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Joseph Acquisto, *Living Well with Pessimism in Nineteenth-Century France*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. 311 pp. Bibliography, notes, and index. \$119.99 (hb). ISBN 9-78-303061013-5; \$84.99 (pb). ISBN 9-78-3030610166.

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In his collection of essays, *The Crack-Up*, F. Scott Fitzgerald writes—rather famously—“the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.” And then he illustrates the point: “One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise.”[1]

It would be interesting to know whether the twentieth-century American writer found time during his heady Princeton days to read the nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. For according to Joseph Acquisto in his stimulating book, *Living Well with Pessimism in Nineteenth-Century France*, it was Schopenhauer who raised pessimism from a rather inchoate sentiment or merely a psychological disposition to something of a “doctrine.” Somewhat relentlessly, it must be said, Acquisto’s deeply informed study offers us a range of French writers in the late nineteenth century—many influenced by Schopenhauer, others at least not apparently—who ruminated on the meaning and value of pessimism and its relevance to “living well” in their time. We are treated to a kaleidoscope of understandings of “pessimism,” but all, it would seem, captured by Fitzgerald’s aphorism that “One should...be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise.”

This is indeed one of the takeaway points of *Living Well with Pessimism in Nineteenth-Century France*: that pessimism is not, or at least should not, lead to despair, nihilism or even cynicism. In fact, in the hands of the many authors whose writings Acquisto analyzes at length—mostly lesser-known writers, novelists and poets—if properly understood it offers a range of virtues that might very well lead to an ethical, engaged life. With pessimism comes a salutary lucidity, thwarting the “pernicious effects of optimism” (p. 48), which never fails to disappoint. To preempt disappointment is a “key advantage of pessimism” (p. 49).

But Schopenhauer’s pessimism, which sets the tone for the book (with a whole chapter devoted to an exposition of his views) goes well beyond this rearguard, rather paltry understanding of its meaning. For in his hands the very lucidity inherent in a pessimistic stance, which reveals “how awful our existence is,” also prompts an appreciation of those moments of “calm” leading to a “*carpe diem* approach”—an attitude that, writes Acquisto, “can lead to something like happiness.”

At the same time, “cultivating lucidity means being attentive to the world’s suffering to which we can often be blind” (p. 60). Schopenhauerian pessimism thus takes its distance from quiescence or resignation, as well as Stoicism. It can even foster a sense of commonality with the lot of humankind, fellow-sufferers in this veil of tears. And here, Acquisto notes, Schopenhauer’s thought differs from Nietzsche’s, with whom he is often associated, in offering a “progressive political potential” based on a sense of compassion, a “forbearance [of humans] towards one another” (p. 67, quoting Schopenhauer). In these last pages of the chapter devoted to Schopenhauer, Acquisto extends this speculative line of thought by looking at such twentieth-century commentators on the German philosopher as Terry Eagleton and Max Horkheimer who have exploited the “political potential” in his thinking in their own fashion—that is, towards a progressive political critique.

The three chapters following that on Schopenhauer are all quite long considerations of (in succession) philosophical debates over pessimism, novels in which pessimism is a theme, and finally “Pessimism and the Poetic Imagination.” While many of these pages—and the largely minor writers treated—echo Schopenhauer’s “doctrine,” the exposition tends to splinter, as different aspects, interpretations, and implications of pessimism begin to pile up, some in stark contradiction to one another. And it is not really clear how far Schopenhauer’s direct influence extended into the ranks of these intellectual and literary figures. Acquisto writes that “by the 1880s, Schopenhauer’s ideas had become definitively influential to the point of losing their specific association with the philosopher and changing into a more generalized pessimism” (p. 155). And to shore up this assertion, he turns to the fascinating short story by Guy de Maupassant, “Après d’un mort” (1883), which imagines the rather sordid scene of Schopenhauer’s death. Comments Maupassant on the philosopher’s influence, “And even today, those who despise him seem to carry in their minds, despite themselves, aspects of his thought” (p. 155).

Other writers likewise testify to Schopenhauer’s looming influence, but as the book progresses evidence of this tends to wane, leaving us with what Acquisto acknowledges as a “more generalized pessimism.” And this raises a question of method. *Living Well with Pessimism in Nineteenth-Century France* is primarily an intellectual and literary history with the broader context of “nineteenth-century France” largely missing. If there is an explanation for the emergence and development of a doctrine of pessimism in the pages of this book, it is to be found almost exclusively within discursive universe of these writers’ texts. This is, in other words, a study that resolutely remains intellectual and literary in its focus. There is a passing reference to the Franco-Prussian War, the Paris Commune, and “the hatred of one people for another” (p. 130), but this nod in the direction of the historical vicissitudes of the period—indeed precisely those acknowledged as epoch-making by French historians, shaking the very foundations of bourgeois certitude—is notable for its singularity. One might well conclude from reading this book that the intellectual and literary cultivation of pessimism transpired in a social and political vacuum. [2]

This is perhaps not surprising from a literary scholar, whose considerable strengths, evident in the deep and well-informed readings of the many rather obscure writings, more than make up for this lack. And, indeed, on another methodological front, Acquisto develops a line of interpretation which in some respects is as interesting as his overall analysis of pessimism. This has to do with the mode of literary fiction as especially suited to fashioning pessimism as an “as if” attitude towards living in the world. In this sense, pessimism really should not be considered

a doctrine, not if we understand this concept as connoting something either fixed or factual. “[P]essimism gives itself over to the view of life as a fictional construct,” Acquisto writes. “[It] is not a logically or empirically verifiable system but rather an interpretive tool that is effective in generating meaning while retaining a certain lucidity in the face of suffering” (p. 145). And, in a sense, this tethering of pessimism with fiction justifies the book’s privileging of literary works over historical context.

Now one might respond that if anything is a “fictional construct,” it’s optimism. But this, according to both Schopenhauer and the author, is to misunderstand the ways optimism and pessimism are not really opposites but rather entirely different modes of perceiving the world. For optimism, in this view, is merely to “behold” the world, not to live in it. It is “tenable...only if we refuse to consider the dynamism of events unfolding in time, with the appearance of dramatic characters such as pain, desire, and suffering” (p. 48). Pessimism, on the other hand, insists on the unpredictable, varied nature of living in the world as an unfolding narrative characterized not by a fixed outcome or prognosis as suggested by an optimism but rather as a “kind of lucid illusion, a way of conceiving experience that makes room for, and even invites, fictional constructs as organizing principles” (p. 47).

To be sure, this takes us quite away from more vernacular or pedestrian notions of pessimism, where “optimism” usually stands as its mirror-image opposite (as, for example, in the “glass half empty/half-full” metaphor, which indeed implies a sort of symmetry between the two). While Acquisto does in fact evoke this metaphor on the very first page, he resolutely rejects an even-handed view of these sentiments.^[3] This is a book that unapologetically defends pessimism, but along the way—and perhaps just as notably—it offers a robust argument for fiction as an authentic and meaningful guide for “living well,” and not only in nineteenth-century France.

NOTES

[1] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up* (New York: New Directions, 1945), 69.

[2] In a few pages where the author discusses *Le sens de la vie* (1889) by Edouard Rod, he does offer some ruminations by the novel’s author regarding deleterious effects of a democratizing trend, which “advances each day in the sorry way of the sacrifice of the individual,” while also, somewhat paradoxically, promoting a version of individualism “not in what is generous, noble, and fecund, but rather what is most vile, indifferent egotism...” Caught in the middle are the “poets, the thinkers, the artists, all those who in older times expressed the common ideal, touched the heart of the masses, and guided the peoples. Now, they juggle with sentences, sounds rhythms, or colors, disdainful of the crowd and proud of their retreat” (pp. 196-197). But neither the narrator in the novel nor Acquisto follows up on this acknowledgement of the emerging tempestuous mass political culture of the day—so central in most accounts of the late nineteenth century.

[3] He writes, “These days, one can easily purchase a T-shirt, mug, framed print, and other items featuring the following statement: ‘If you see your glass as half empty, pour it into a smaller glass and stop bitching.’ While at first this might appear to be a rebuke to the pessimist who sees the glass half empty, I would argue that a true pessimist would absolutely endorse the statement. What it advocates, after all, is an adjustment of expectations based on the observed reality with which one is confronted, a mindset that allows one to cope with a situation rather than aspiring

to something else, and crafting a livable reality from the situation by recasting the way in which one conceives it” (pp. 1-2).

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