

## **PART II: PANIZZA'S LITERATURE**

“ . . .I commend my soul to the Lord; may He forgive my having sat so long at my desk in these golden summer days. There are not many people for whom I would have made this sacrifice.”

(O.J. Bierbaum, “Oskar Panizza”)

## Chapter 3.

# LIFE IS HELL: THE POETRY OF PAIN

### Delicacies and Peasant Fare

**T**he published poems of Oskar Panizza number slightly more than two hundred and appeared in four separate collections: *Düstere Lieder* (1886), *Londoner Lieder* (1887), *Legendäres und Fabelhaftes* (1889), and *Parisjana* (1899). The first three books, though they are the products of a man in his mid-thirties, can be grouped together as the “early poems.” Between these three, which followed each other in rapid succession, and the publication of *Parisjana*, there is a full ten-year hiatus, during which virtually no poetry was written. Panizza is least known for his verse, and yet it is hardly a coincidence that the first and last books he published were volumes of poetry. He was a “failure” in poetry as in almost everything else; nonetheless, even these inferior works bear the unmistakable mark of Panizza and add to a fuller comprehension of this writer.

Only a few critics, including the poet Otto Julius Bierbaum and the recent Panizza-editor Hans Prescher, have bothered to comment upon the three volumes of early poems. The latter merely mentions that “in the eighties of the last century he published three slender volumes of poetry, whose form and contents are, to be sure, quite insufficient.”<sup>1</sup> In an essay written seventy years before Prescher’s, Oskar’s sometime friend and fellow-poet Bierbaum devoted nearly two pages to a discussion of the early poems.<sup>2</sup> Most of this space, though, is taken up with a justification of Panizza’s anti-bourgeois tendencies in terms which were later freely borrowed by Weinhöppel

to characterize the author's early writings.<sup>3</sup> Employing a profusion of culinary metaphors, Bierbaum refers to his friend's poetry as a "refined delicacy" mixed with coarse peasant fare. What bothers him most is a general lack of beauty, although he realizes that a presentation of the sublime is by no means on the program of Naturalism. Thus the formal aspect of Panizza's poetry receives his harshest criticism: "The form is usually very inadequate. . . . One senses: this poetry does not come from the heart, otherwise it would have the pulsating, perhaps irregular but still spiritually rhythmic heartbeat. No: it is produced in the brain,—in a strange brain with no small dose of brilliant madness."<sup>4</sup> While it is immediately evident that his poetry is extremely deficient esthetically, there seems no justification for maintaining that it "does not come from the heart," if this is to mean the emotional realm. An analysis of Panizza's verse will show exactly the opposite to be the case: there is a superabundance of feeling and heartfelt suffering; what is sorely lacking is the conscious craft of the skilled poet.

The works of Heine had the greatest influence on Panizza's poetry, and Leixner has pointed out that "the irony in the treatment of the material, as well as the expression and the verse form, are reminiscent of this model."<sup>5</sup> It is impossible, however, to agree with his assertion that "Heine himself could have written some of the love poems with their mocking or cynical twists,"<sup>6</sup> since Panizza's poetic craft is such a distinctly inferior imitation of Heine's.

He utilized predominantly iambic rhythms, mostly in tetrameter, though occasionally we do find three-beat lines by themselves or alternating with tetrameter. The overwhelming majority of his verse is grouped into stanzas of four lines with alternating end-rhymes; for variation and simplicity, sometimes only the second and fourth lines are rhymed. Such common poetic devices as alliteration and assonance occur no more frequently than they would in everyday speech. Indeed, Panizza's poetry is poetic only in mood rather than language. One gets the impression that the author wished to write in prose, that it was a bothersome nuisance to chop his convoluted sentences into lines of fairly uniform length. It is difficult to understand why such a liberated spirit as Panizza felt constrained to adhere so rigidly to traditional tetrameters, end-rhymes, and four-line stanzas. The result is not one of studied ugliness but simply unskilled awkwardness: either the iambic rhythm is arbitrarily thrown out of kilter, or German words and syntax are grotesquely distorted, or both. Strangely

enough, this genuine awkwardness does indeed express something that the poet was not intentionally trying to communicate. It expresses his utter failing as a poet, and since most of these poems deal with human defeat, perhaps their inadequate form is best suited to convey the feelings of profound failure experienced by Oskar Panizza.

### Düstre Lieder

The fifty-two poems in *Düstre Lieder* are loosely grouped into four sections: "Twilight Pieces" (5 poems), "Ballads and Romances" (7), "Men and Women" (21), and "Miscellaneous" (19). Aside from the cycle of sonnets comprising the section titled "Men and Women," there is no reason to view the various groups separately. Many of the poems are "Twilight Pieces" in the sense that they originate in the nebulous zone between reality and fantasy, and most of the pieces outside the category of "Ballads and Romances" are so decidedly epic in conception and execution as to make separate categorization a senseless formalism. It seems far more fruitful to discuss this collection of poems from a thematic point of view, since, with the exception of "Men and Women," they all deal with common themes expressed in identical forms.

It has already been mentioned that *Düstre Lieder* is haunted by an all-pervasive mood of failure, a failure which finds its clearest expression in a half-dozen areas: religion, insanity, death, sex, infidelity, and love. Some of these problem areas are familiar to us from Panizza's biography, and yet the intensity of Panizza's suffering is revealed nowhere as clearly as in his poetry. One searches in vain through the author's entire work for a presentation of religious guilt as powerful as that found in the poem "Der Firmling." Little Gustav has had a forbidden dream the night before his confirmation, and becomes terrified at the thought of going through with the ceremony the following day. His moral distress mounts as the sermon drones on. Hearing the words, "Es sind in meinem Himmelreich/Viel blonde, schöne Knaben" (p. 43), he screams out in terror and falls dead to the ground. At no point are we told what Gustav had actually been dreaming about, although it is clear from the context that the fantasy was sexual in nature; the term "blonder, schöner Knabe," repeated seven times in the course of the poem, also bears obvious homosexual implications. The reader is left with the clear knowledge

that whatever fantasies Gustav had, he was killed by a religion that inhibits the free expression of natural life forces.

Sex, religion, death, and insanity are all inexorably linked in Panizza's mind, and it would be folly to attempt to view them as separate problem areas. Religion is regarded as being hostile to sex, and the struggle between these two forces within a person is so violent that it can easily lead to death or insanity. Frequently it produces a decadent sado-masochism as depicted in the poem "In der Kirche":

Und horch! die rothen Lippen erzählen  
 Die alten, kleinen, frommen Geschichten,  
 Die tausendjäh'gen Histörchen vom Himmel,  
 Wo Maria, die ad'lige Himmelsob'rin  
 Dortsitzt am Thron, in der weissen Brust  
 Die sieben Schwerter, während die Lippen  
 Lächeln den honigsüssen Qualen, —  
 Von den weissen, schneeigreinen Gefilden,  
 Wo die Märtyrer mit klaffendblut'gen,  
 Rieselnden Wunden so friedlich einhergehen  
 Und zählen die Lanzen in der Brust, — (p. 7f.)

If people end up destroying themselves in order to keep a pure conscience, it is not God who wins out, but the Devil and his infernal cohorts:

Da sitzen kleine, haar'ge Gesellen,  
 Mit neckischen Hörnern,  
 Und schwarzen, langabhängenden Schwänzchen,  
 Die spotten herunter mit Hohngezwitzcher. . . (p. 9)

Devils, witches, and terrifying monsters figure prominently in Panizza's poetry. Tam O'Shanter, who could drink like no other man in Scotland, is pursued by hordes of devils and rides his bloody horse to death (p. 59). In "Der Hexenritt," the poet recounts how when he was a little boy his nurse tried to seduce him:

Als ich ein Knäbchen tugendsam  
 Zur Wiege lag, da küsst  
 Mich einst die wunderschöne Amm'  
 Mit seltsamen Gelüst. (p. 27)

The nurse transforms herself into a witch, taking the excited boy off to the Harz mountains for a roaring Walpurgisnight. What he witnesses is the blasphemous jubilation of the witches' convention:

“Hujeh! vivat der Pferdefuss,  
Gelobt das Hexenweib!  
Die Seel' gehört den Höllenruss,  
Dem Teufel g'hört der Leib!

.....

Verflucht sei ER—pfui, spucket drauf!—  
Der dort das Scepter führt!  
Verdammt die DREI,—haut hinten 'nauf!—  
In Himmel die regiert!”

(p. 32)

Like Nietzsche, Panizza never tired of blaspheming the old, decrepit, impotent Christian God who had long since outlived his usefulness. The Devil, on the other hand, was alive and doing very well on earth; with his sexy witches and terrifying demons, he remained in complete control of mankind. To both Nietzsche and Panizza, it seemed incomprehensible that anyone other than a cowardly fool could believe in the redemptive powers of a dead or dying God.

## Hospital Poetry

Perhaps he was more than cynical toward a has-been divinity, because he could not help identifying with the moribund human beings he had come to know as a physician. There is much in the verse of Dr. Oskar Panizza that anticipates the poetry which Dr. Gottfried Benn was writing some thirty years later.<sup>7</sup> Both men were intimately familiar with what takes place in hospitals, first as medical students and later as practicing physicians. In “Das grosse Haus,” Panizza introduced what might be called “hospital poetry” into German literature:

Und quer den Gang kommt Sarg auf Sarg  
Gekeuchet  
Mit Leichen selig, still und arg  
Erbleichet  
Durch all Säle Bett an Bett—

Verderben! —  
 Mit Menschen ächzend, schmerzgekett',  
 Die sterben;  
 Bebrillte Herren gehen herum,  
 Die winken,  
 Und zischeln, lachen fein und stumm  
 Und zwinken. . . (p. 3f.)

Dr. Panizza's simultaneous revulsion and identification with his patients reaches its peak in fantastic paranoid delusions:

Aus allen Fenstern drängt's heraus,  
 Es recken  
 Viel' Körper nackend, brestverschwärt,  
 Die bäumen,  
 Mit Mienen dunsig, wuthverzehrt,  
 Und schäumen,  
 Es zeigt mit tausend Händen her  
 Anklagend,  
 Und Augen rollen wild und schwer,  
 Wie jagend  
 Das ganze Haus die Höll' im Nu  
 Vereinte, —  
 Ich aber schloss die Augen zu,  
 Und weinte. (p. 5)

The harrowing and revolting experiences of dealing with wholesale death elicit guilt, hell, and insanity. Hell is not a faraway place where people go after death, but rather a state of mind generated by the frustrations and paradoxes of life itself.

Sometimes life becomes so problematic that the best solution is provided by death. In "Die Nix," a beautiful, sad-eyed girl falls in love with a young fellow at a dance. Since she is no longer free, their love can only be sealed by death; the two young lovers dance into the river and drown (p. 52). Panizza's despair and revulsion at life reach baroque proportions in the penultimate sonnet of "Men and Women":

Voll Ekel ist die Welt!—Die Menschen blicken  
 So krank und bleich, und keiner hofft Genesung;  
 Und was sie denken ist schon Hirnverwesung,  
 Ein jeder trägt den Sarg schon auf dem Rücken;

Und Keiner merkt's,—sie springen und sie scherzen,  
 Sie merken nicht das arge, grosse Sterben,  
 Sie hassen und sie lieben, küssen, werben,  
 Sie merken nicht die grossen Wahnsinnsschmerzen.— (p. 87)

There is, however, another aspect of life, a haven if not a heaven where the weary earthling can find refuge and be restored in mind and body:

Ich weiss ein Schloss mit duftenden Gemachen,  
 Drinn sitzen Mädchen, und die Mädchen lachen,  
 Die Hände waschen sie mit weissen Rosen,

Kommt Einer, den die Welt hat ausgestossen,  
 Sie öffnen ihm,—er wird wie neugeboren,  
 Das Schloss, das Schloss!—der Schlüssel ging  
 verloren. (p. 87)

This castle motif wends its way like a red thread through Panizza's early poems. It seems obvious that we are dealing with a poetic metaphor for a brothel, since the castle's inhabitants are always beautiful girls whose sexual favors are capable of dispersing the poet's deep depression. The reference to the key in the last line would appear to be a phallic image, in line with the widespread use of this symbol in German literature ever since Goethe.<sup>8</sup> Based on the limited biographical data we have for Panizza, no amount of speculation will provide a definitive interpretation of what is meant by "der Schlüssel ging verloren." All that can be said for certain is that despite the poet's basically positive attitude toward sex, he expressed a problematic ambivalence to women which resulted in feelings of inadequacy.

### Fear of Women

These feelings of inadequacy are readily apparent in the numerous poems dealing exclusively with the subject of sexual infidelity. Two of them are written in the first person and concern traumatic events experienced by the groom during the period immediately preceding the marriage. In "Die rothe Braut" (pp. 23-26), the white bride suddenly becomes "red with love" and is forcefully taken from her fiancé's arms. A similar situation exists in "Der Träumer"



(pp. 97f.), where the unsuspecting groom wanders through the woods asking the flora and fauna whether they have seen his beloved. At last he learns the truth from the little birds who inform him that "Deine Liebste war soeben hier, / Sie war mit einem Grenadier!" The revelation of infidelity is usually placed just before a wedding or in some other social context where the jilted lover will suffer public shame in addition to the private pain of being rejected. Thus in "Herr Heymon," when the knight returns after seven years with the crusades, he must learn from his wife, in the presence of the entire court, that she had been unfaithful to him. Quite predictably, his response is one of impotence: he breaks down and weeps (p. 62). In "Die Dirne und der schwarze Junker," another of the many poems set in the Middle Ages, the black knight simply appears at a party and walks off with "die übermüth'ge Dirne," leaving behind the horrified guests and her pale lover (pp. 53-55). In none of these instances does the abandoned young man put up any sort of a struggle; indeed, he usually has a vague premonition of what is about to occur, and simply accepts it as a painful fact of life when it finally does happen.

Perhaps Panizza's fear of being rejected by women was abnormally heightened because he was so dependent on their affection to soothe his feelings of rejection by the world. In poems such as "Vergebens," he speaks again and again of how he feels like an outcast from the world:

O frage nicht, ob Du vielleicht  
Dich mit der Welt noch wirst versöhnen,  
Nachträglich Mitleid hilft Dir nicht,  
Dein Schicksal ist ja längst beschlossen!

Was Du bisher gekämpft, geweint,  
War mühsam nachgeöfftes Blendwerk,  
Du weisst, die Frau hat Dich geküsst,  
Zum Venusberg musst Du zurücke!

Das Mal war ja auf Deiner Stirn  
Schon eingebrannt seit Kindestagen,  
An Deiner Wiege stund die Fee,  
Ihr Schicksalspruch muss sich erfüllen!

.....  
Geh lieber gleich zu ihr und sage,  
Die Welt hab' Dich schon ausgestossen. (pp. 114f.)

The mention of infant sexuality is significant since it has been cited in two previously discussed poems, in connection with Gustav's death by guilt in "Der Firmling," and the nurse of "Der Hexenritt" whose sexual advances produced a demonic fantasy in her young charge. This recurrent motif would seem to indicate that Oskar had some early experience with the healing power of Frau Venus, who is usually depicted as a nurse or some other maternal authority figure capable of restoring the wounded individual back to health:

Frau Venus steht am Fenster dort  
Im güldnen Rosenkleid,  
Die lacht Dich an und spricht kein Wort,  
Dann schwindet all Dein Leid.

Frau Venus hat ein Händchen klein  
So sanft wie Milch und Blut,  
Die legt sie auf die Wunden Dein,  
Dann wird Dir wieder gut. ("Das Schloss," p. 92)

In sexual as in other contexts, the poet plays a totally passive role; he is always receiving what is mercifully being given to him. The act of sex can thus be manipulated to assume the role of a "positive reinforcer," a powerful reward to place his behavior under the control of a woman,

Die mit Küssen uns belohnet  
Fern im Stübchen eng und schmal,  
Die im weissen Bettchen wohnt. . .  
(*"Die kleine Sangerin,"* p. 110)

Since Panizza was acutely aware of the controlling power that women exercised over him, he was anxious to avoid becoming too dependent on any single one. His fear of becoming over-involved and thus losing his freedom is distinctly manifest in the concluding stanzas of "Die blühenden Madchen":

Doch was so wildbeschwerlich,  
So unermesslich gross,  
Ist aus den grünen Armen  
Sich reissen wieder los.

Und wieder sich gewöhnen  
 Im neuen, fremden Land  
 An die seltsam wilden Blumen,  
 An die Mädchen unbekannt. (p. 93)

Panizza's negative attitude toward serious emotional involvement is naturally also reflected in his disdain for marriage, which he views as an institution for persons healthier than himself:

Ja,—das thun gesunde Leute  
 Ohne irgend welche Mahnung—  
 O, glaub' mir, wie sie gesund sind  
 Keiner hat davon die Ahnung!  
 ("Gesunde Leute," p. 101)

At this point, after our discussion of sex, infidelity, and marriage, one would be justified in asking whether the concept of love—as presented, for instance, by Goethe—played any role whatsoever in Panizza's poetry. The best answer to this question can be found in the twenty-one sonnets of "Men and Women," which deal specifically with the problems of relating to the opposite sex. While men are depicted as being strictly intellectual and rational (I.), women are more emotional and wiser (I.) due to their superior intuitive capabilities (II.). Females sweeten life (VI.) and, though incomprehensible (XII.), are definitely preferable to books (V.). The poet, the man, on the other hand, is troubled by all sorts of uncertainties (XIII.) and moral scruples (XIV.); he fears the sickness brought upon by inconstancy (XVIII.) and desperately longs to know what his beloved is thinking (XV.). Men are always at the mercy of women, never vice versa.

Although there is little formal structure to this cycle of sonnets, one can nevertheless discern a definite progression from a preoccupation with women in the first half to an almost exclusive emphasis on himself in the second. This second half, as well, moves from a vague expression of general uncertainties (XII.) to an abject disgust with the world and a heightened fear of death and insanity (XX.). Strategically located between these two halves, precisely in the pivotal center of the entire cycle, is the crucial sonnet (X.) where Panizza reveals his concept of love:

Als einst Achill von Wuth und Schmerz zerrissen  
 An's Meer sich setzte, laut aufschluchzend klagte,  
 Und über's Meer hinrief, die Wellen fragte,  
 Thetis, die schöne Frau, kam sanftbeflissen.

“Die Mutter doch!”—Ja ja, die Mutter,—gut!  
 Es war ein Weib,—in lichten, blonden Haaren,  
 Der Thränen fähig, und im Schmerz erfahren,  
 Das stimmt' ihn mild, das zähmte seine Wuth. (p. 75)

The archetypal concept of love which Panizza clung to, and beyond which he never seemed capable of evolving, was the elemental bond between mother and son. The love he sought was one which would blindly accept him despite his failures and weaknesses, which would heal his wounds and soothe his broken spirit, which would endure through time and not be jeopardized by the strains and caprices of an absurd world. He yearned for a love which would place no responsibilities or obligations upon him, which he could passively receive without the performance fears normally associated with aggressive courtship. Only a mother could adequately fill this role, and the other women in Panizza's life appear to have been either surrogate mothers or mere sex objects. To what extent the author was aware of his particular predicament is, of course, extremely difficult to determine. One gets the impression that he was, at least for a while, fairly successful at defending himself against certain painful insights, though this struggle did not go unnoticed. At the end of the twenty-first sonnet he complains about the constraints posed upon him by the sonnet form, and there is a strong desire for emotional release when he writes: “—ach, diese Fesseln / Ertrag' ich night, am liebsten möcht ich schreien!” (p. 88) The majority of Panizza's early poetry can readily be likened to a suppressed scream.

### Fear of Insanity

In his biography, we came to know Panizza as a fierce cultural warrior, an often quixotic crusader for the free expression of enlightened ideas and a socially liberated life-style. But in his most personal poetry, the author viewed himself as fighting battles within his own mind. The final poem in *Düstere Lieder*, “Die Krieger von Lochlin,”

depicts the poet struggling to subdue his own emotional drives and elusive fantasies:

Doch wir ach, kämpfen mit Schattenschwertern,  
 Und führen lautlos-kraftlose Hiebe  
 Gegen die eignen nebelhaften  
 Halberschlagen, dumpfen Gefühle,  
 Und fratzenhafte Triebe der Seele,  
 Die unverwundbar wie Phantome,  
 Mit gläsernem Leib und hölzernen Beinen,  
 Und lederner Brust und gefärbten Lippen  
 Aufs neue sich stets vom Lager erheben  
 Und uns verhöhnen mit gelben Gesichtern,  
 Ein erbärmlich-nichtsnutziger, zweckloser Kampf,  
 Den ganzen Tag und zu jeder Stunde,  
 Bis wir hinsinken endlich am Abend  
 Verzweifelnd fast, dass uns das Schicksal  
 Nicht gütige, blutende Wunden bescheert hat. . . (pp. 120f.)

There can be no doubt that already as a man in his early thirties, Panizza regarded his mind as a grave threat and a potential source of disaster. In the poem "Avancement," he observes how others, the "healthy people," use their heads to advance their careers and to establish secure personal relationships. In contrast to these respectable activities, he presents his own evolution as a gradual advancement into insanity:

Worin allein ich avancire,  
 Es ist zu wild, zu schmerzensebleich,  
 Mich zogen weisse Lichtgestalten  
 In ihr umklammernd Nebelreich. (p. 105)

The greatest document of young Panizza's overwhelming fear of insanity is the poem "Das rothe Haus." With its 244 lines it is by far the longest poem in the collection and the second-longest one he ever wrote. The "red house" of which the poet writes is an insane asylum, an institution that is both attractive and repellent. It exerts a powerful fascination on him, much like the mythical Tree of Knowledge, "Von dem verboten zu essen, / Die Frucht sei wunderbar und süß, / Doch die Folgen nicht zu bemessen" (p. 11). Not unexpectedly, the sight of the mental institution reminds him of his feelings toward his

mother and his golden fantasies of youth.:

Ich dacht' an den goldenen Jugendtraum,  
 Ich dacht' an die Mutter, die gute,  
 An eingestürztes Lebensglück. (p. 13)

What attracts him so strongly, though, are not the familiar faces of family and friends poking their demented heads out the asylum windows and beckoning him to join them. What he sees being offered to him is a most desirable opportunity to gain entrance to "eine geistige Freistatt" (p. 17), an intellectual sanctuary providing him with the absolute freedom to forget about his unhealthy body and to infinitely expand his consciousness:

Gelegenheit zum Denken ist hier,  
 Zum trüben und zum heitern;  
 Die Hirne schiessen hier ins Kraut,  
 Die Köpfe sich erweitern,

Die Köpfe wachsen riesengross  
 Mit Augen stier und hässlich,  
 Arme und Beinchen werden klein,  
 Die Gedanken unermesslich. (p. 17)

This escape from the painful external world into the liberated universe of the imagination is epitomized by the startling image of a hall filled with disembodied, furiously thinking brains: "Ein Zimmer mit lauter Köpfen voll, / Die Köpfe voller Gedanken" (p. 18). In this realm, nobody is doomed to failure by the insoluble conflicts of a harsh and indifferent world; here one can effortlessly attain "a brilliant advancement" and become Kaiser or God at will (p. 21). This seductive fantasy reaches its climax with the crescendo of inmates exhorting the poet to emancipate himself from all earthly bonds and join them:

Entflieh der Welt und ihrem Zwang,  
 Dem geistigen Chikaniren,  
 Hier bade Dich im Ideenrausch,—  
 Wir wollen Dich dann seciren.

Hier bist Du jeglicher Fessel frei,