

THE UNHAPPIEST MAN

An enthusiastic address before
the

SYMPARANEKROMENOI

Peroration presented at the Friday meeting

Somewhere in England there is said to be a grave which is distinguished not by a splendid monument, nor by its melancholy surroundings, but by a brief inscription: The Unhappiest Man.¹ Someone must have opened the grave, but had found no trace of a body. Which is the more astonishing, that no body was found, or that the grave was opened? It is indeed strange that anyone should have taken the trouble to see whether there was a body there or not. Sometimes when you read a name in an epitaph, you wonder what manner of life was his who bore it, and you wish you might step down into the grave to converse with him. But this inscription is so significant! A book may have a title which makes you wish to read the book, but a title can be so richly suggestive of thought, so personally appealing, as to leave you with no desire to read the book. This inscription is indeed so significant—harrowing or comforting according to one's mood—for everyone who has in quietness secretly cherished the thought that he was the unhappiest of men. But I can imagine a man, whose soul has never known such thoughts, to whom it would be a matter of curiosity to find out whether there actually was a body in this grave. And lo, the tomb was empty! Is he perhaps risen from the dead? Has he perhaps wished to mock the poet's word:

. . . In the grave there is peace,
Its silent dweller from grief knows release.²

Did he find no rest, not even in the grave; does he perhaps wander restlessly about in the world? Has he forsaken his dwelling-place, his home, leaving only his address behind! Or has he not yet been found, he the unhappiest man, who is not even pursued by the furies until he finds the door of the sanctuary and the seat of the humble suppliant, but who is kept alive by sorrow and by sorrow pursued to the grave!³

If it is true that he has not yet been found, then, dear Symparanekromenoi, let us begin upon a pilgrimage, not

as crusaders to seek the sacred tomb in the happy east, but to find this melancholy grave in the unhappy west. At that empty tomb we shall seek for him, the unhappiest man, certain to find him; for as the faithful long to see the sacred tomb, so do the unhappy feel themselves drawn toward that empty tomb in the west, each filled with the thought that it is destined for him.

Or is not such an inquiry worthy of our attention, we whose activities, in conformity with the sacred tradition of our society, are essays devoted to the aphoristical and the accidental, we who do not merely think and speak aphoristically but live aphoristically, we who live *aphorismenoi* and *segregati*,⁴ like aphorisms in life, without community of men, without sharing their griefs and their joys; we who are not consonantal sounds in the alarms of life, but solitary birds in the stillness of night, gathering together only occasionally, to be edified by considering the wretchedness of life, the length of the day, and the endless permanence of time; we, dear Symparanekromenoi, who have no faith in the game of happiness or the luck of fools, who believe in nothing save misfortune.

Behold how the unhappy crowd forward in countless multitudes! Many are they who believe themselves called, but few are the chosen. A distinction must be made between them—a word, and the crowd vanishes; excluded are they, the uninvited guests, who think death to be the greatest misfortune, who became unhappy because they fear death; for we, dear Symparanekromenoi, we, like the Roman soldiers, fear not death; we know of greater misfortunes, and first and last and above all—life. If indeed there were some human being who could not die, if the story told of the Wandering Jew be true, then how could we hesitate to declare him the unhappiest of men? Then we could also explain why the tomb was empty, in order to signify, namely, that the unhappiest man was the one who could not die, could not slip down into a grave. The case would then be decided, the answer easy: for the unhappiest man was the one who could not die, the happy, he who could; happy he who died in his old age, happier, whoever died in his youth, happiest he who died at birth, happiest of all

he who never was born. But it is not so; death is the common lot of all men, and in so far as the unhappiest man is not yet found, he will have to be sought within this universal limitation.

Behold the crowd vanishes, its number is diminished. I do not now say: grant me your attention, for I know I have it; nor do I say: lend me your ears, for I know they belong to me. Your eyes shine, you rise in your seats. It is a contest for a wager, which it is indeed worth participating in, a struggle even more terrible than one of life and death; for death we do not fear. But the reward, aye, it is more glorious than any other in the world, and more certain; for he who is assured that he is the unhappiest man need fear no good fortune; he will not taste the humiliation in his last hour of having to cry: Solon, Solon, Solon!⁵

So we open a free competition, from which no one is excluded by virtue of rank or age. No one is excluded except the happy, and he who fears death—every worthy member of the community of the unhappy is welcome, there is a seat of honor for every really unhappy person, the grave for the unhappiest of all. My voice sounds forth through the world: "Hear you, all you who call yourselves unhappy, and do not fear death." My voice rings back into the past; for we would not be sophisticated enough to exclude the dead because they are dead, for they have once lived. "I beseech you, forgive that I disturb your rest for a moment; meet us here by this empty tomb." Thrice I let the call ring forth over the world: "Hear this, you unhappy ones." For it is not our intention to decide this matter among ourselves in a corner. The place is found where it must be decided before all the world.

But before we examine the claimants, let us make ourselves fit to sit here as worthy judges and competitors. Let us reinforce our thought, let us arm it to withstand the seductiveness of words; for what voice is so insinuating as that of the unhappiest, which so beguiling as that of the unhappiest when he speaks of his own unhappiness? Let us make ourselves fit to sit as judges and competitors so that we do not lose the sense of proportion, nor become disturbed by the individual claims; for the eloquence of

grief is boundless and infinitely inventive. Let us divide the unhappy into groups, and admit only one spokesman for each group; for this we shall not deny, that it is not some particular individual who is the unhappiest, but it is a class; but, therefore, we shall not hesitate to assign the representative of this class the name: the unhappiest, nor hesitate to assign him the tomb.

In each of Hegel's systematic writings there is a section which treats of the unhappy consciousness.⁶ One approaches the reading of such inquiries with an inner restlessness, with a trembling of the heart, with a fear lest one learn too much, or too little. The unhappy consciousness is a term which, when casually introduced, almost makes the blood run cold, and the nerves to quiver; and then to see it so expressly emphasized, like the mysterious sentence in a story of Clemens Brentano's, *tertia nux mors est*⁷—it is enough to make one tremble like a sinner. Ah, happy he who has nothing more to do with it than to write a paragraph on the subject, happier still, he who can write the next. The unhappy person is one who has his ideal, the content of his life, the fullness of his consciousness, the essence of his being, in some manner outside of himself. He is always absent, never present to himself. But it is evident that it is possible to be absent from one's self either in the past or in the future. This, then, at once circumscribes the entire territory of the unhappy consciousness. For this rigid limitation we are grateful to Hegel; and now, since we are not merely philosophers beholding the kingdom from afar, we shall as native inhabitants give our attention in detail to the various types which are implied herein. The unhappy person is consequently absent. But one is absent when living either in the past or in the future. The form of expression must here be carefully noted; for it is clear, as philology also teaches us, that there is a tense which expresses presence in the past, and a tense which expresses presence in the future; but the same science also teaches us that there is a tense which is *plus quam perfectum*, in which there is no present, as well as a *futurum exactum* of an analogous character. Now there are some individuals who live in hope, and others who live in memory. These are in-

deed in a sense unhappy individuals, in so far, namely, as they live solely in hope or in memory, if ordinarily only he is happy who is present to himself. However, one cannot in a strict sense be called an unhappy individual, who is present in hope or in memory. That which must here be emphasized is that he is present to himself in one or the other of these forms of consciousness. We shall also see from this that a single blow, be it ever so heavy, cannot possibly make a man the unhappiest of all. For one blow can either deprive him of hope, thereby leaving him present in memory, or of memory, thus leaving him present in hope. We now go on to get a more detailed description of the unhappy individual.

First we shall consider the man of hope. When he as a hoping individual (and in so far, of course, unhappy) is not present to himself in his hope, then he becomes in the stricter sense unhappy. An individual who hopes for an eternal life is, indeed, in a certain sense unhappy, since he has renounced the present, but not yet in the strict sense, because he is himself present in this hope, and does not come into conflict with the individual moments of the finite life. But if he does not become present to himself in this hope, but loses his hope and then hopes again and again loses, and so on, he is absent from himself, not only with respect to the present, but also with respect to the future; this gives us one type of the unhappy consciousness. In the case of the man of memory the case is parallel. If he can find himself present in the past, he is not in the strict sense unhappy; but if he cannot, but is constantly absent from himself in the past, then we have another type of unhappiness.

Memory is emphatically the real element of the unhappy, as is natural, because the past has the remarkable characteristic that it is past, the future, that it is yet to come, whence one may say that in a certain sense the future is nearer the present than is the past. In order that the man of hope may be able to find himself in the future, the future must have reality, or, rather, it must have reality for him; in order that the man of memory may find himself in the past, the past must have had reality for him. But when the

man of hope would have a future which can have no reality for him, or the man of memory would remember a past which has had no reality, then we have the essentially unhappy individuals. It might seem as if the first supposition were impossible, or sheer lunacy; however, it is not so; for though the hoping individual does not hope for something which has no reality for him, he may nevertheless hope for something which he himself knows cannot be realized. For when an individual loses his hope, and then instead of taking refuge in memory, continues to hope, then we have such a type. When an individual who loses his memory, or who has nothing to remember, will not become a hoping individual, but continues to be a man of memory, then we have one type of unhappiness. If thus an individual buried himself in antiquity, or in the Middle Ages, or in any other period of time so that this had an authentic reality for him, or if he lost himself in his own childhood or youth, so that these things had an authentic reality for him, then he would not in a strict sense be an unhappy individual. On the other hand, if I imagine a man who himself had had no childhood, this age having passed him by without attaining essential significance for him, but who now, perhaps by becoming a teacher of youth, discovered all the beauty that there is in childhood, and who would now remember his own childhood, constantly staring back at it, then I should have an excellent illustration of this type of unhappiness. Too late he would have discovered the significance of that which was past for him but which he still desired to remember in its significance. If I imagined a man who had lived without real appreciation of the pleasures or joy of life, and who now on his deathbed gets his eyes opened to these things, if I imagined that he did not die (which would be the most fortunate thing) but lived on, though without living his life over again—such a man would have to be considered in our quest for the unhappiest man.

The unhappiness of hope is never so painful as the unhappiness of memory. The man of hope always has a more tolerable disappointment to bear. It follows that the un-

happiest man will have to be sought among the unhappy individuals of memory.

Let us proceed. Let us imagine a combination of the two stricter types of unhappiness already described. The unhappy man of hope could not find himself present in his hope, just as the unhappy man of memory could not find himself present in his memory. There can be but one combination of these two types, and this happens when it is memory which prevents the unhappy individual from finding himself in his hope, and hope which prevents him from finding himself in his memory. When this happens, it is, on the one hand, due to the fact that he constantly hopes something that should be remembered; his hope constantly disappoints him and, in disappointing him, reveals to him that it is not because the realization of his hope is postponed, but because it is already past and gone, has already been experienced, or should have been experienced, and thus has passed over into memory. On the other hand, it is due to the fact that he always remembers that for which he ought to hope; for the future he has already anticipated in thought, in thought already experienced it, and this experience he now remembers, instead of hoping for it. Consequently, what he hopes for lies behind him, what he remembers lies before him. His life is not so much lived regressively as it suffers a two-fold reversal. He will soon notice his misfortune even if he is not able to understand the reason for it. To make sure, however, that he really shall have opportunity to feel it, misunderstanding puts in its appearance to mock him at each moment in a curious way.

In the ordinary course of things, he enjoys the reputation of being in full possession of his five senses, and yet he knows that if he were to explain to a single person just how it is with him, he would be declared mad. This is quite enough to drive a man mad, and yet he does not become so, and this is precisely his misfortune. His misfortune is that he has come into the world too soon, and therefore he always comes too late. He is constantly quite near his goal, and in the same moment he is far away from it; he finds that what now makes him unhappy because he has it,

or because he is this way, is just what a few years ago would have made him happy if he had had it then, while then he was unhappy because he did not have it. His life is empty, like that of Ancaeus, of whom it is customary to say that nothing is known about him except that he gave rise to the proverb: "There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip"—as if this was not more than enough.⁸ His life is restless and without content; he does not live in the present, he does not live in the future, for the future has already been experienced; he does not live in the past, for the past has not yet come. So like Latona, he is driven about in the Hyperborean darkness, or to the bright isles of the equator, and cannot bring to birth though he seems constantly on the verge.⁹ Alone by himself he stands in the wide world. He has no contemporary time to support him; he has no past to long for, since his past has not yet come; he has no future to hope for, since his future is already past. Alone, he has the whole world over against him as the *alter* with which he finds himself in conflict; for the rest of the world is to him only one person, and this person, this inseparable, importunate friend, is Misunderstanding. He cannot become old, for he has never been young; he cannot become young, for he is already old. In one sense of the word he cannot die, for he has not really lived; in another sense he cannot live, for he is already dead. He cannot love, for love is in the present, and he has no present, no future, and no past; and yet he has a sympathetic nature, and he hates the world only because he loves it. He has no passion, not because he is destitute of it, but because simultaneously he has the opposite passion. He has no time for anything, not because his time is taken up with something else, but because he has no time at all. He is impotent, not because he has no energy, but because his own energy makes him impotent.

And now our hearts are indeed sufficiently steeled, our ears stopped, even if not closed. We have listened to the cool voice of deliberation; let us now hear the eloquence of passion—brief, pithy, as all passion is.

There stands a young woman. She complains that her

lover has been faithless. This we cannot take into consideration. But she loved him, and him alone, in all the world. She loved him with all her heart, and with all her soul, and with all her mind—then let her remember and grieve.

Is this a real being, or is it an image, a living person who dies, or a corpse who lives? It is Niobe.¹⁰ She lost all at a single blow; she lost that to which she gave life, she lost that which gave her life. Look up to her, dear Symparanekromenoi, she stands a little higher than the world, on a burial mound, like a monument. No hope allures her, no future moves her, no prospect tempts her, no hope excites her—hopeless she stands, petrified in memory; for a single moment she was unhappy, in that same moment she became happy, and nothing can take her happiness from her; the world changes, but she knows no change; and time flows on, but for her there is no future time.

See yonder, what a beautiful union! The one generation clasps hands with the next! Is it unto blessing, unto loyal fellowship, unto the joy of the dance? It is the outcast house of Oedipus, and the curse is transmitted from one generation to the next, until it crushes the last of the race—Antigone. Yet she is provided for; the sorrow of a family is enough for one human life. She has turned her back on hope, she has exchanged its instability for the faithfulness of memory. Be happy, dear Antigone! We wish you a long life, significant as a deep sigh. May no forgetfulness deprive you of aught, may the daily bitterness of grief be yours in fullest measure!

A powerful figure appears, but he is not alone, he has friends, how comes he here then? It is Job, the patriarch of grief—and his friends. He lost all, but not at a single blow; for the Lord took, and the Lord took, and the Lord took. Friends taught him to feel the bitterness of his loss; for the Lord gave, and the Lord gave, and the Lord also gave him a foolish wife into the bargain.¹¹ He lost all; for what he retained lies outside the scope of our interest. Respect him, dear Symparanekromenoi, for his gray hairs and his unhappiness. He lost all; but he had possessed it.

His hair is gray, his head bent low, his countenance

downcast, his soul troubled. It is the father of the prodigal son. Like Job he lost his most precious possession. Yet it was not the Lord who took it, but the enemy. He did not lose it, but he is losing it; it is not taken away from him, but it vanishes. He does not sit by the hearth in sackcloth and ashes; he has left his home, forsaken everything to seek the lost. He reaches after him, but his arms do not clasp him; he cries out, but his cries do not overtake him. And yet he hopes even through tears; he sees him from afar, as through a mist; he overtakes him, if only in death. His hope makes him old, and nothing binds him to the world except the hope for which he lives. His feet are weary, his eyes dim, his body yearns for rest, his hope lives. His hair is white, his body decrepit, his feet stumble, his heart breaks, his hope lives. Raise him up, dear Symparanekromenoi, he was unhappy.

Who is this pale figure, unsubstantial as the shadow of the dead? His name has been forgotten, many centuries have passed since his day. He was a youth, he had enthusiasm. He sought martyrdom. In imagination he saw himself nailed to the cross, and the heavens open; but the reality was too heavy for him; enthusiasm vanished, he denied his Master and himself. He wished to lift a world, but he broke down under the strain; his soul was not crushed nor annihilated, but it was broken, and his spirit was enervated, his soul palsied. Congratulate him, dear Symparanekromenoi, for he was unhappy. And yet did he not become happy? He became what he wished, a martyr, even if his martyrdom was not, as he had wished, to be nailed to the cross, nor to be thrown to wild beasts, but to be burned alive, to be slowly consumed by a slow fire.

A young woman sits here of thoughtful mien. Her lover was faithless—but this we cannot take into consideration. Young woman, observe the serious countenances of this society; it has heard of more terrible misfortunes, its daring soul demands something greater still.—Yes, but I loved him and him only in all the world; I loved him with all my soul, and with all my heart, and with all my mind.—You merely repeat what we have already heard before, do not weary our impatient longing; you can remember, and grieve.—No,

I cannot grieve, for he was perhaps not a deceiver, he was perhaps not faithless.—Why, then, can you not grieve? Come nearer, elect among women; forgive the strict censor who sought for a moment to exclude you. You cannot sorrow. Then why not hope?—No, I cannot hope; for he was a riddle.—Well, my girl, I understand you. You stand high in the ranks of the unhappy; behold her, dear Symparanekromenoi, she stands almost at the pinnacle of unhappiness. But you must divide yourself, you must hope by day and grieve by night, or grieve by day and hope by night. Be proud; for happiness is no real ground for pride, but only unhappiness. You are not indeed the unhappiest of all; but it is your opinion, dear Symparanekromenoi, is it not, that we ought to offer her an honorable *accessit*? The tomb we cannot offer her, but the place adjoining shall be hers.

For there he stands, the ambassador from the kingdom of sighs, the chosen favorite of the realm of suffering, the apostle of grief, the silent friend of pain, the unhappy lover of memory, in his memories confounded by the light of hope, in his hope deceived by the shadows of memory.¹² His head hangs heavy, his knees are weak; and yet he seeks no support save in himself. He is faint, and yet how powerful; his eyes seem not to have wept, but to have drunk many tears; and yet there is a fire in them strong enough to destroy a world, but not one splinter of the grief within his breast. He is bent, and yet his youth presages a long life; his lips smile at a world that misunderstands him. Stand up, dear Symparanekromenoi, bow before him, ye witnesses of grief, in this most solemn hour! I hail thee, great unknown, whose name I do not know; I hail thee with thy title of honor: The Unhappiest Man! Welcomed here to your home by the community of the unhappy, greeted here at the entrance to the low and humble dwelling, which is yet prouder than all the palaces of the world. Lo, the stone is rolled away, the grave's shade awaits you with its refreshing coolness. But perhaps your time has not yet come, perhaps the way is long before you; but we promise you to gather here often to envy you your good fortune. Accept then our wish, a good wish: May no one understand you, may all men envy you; may no friend bind him-

self to you, may no woman love you; may no secret sympathy suspect your lonely pain, may no eye pierce your distant grief; may no ear trace your secret sigh! But perhaps your proud soul spurns such sympathetic wishes, and despises the alleviation, so may the maidens love you; may the pregnant in their anguish seek your aid; may the mothers set their hopes on you, and the dying look to you for comfort; may the youth attach themselves to you; may men depend upon you; may the aged lean upon you as on a staff—may the entire world believe that you are able to make them happy. So live well, then, unhappiest of men! But what do I say: the unhappiest, the happiest, I ought to say, for this is indeed a gift of the gods which no one can give himself. Language fails, and thought is confounded; for who is the happiest, except the unhappiest, and who the unhappiest, except the happiest, and what is life but madness, and faith but folly, and hope but the briefest respite, and love but vinegar in the wound.

He vanished, and we again stand before the empty tomb. Let us then wish him peace and rest and healing, and all possible happiness, and an early death, and an eternal forgetfulness, and no remembrance, lest even the memory of him should make another unhappy.

Arise, dear Symparanekromenoi. The night is spent, and the day begins its unwearied activities, never weary, it seems, of everlastingly repeating itself.

3. Though pursued by the Eumenides, Orestes at length found asylum in the Temple of Delphi. Not so the "unhappiest." He finds refuge nowhere.

4. *Aphorismenoi = segregati*, separated, cast out.

5. Solon had warned Croesus against the dangers of success; later, falling into the hands of Cyrus, Croesus called upon Solon.

6. An instance is *Phaenomenologie des Geistes*, IV, B.

7. "The third nut is death." (Clemens Brentano, *The Three Nuts*.)

8. Ancaeus, King of Samos, just as he was about to drink of the new wine, which the oracle had warned him against tasting, was killed by a wild boar.

9. Latona was condemned to wander about the earth before she could give birth to Apollo and Diana. The Hyperboreans were supposed to live back of the north wind. See Thomas Moore's "Song of the Hyperboreans."

10. Niobe was changed into stone through grief over the death of her children.

11. Job 1:21.

12. From this statement it is evident that "the unhappiest" is the person whose condition was described in the paragraph beginning, "Let us proceed. Let us imagine a combination . . ."

"THE UNHAPPIEST MAN"

1. The epitaph really exists in Worcester. Chateaubriand mentions this.

2. Pram, *Heroic Odes*, 1785.