better an affectionate cretin than a loveless genius. Love makes us worth something in our own eyes because we are of importance to someone else. Love calls out our emotional, mental and even physical energies as nothing else can. Love puts you in touch with another person. Physical intimacy – and not all forms of love require it – is a physical expression of the interpenetration of thought and feeling. In love one has a privileged admission to someone else's mind and heart; and without this the franchise of the erogenous zones is much less than human.

But my theme is despair rather than the analysis of love, and there is always something monstrously silly in an intellectual – or would-be intellectual – presentation of love. It is like explaining to people that they have always spoken prose. Yet I have put myself in the position where I must touch upon the disintegration of love, for love, hateful though the thought be, and bitter beyond words the experience, is by no means immortal. Precious stones are durable. But the most precious thing on earth can perish so easily, and is for ever irreplaceable. We may love and be loved by others, but the bond that was like some umbilical cord between equals, by which affection, esteem and tender concern reciprocally flowed, with that particular person is severed and destroyed. And no other person is that person. Each genuine love is unique. The old romances spoke of a broken heart. It was an excellent metaphor, though over-use has killed it. It conveyed the sense of being stricken at the very core of one's being, of life continuing but maimed at its centre.

Interesting to me is the fact that the way to assuage this pain is to become indifferent, to lose the love one had. Earlier I commented that one can become reconciled to the painful failure to realize one's ideals by forgetting those ideals. I spoke of their being amputated. The man who despairs of the world is the man who had a vision of a better world and who yearned to see it realized. If he can forget, his vision of unhappiness is greatly reduced. It is when the

vision remains, when it is still plucking forcefully at the sinews of desire, that the pain is greatest. Abandon your ideals and forget your loves and your life will be much easier; if you consider that walking the world with all that is human in you anaesthetized still a human life.

Perhaps this essay has paid too much attention to despair in a religious context. There are secular visions which may move a man all the more strongly because they have the immediacy of this life. How many visions of ordered human progress were killed by the guillotine of Germinal, incinerated in the ovens of Auschwitz, or shrivelled in the rays of the man-made sun of Hiroshima. How many communists laboured to build the people's paradise and found they had rivetted together the stalinist tyranny. The disintegration even of a purely secular eschatology leaves man face to face with life that is 'like a tale told by an idiot', indeed signifying nothing, but containing far worse things than sound and fury; containing perhaps inescapable physical pain, perhaps the worse agony of watching the irremediable suffering of those we love. This is not a tale told by an idiot. It is a tragical farce composed and stage-managed by a mindless sadist.

We human beings want life to mean something, to have some pattern, some purpose; we want to realize our powers; we want to move to the realization of our ideals for ourselves and the whole world. We want our loves to last. We want our painful stumbling through the wilderness to bring us to the promised land. We want to be redeemed.

Dear me! I have ended by describing hope.