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## Lycée Essay (2): The Truth, when Known / Though Sad, Has yet its Charms

### Abstract

The subject of the essay, here in its English version, is taken from Giacomo Leopardi's poem to Count Carlo Pepoli (Canti, 1841) and reads in English, "... the truth, when known, / Though sad, has yet its charms". One type of person accepts the world as it is, seeing only its beautiful side, is transported by dreams and refuses to take into account cruel truths. Others detach themselves from the human herd, not being content with vain appearances; they are driven by the desire to know but risk becoming total sceptics. A third type looks at the world as it is, knowing that the truth they see may be hard to accept, but reason rather than an attack on spurious targets must be used to find it. The real heroism of the "man of thought" is a knowledge of the world as it really is, which entails not hiding unpleasant sides from outsiders, which would amount to a hypocritical "Jesuitism". Wrong and harmful positions must be attacked, as for example in Emile Zola's "J'accuse" letter and, in Italy, Giosuè Carducci's diatribes against the "patriots" who were ruining the young Italian State.

### Keywords

Truth; Illusion; Reality; Jesuitism; Zola; Carducci.

## *Lycée Essay (2): The Truth, though Sad, Has yet its Charms*

Antonio Gramsci

Nature offers man marvellous spectacles, art and genius continuously produce works of the highest quality, able to stimulate the senses, and the loved ones attract him with their affections; he could enjoy life, loving the world as it appears and being content to observe the effects of phenomena, without looking for their causes. And the universe lends itself in an extraordinary way to this masque, since it is beautiful for those who wish to see it thus. And the majority of men unconsciously let themselves be transported by their dreams, voluptuously cradle themselves in the joy of living, and do not seek to deepen their observations, to seek all that the world produces, both good and beautiful. And moreover, this hatred of philosophical speculation is logical; having to live, it is necessary to believe that life is good; since almost all men are weak and vile creatures, they would not know how to stand cruel truths, and if these intuitively appeared as such, a disaster would come about.

And yet there are certain higher men, who detach themselves from the human herd, isolate themselves in their conscience, and want no subterfuge or hypocrisy, but prefer to drop all illusions one by one all, see the removal of all *raison d'être*, all ideal towards which life is directed, rather than be content in coward fashion with vain appearances that please only the weak.

They are always driven by a never-satisfied desire to know, and in their speculation go so much further that they abstract themselves from life, and by studying life's phenomena and relations end up by not believing in anything, except their own existence. But since they are men and suffer and feel like everyone, when they see their every desire vanish, when they feel all the emptiness of their existence, they experience pain and are unhappy.

Because truth is such a fine and such a pure thing, that in itself cannot be a source of pain. It is men who, used to seeing life from one sole point of view, are not able to convince themselves that

what they see is but one facet of an immense prism, and suffer and are torture themselves if they come to know that the entire inner sanctum that they have constructed in their mind, is nothing other than an inflated bubble that can be burst by the prick of a pin

Those who are more to be admired are the ones who, while knowing that what they are seeking is in the nature of a double edged weapon that will cause them a deep wound, sacrifice themselves and lacerate their flesh, and at the same time feel the need to elevate their conscience, which becomes higher than that of the mass of the other men, who vegetate without aspiring to know life's wellsprings, and flee away from everything capable of dragging them out of error, and attach themselves even to hooks just to maintain themselves in the state of a blessed lack of conscience. And Leopardi protested before dying against the tendency of men to want to deny the truth, even though it is clearly the truth. 'I pray my readers' he said 'to involve themselves in destroying my observations and my reasonings, better than blaming them on my various illnesses'.

Moreover, what merit is there in loving life, when it seems paradise? Heroism instead ought to be called knowledge of the world, as it really is, and still remain part of it. It is here that the profound difference lies between the man of thought and the man of the "herd". The former has been liberated from the hypocrisy that is dominant in the external and internal life of man. Even suffering from the most atrocious spasms he has wanted to know good and evil, after which he feels alone, isolated from the rest of the world.

In public life too, in the relation between man and man, Jesuitism is triumphant. The ills of humanity have to be hidden, to the point of not wanting to know them; all the defects that it is not wished that gnaw at the body of the nation have to be kept secret from the foreigners. If the people are dying of hunger, if the nation is in the hands of a number of charlatans with no conscience, it does not matter as long as nothing trickles through to the outside world. One may remember the mountain of abuse hurled at Zola when he published his *J'accuse* letter; in the case of Carducci himself, how many were the enemies he made with his iambics, in which he wished to mortally wound all the gnomes and pygmies who were reducing Italy – still young – to ruin, while presenting a fine

appearance to the external world so as not to reveal its sores. Carducci was accused of having little feeling for his country, and yet he had to suffer in seeing the fatherland of the Catos and Brutuses prey to the Vanni Fuccis and the Stenterellos; but his innate feeling of duty and sincerity obliged him to hurl against the fatherland the word of insult and contempt.

The various mediocrities were not able to understand the greatness of the act, which one day, when the conscience of the nation would be more developed, would ransom the fatherland from shame. When one clarifies the conception that the true, even when brutal, is preferable to the illusion that clouds the senses, a great step forward will have been made in evolution, and men will also suffer less than they do now.

This last concept is a little obscure; but the work has been thought out and felt, and is praiseworthy of thought and of form. The subject is very intense and well developed.

7-8/10. V. A. Arullani

[The signature “A. Gramsci” appears under the judgment and signature of Arullani and the grade]