

THE HAPPY AND THE UNHAPPY

by Peter Schjeldahl

The real class war is between the happy and the unhappy. The happy never know what they have; the unhappy exaggerate it. It is a misunderstanding, but if everybody understood everything there couldn't be any history.

The unhappy may be rich or poor or middle-class. The happy are usually middle-class, marveling at the shiny pleasures of the rich and the smoky pleasures of the poor. It sometimes seems to the happy that their own pleasures are rather dull, but what do they know? Simply living is a pleasure to them such as the unhappy never know.

Usually, unhappy child equals future unhappy adult equals future neutral dead person. Usually, happy child equals future neutral dead person, with the adult in question. That is, it's all decided very early, but something can always go wrong. A happy child may be one capable merely of disappointment. For the unhappy, everything that goes wrong is Suspicion Confirmed. Unhappiness has its satisfactions.

Those who were unhappy and have become happy and those who were happy and have become unhappy know secrets they are not permitted to share. They are strange to themselves and embarrassments to both camps.

Unhappy people who have become happy look stunned. Happy people who have become unhappy look savage.

The unhappy are like fish envious of those who breathe air. It is comical watching the fish try to squirm up out of the water and assault the homes of the air-breathers. Then you realize, with growing awe, that they may be just pissed off enough to succeed.



Jose Urbach

If I am happy and you are unhappy, everything you say will dismay me and everything I say will grate on you.

One law for the happy and the happy is the tyranny of the happy.

The tyranny of the happy is no joke. Appearing happy is a compulsory aspect of rituals from which the unhappy are not excused. Thus do unhappy ones, in mid-ritual, come to imagine themselves happy. Then they meet someone who is really happy, and the way they feel is indescribable.

Happiness has no exchange value. Unhappiness is always in circulation. Life is continually minting new denominations of unhappiness. In the meeting places of the world, these change hands night and day. The unhappy move through the streets with their pockets bulging. The happy are static, like gold in the ground.

The violence of the happy is heedlessness. The violence of the unhappy is biting and scratching. The happy know that to think too much is asking for it. The unhappy think without ceasing.

When I ask myself whether I am happy or unhappy, I remember that only unhappy people ask such questions.

Peter Schjeldahl is a poet and art critic and lives in New York. "The Happy and the Unhappy" originally appeared in Parkett, No. 7. Parkett is a Swiss quarterly published in English and German.

THE SUSPECT SMILE

To discover whether or not a man is prey to madness, you need merely observe his smile. Does it leave you with an impression close to discomfort? Now is your chance for some amateur psychiatry...

We rightly suspect the smile which does not adhere to a person, which seems to come from elsewhere, from another; it does come, in fact, from another, from the madman who lies in wait, preparing, organizing himself before declaring himself.

A fugitive light given off by ourselves, our smile lasts as long as it should, without extending beyond the occasion or pretext which has provoked it. Since it does not linger upon our countenance, it is difficult to notice: it cleaves to a given situation; it is exhausted in the moment. The other smile, the suspect one, survives the event which gave it birth, lingers, perpetuates itself, cannot disappear. At first it solicits our attention, intrigues us, then vexes, disturbs, and obsesses us. Try as we will to discount or reject it, it regards us, and we regard it. No way of eluding it, of protecting ourselves against its power of insinuation. The impression of malaise it first inspired in us swells, deepens, and turns to terror. But the smile, unable to end, spreads as though detached from, independent of, our interlocutor — a smile-in-itself, a terrifying smile, the mask that could cover any face: our own, for example.

— E. M. CIORAN

From "The Temptation to Exist," published by Seaver Books. Translated from the French by Richard Howard.

GENEROUS SPIRIT

A young man of unspeakable ugliness was sitting in a barber's chair. His face, long, pale, sheeplike, was covered with bleeding pimples. The scissors were cutting gobbets of his yellow hair. I felt such disgust that the thought of finding myself soon in the same armchair and of submitting myself to the same scissors was unbearable to me. In this way I caught myself once more in my repugnance for the majority of the human tribe, and, underneath that, was my attraction to the species opposed to them, the species of the good-looking, among whom, obviously, I counted myself.

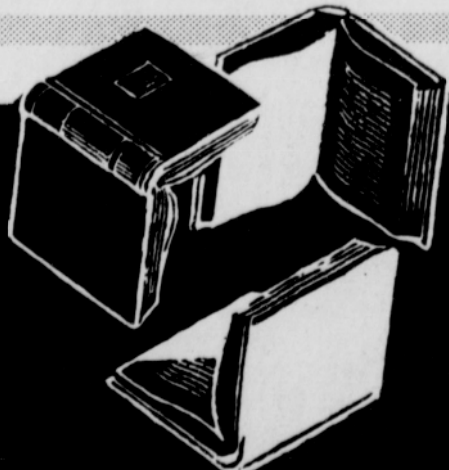
— CZESLAW MILOSZ

From "Unattainable Earth," a collection of poems and other writings, published by Ecco Press. Milosz received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1980. Translated by the author and Robert Hass.

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