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KOELETH AND KHAYYAM.

Vanity of vanities; all is vanity.—Koeleth.
What profits it, our coming and our going?—
 Khayyám.

If an experimental psychologist were to apply the test-words "pessimist" and "Persian poet" to ten men of average intelligence and education, he would probably elicit in the majority of cases the answers "Ecclesiastes" and "Omar Khayyám": the latter reply being partly due to the lingering association awakened by the word "pessimist." The average man feels sure that he knows the meaning of pessimism until he is asked to define it; and he would hesitate before accepting the definition: "The view that the world is the worst of all possible worlds."

"The tendency to look always on the gloomy side of things" would prove more satisfactory, but he would demur at the "always": the consistent pessimist is rare. Besides, he feels that there are degrees and varieties of pessimism regarded as a critical attitude towards life and the scheme of things in general.

"La vie est brève"—granted by optimist and pessimist alike: for the realization of the brevity of life may react upon conduct as a stimulus to virtue as well as to vice. Contrast "I must work the work of him that sent me while it is day: the night cometh when no man can work"—"While there is time let us do good unto all men"—"Redeeming the time, because the days are evil," with "I hated all my labour which I had laboured under the sun; because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me"—"If thou art drunken with wine, be happy, since ere long thou shalt be

naught"—"Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die"—"Vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat inchoare longam"—"Carpe diem: quam minimum credula postero."

"Alles Leben ist Leiden"—admitted by the optimist (with certain reservations), and unduly emphasized by the pessimist. Christianity, in so far as it is other-worldly, is pessimistic; as is claimed by von Hartmann in his *Philosophy of the Unconscious*. It can hardly be said that the New Testament and the writings of the Fathers are exuberant with the *joie de vivre*; while a Martian would be apt to gather from our hymnals that Terra is not a particularly pleasant planet to inhabit. Witness the following opening lines:—"I journey through a desert drear and wild"; "Life's but a desert drear"; "Here we suffer grief and pain"; "Brief life is here our portion, brief sorrow, short-lived care."

"La vie est vaine"—maintained by the tribe of Schopenhauer and von Hartmann; although, pushed to its logical conclusion, it is not pessimism, but miserabilism. The brevity, the suffering, the vanity of human existence: three chords which, touched at reasonable intervals, are indispensable to the harmony of the world's song; but which, harped upon continually, yield a monotonous melody in a minor key.

It is popularly supposed that pessimism rests upon a purely physiological basis: in other words, that gloominess of outlook is as symptomatic of a disordered liver as is a furred tongue. The cheeriest individual has his moments of depression; and it is doubtful whether Schopenhauer, in his heart of hearts, regarded his flute-playing as a contribution to the *Weltschmerz*—as swelling the already swollen tide of the world's anguish. Laying aside all formal treatises on pessimistic philosophy, it is possible that pieces of literature like the Book of Ecclesiastes and the Quatrains of Omar Khayyám were the products of temporary fits of depression, and do not necessarily represent the normal views of

the writers. Would it be just to regard *Alice in Wonderland* as an exposition of the *Weltanschauung* of Lewis Carroll? If the only acknowledged poem of Burns extant were *Holy Willie's Prayer*, could we assign to him, even in imagination, the hypothetically anonymous *Cottar's Saturday Night*?

Tennyson's *In Memoriam* is long enough to enable us to observe the fluctuations of hope and despair, of faith and doubt; but it would be an easy matter to collect one hundred and fifty quatrains deeply tinged with pessimism. Yet there are extant little more than one hundred and fifty Ruba'iyát which may be regarded as genuine; and, on the strength of these, Khayyám has been dubbed "an ornamental pessimist." Similarly, Ecclesiastes—meaning thereby the genuine utterances of Koheleth—is one of the shortest books in the Old Testament. Are we to suppose that a poet capable of writing the famous description of old age and death, in the last chapter, never wrote other verses in less doleful strain?

It should also be borne in mind that, just as dignified persons will, on rare occasions and under grave provocation, indulge in strong language in order to relieve their feelings, both Koheleth and Khayyám may have intended their compositions as literary *tours de force*, under cover of which they might open fire upon the 'unco guid' of their respective day and generation. For obvious reasons, Khayyám has long ago been compared with Schopenhauer and Lucretius: it is better to compare and contrast him with his fellow-Oriental, though non-Aryan, Koheleth.

They have much in common. They both employed *noms de guerre*. Both attacked orthodoxy. They have both suffered many things at the hands of editors, imitators, glossators and interpolators. Koheleth, through the influence of the school of Hillel, has been forced into the Canon of Holy Scripture: Khayyám's disconnected musings have achieved a world-wide fame

through the genius of Fitzgerald, whose Ruba'iyát, with their bold adaptations, transformations and original creations, bear about the same relation to the Ruba'iyát of Omar as *In Memoriam* does to the Aphorisms of Nietzsche. How Omar would have chuckled if he could have foreseen the cult of Khayyám and its influence upon Victorian England!

Lastly, the commentators on both have endeavoured to discover orthodoxy at the expense of truth. Says Luther, of Ecclesiastes: "Difficult as this book is, it is almost more difficult to clear the author of the visionary fancies palmed upon him by his numerous commentators than to develop his meaning." Says an authority on Khayyám: "Every student of Omar reads into this poet's quatrains his own pet philosophy, and interprets him according to his own religious views."

For parallels of thought compare the following:—

I.

There is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool. There is one event to the righteous and to the wicked.

(Of those who draw the pure date wine, and those who spend the night in prayer, not one is on dry land, all are in the water.)

II.

Whatsoever God doeth it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it.

(Resign thy body to destiny, for what the pen has written, it will not re-write.)

III.

All are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.

(Dust I must become. The end is that we must all be beneath the dust.)

IV.

An untimely birth is better than he. . . This hath more rest than the other.

D

(He who never came into the world is at rest. Were it not better that in this world I had neither come, nor gone, nor lived.)

V.

Be not righteous over much: why shouldest thou destroy thyself?

(Be thou heedless of hell or heaven; why should a wise man be deceived about such things?)

VI.

He cometh in with vanity, and departeth in darkness.
(We come like water, and like wind we go.)

VII.

Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear than to give the sacrifice of fools.

(For the sake of God do not wear the garment of hypocrisy. . . Better cooked in a tavern than raw in a monastery.)

VIII.

Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave whither thou goest.

(Be happy—thou knowest not whence thou hast come: drink wine—thou must sleep beneath the earth.)

IX.

Rejoice, O young man in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thy heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh; for childhood and youth are vanity.

(Set limits to thy desire for worldly things, and live content: sever the bonds of thy dependence upon the good and bad of life: take wine in hand, and the curls of a loved one; for quickly all passeth away—and how many of these days remain?)

The contrast between Koheleth and Khayyám is largely one of style. Koheleth is more solemn, dignified and didactic, as befits one who speaks in the character of "a king in Jerusalem." He has nothing of the outrageous wit of Khayyám. He advises man to drink wine, indeed; but he would be incapable of such an ultra-Anacreontic sentiment as—"When I die, wash me with wine, and out of the wood of the vine make the planks of my coffin." For a parallel one would have to go to the effusions of the Irish bards, such as the Munster poet who sang:—

Cuiridh fé chlár me
Ag dorus tighe tábhairne
Is cuiridh cáirt de
le m'anam!

(Bury me under a drinking-table at the door of a tavern, and bury a quart of liquor along with me for the benefit of my soul!)

The gloomy solemnity of Koheleth is familiar. Khayyám is bubbling over with insuppressible wit: he indulges in the most riotous puns, not sparing even his own *nom de plume*:—

"Khayyám ki khaimhá-e hikmat mi-dokht."

(The tent-maker who stitched at the tents of wisdom.) And one of his best *bons mots* is the question: "Why should good liquor be called 'sharáb'?" The joke lies in the fact that he pronounces the Arabic word "sharáb" (wine) as though it were the Persian "sharr-áb" (wicked water)!

Koheleth complains of the monotony of nature; distrusts most men and all women; strongly recommends interest in work as a pastime. Khayyám revels in roses; is chary of making friendships, yet welcomes the boon companion and the houri-shaped ones; recommends wine-drinking as a panacea for human ills. Contrast:

I.

The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing . . . there is no new thing under the sun.

(Now there is happiness within reach of this world, every thoughtful soul has yearnings towards the desert; on every bough is the appearance of Moses' hand (*i.e.*, is white with blossoms—the reference being to Moses' leprous hand), in every breeze is the sigh of Jesus' breath. Pleasure comes to me from the rosebud which gathers its skirts close around itself).

II.

Which yet my soul seeketh, but I find not: one man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found.

(In this life it is best that thou shouldst make few friends; with the people of the times distant intercourse is good; that person upon whom thou leanest entirely, when thou openest the eye of wisdom he is thine enemy. On the other hand—In spring . . . a few companions and a playmate houri-shaped . . . the season of wine, and boon companions. Whosoever has engrafted the leaf of love upon his heart, not one day of his life has been wasted. In my mind may there be the desire for idols houri-like.)

III.

There is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his own works . . . and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God.

(Drink wine which banishes the calamities of time. The ingredients of the antidote of sorrow—ruby wine and the silk-stringed lute.)

The commentators on Kohleth are at fault because they do not recognize the fact that his book contains more *Dichtung* than *Wahrheit*. He was an armchair critic of life. All his "great works"—houses, vineyards, gardens, orchards, treasures of silver and gold, men singers and women singers, musical instruments (or concubines) were as imaginary as his kingship in Jerusalem: he gives the result of an imaginary experiment. The whole book is an indictment of orthodoxy; a

reductio ad absurdum of the theology which placed all rewards and punishments on this side of the grave, because there was for that theology no other side. Khayyám ridicules Muslim orthodoxy—especially the doctrine of predestination (God knew on the Day of Creation that I should drink wine; if I do not drink wine God’s knowledge was ignorance): at the same time he makes merry over the Sufi philosophy. His wine-drinking extravagances are deliberate. Of set purpose he out-Hafized Hafiz. Like Koheleth, he would be better understood if he were not taken so seriously. One gathers that such sentiments are assumed for the nonce. We know that the real Khayyám was a learned and studious mathematician, and a distinguished astronomer, who assisted Malik Shah to reform the Muslim calendar: very probably Koheleth also in every-day life was just as optimistic as his neighbours. It is idle, in any case, to talk of the influence of Epicureanism or Stoicism: such sentiments are older than Greek philosophy. In a fragment of the Gilgamesh epic, found on a tablet dating from the Hammurabi dynasty (circa 2000 B.C.), we read:—

Since the gods created man,
Death they ordained for man,
Life in their hands they hold;
Thou, O Gilgamesh, fill indeed thy belly,
Day and night be joyful.
Daily ordain gladness,
Day and night rage and make merry;

.
Desire thy children which thy hand possesses,
Cherish a wife in thy bosom,
[Enjoy] thy work peaceably.

Witness also the inscription on the tomb of Sardanapalus: “Eat, drink, play; the rest is not worth the snap of a finger.”

Sapias, vina liques et spatio brevi
Spem longam reseces

—it is a siren voice; a temptation that assails every man at times, though few may confess it: and that all men, at times, appreciate a lasting literary presentment of such fleeting moods, the preservation of such unorthodox and pessimistic writings as the Book of Ecclesiastes and the Ruba'iyát of Omar Khayyám is ample proof.

[NOTE.—The quotations from Khayyám are translated as literally as possible from a facsimile of the Bodleian MS., which dates from 1460 A.D.]

F. W. O'CONNELL.