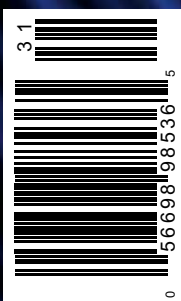


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MODE OF DEATH

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I.

Death and fashion are sisters, though not everyone knows this. They have known periods of estrangement, but these have been without cause, for they share not only a mother but a calling. It is with these family matters that Giacomo Leopardi begins his "Dialogue Between Fashion and Death," written in 1824, when Leopardi was twenty-six years old, and published in a book he titled *Operette morali* (which is normally rendered in English as *Essays and Dialogues*, but whose title means "diminutive moral works"). The book does not offer a bright view of existence. Its last lines (spoiler alert) are: "If I were offered, on the one hand, the fortune and fame of Caesar or of Alexander, pure of all stains, and, on the other, to die today, and if I were to make a choice, I would say, to die today, and I would not need time to think it over."

But on to brighter matters—like fashion. As the reader of the dialogue on the following pages will have noted, Fashion has sought out her sister to remind her of a few things (Death has a poor memory). Fashion begins with the bright side of death, that it "continually renews the world," and argues that this renewal is a part of their shared calling. Seeing death as an unhappy ending is to see only one half of the story—and is to leave out the fresh beginning which is, ultimately, a question of perspective. In another of the dialogues—"Dialogue Between Nature and an Icelander"—Nature explains precisely this perspectival idea to an Icelander lamenting "the vanity of life." She asks him whether he thinks that "the world was made for him alone," and informs him that "in this universe life is a perpetual cycle of production and destruction." And then, to make the point perfectly clear, she has lions tear him apart and devour him on the spot. (Or perhaps a fierce wind knocked him to the ground and buried him alive under a mountain of sand—Leopardi's narrator is unsure.)

In a kindred vein, Fashion tells Death, "You and I together keep undoing and changing things down here on earth, although you go about it one way and I another." The point in both dialogues is that death is an ending only from the restricted viewpoint of the person or thing ending. From the larger one, whether it concerns the death of an Icelander or a galaxy, it is all transformation and renewal.

This does not, however, take away death's sting. For mortals, death brings a darkness, and it is this darkness, and the suffering that precedes it, which is what most interests Fashion. To those who might think—her

sister Death included—that Fashion represents an enrichment, an embellishment, a celebration of life, and thereby defiance of Death, she offers a corrective. Fashion points out that she is constantly advancing Death's cause. She does this, on the one hand, by endangering the health of the living, inducing them, inducing us, to pierce, tattoo, bind and bend our bodies in accord with her caprices. Death acknowledges this, but wonders whether her sister might not be doing more. Fashion, who is quicker than her sister, says that Death hasn't been paying attention; that she, Fashion, already does much more, and something much more fundamental. Fashion not only physically weakens the living, she performs the more important service of emotionally and intellectually weakening mankind. Her whirling dictates see to it that life itself is impoverished to the point that, so says Fashion, all halfway intelligent men and women now despise life, and long for nothing so much as its end. Fashion tells her sister that whereas Death was often reviled in antiquity, now it is held in the highest esteem among the intelligent. What more could Death ask for?

II.

Death and its desirability is not simply one idea among others in Leopardi's book, or his work. It is *the* idea, and so it is not only the one with which he ends his *Operette morali*, it also has a special place in his poetry. Despite his wide learning (the result of a precocious *studio matto e disperatissimo*, "a mad and most desperate study") and diverse writings, Leopardi is most famous as a poet, and his most famous poem is a sonnet addressed to himself in which he denounces and deplors what he calls, in its final line, "the infinite vanity of everything." One day while whistling his way around the Lake District, Wordsworth stopped (on a bridge) to write of "the burthen of the mystery" formed by "the heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world." For Leopardi, if the world was unintelligible, there was no mystery in this, only burden. We were given a single gift and this gift is named elsewhere in "To Oneself": "To mankind / Fate's only gift is death."

The message—in dialogues and poems—is then simple (and haunting) enough. The world is a dreadful place, truly dreadful. It is not accidentally or superficially or contingently dreadful. It is essentially dreadful. It is screamingly dreadful. And as though dreadful were not enough, it is getting worse. Which leaves a single relief: death.

Samuel Beckett was a lifelong fan of Leopardi, weaving Leopardi's lines into his most famous works

on more than one occasion. What is more, the very first line of Beckett's very first book is from Leopardi. The epigraph to Beckett's *Proust* is drawn from Leopardi's poem on the infinite vanity of everything: *e il mondo è fango*, "and the world is mud." The world, as Beckett was to call it in his own name years later, is "an old muckball," or, as Wallace Stevens called it during those same years, it is a "smutted semi-world hacked out of dirt." This place is terrible. Just look at it.

If the world is mud, if everything is infinitely vain, why go on? Why even go to the trouble of stating that all is mud, that all is infinitely vain? Why such lyricism and longing for a world not worth it?

III.

Looking back upon his life, Arthur Schopenhauer once deplored that "the three greatest pessimists in the world, Byron, Leopardi and I" were all in Italy in 1819 and yet never met. What might have been hoped from such a summit? An evening of inspired denigration of the world—followed by a *digestivo* and a midnight stroll through a cemetery? It is hard to say. What is not is that as much as a philosophical position, pessimism is an emotional one. We have no idea if we live in the best or the worst of all possible worlds; all we know is that we live in this one. We might have an intuition of its nature, but that is something else. The world presents to our eyes—every moment of every day, if we can stand to look—a stomach-turning, soul-crushing amount of suffering. And we try to make sense of it, to live in it and through it, to see it counterbalanced by kindness, love, hope. At least some of the time.

It has been said—by pessimists—that life is really just death, from the baby's first breath begins a process shared with every living thing, world without end. And it has been said—by optimists—that death is really just life. This—as Fashion tells Death and Nature tells the Icelander—is all a matter of perspective. When we look at the big picture, we see that death becomes life in a universal round. When we look at the small picture—our own—we see things differently. We see, and feel, the reality of death, the pain of death, the mystery of death—and we see something else. There is a dark consolation in the idea that death brings life. There is a bright consolation in what precedes death, a bright consolation we can read between the lines of Leopardi's dialogue, and which requires a glance at their family tree.

Fashion reminds Death that they have the same mother, and that her name is *Caducità*. The excellent translation of Giovanni Cecchetti renders this name *Caducity*, a rare English term that has the advantage

of sharing an etymology with the Italian term and the disadvantage of being a word that no one knows. The Latin-derived Italian word *caducità* means fleeting, falling, and is used in Italian just as we use the term *transience*. Being mortal means what we have, we have fleetingly. This can bring pain, can mean pain, because constant renovation, constant change, means constant loss. *Caducità*, or Transience, however, has another daughter, nowhere named in the dialogue. She is Beauty, the beauty we find here on earth. There may be a Beauty beyond this world that infuses and suffuses the beauty here. There is no way to know. But the beauty that moves us moves us in that it, like us, is fleeting, is passing away, is transient. The timescale may vary greatly—it may be a flower that blooms for a day and dies in the night, it might be a play of light through leaves that will end a moment from now, or it may be a mountain that seems immovable, but will move, will change, slowly, and then at some point quickly. (Everest will be shattered by earthquake, pulverized by asteroid, consumed by fire when our sun expands to a thousand times its present size and engulfs our solar system in flame.) Living in time as we do means that our sense of beauty is born of our sense of time, and of the fleeting things of this world. And so, although *Caducità*, Mother Transience, has given birth to the vicissitudes of Fashion and the rule of Death, she also gave us Beauty.

IV.

Giacomo Leopardi died during the cholera epidemic of 1837, in Naples, at the age of thirty-eight. His life had not often been happy. He passed away in the arms of a dear friend in the late afternoon of a summer day. His last request was that the window should be opened so that he might see the sun.

opposite: Death à la mode. Léon Spilliaert, *The Absinthe Drinker*, 1876.

