AUBREY BEARDSLEY
*From the Photograph by Frederick H. Evans*

# THE EIGHTEEN NINETIES

## A REVIEW OF ART AND IDEAS AT THE CLOSE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

BY

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TO

MAX BEERBOHM

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# INTRODUCTION

THERE is little to say by way of introduction to this study, as the title, I imagine, explains the subject, with the possible exception that it does not, for reasons of space, indicate that I have reviewed only certain tendencies in art and ideas in this country. I have had, of course, to refer, incidentally, to the work of foreign writers and painters, but only as part of the process of tracing origins and lines of development. This is said not as excuse but in explanation of omissions which might otherwise be questioned. The movement which I have described in the British Islands was, to be sure, but one phase of a literary and artistic awakening which had its counterparts in many countries, particularly in France and Germany, and to some extent in Italy and Russia. Mr Arthur Symons, in the *Symbolist Movement in Literature*, has given us a valuable interpretation of one of its important phases in France, and Mr W. G. Blaikie Murdoch, in *The Renaissance of the Nineties*, has dealt eloquently, but all too briefly, with certain manifestations of the awakening in our own country, whilst Mr J. M. Kennedy in *English Literature, 1880-1905*, has made the literary history of the quarter century he reviews the basis of an argument in defence of the classical as against the romantic idea. My intention has been to co-ordinate the various movements of the period, and avoiding sectional or specialised argument, to interpret them not only in relation to one another, but in relation to their foreign influences and the main trend of our national art and life. Thus my aim may be described as interpretative rather than critical, although criticism is not easily avoided by one who engages to select examples and instances from a great body of work.

No excuse need be made by me for confining my review to so limited a period as the last decade of the nineteenth

century, for once having decided to write about the art and ideas of the closing years of that century, the final ten years insisted upon definite recognition by the coincidence of position in time and appropriate happenings in literature, painting, and other arts and crafts. But, as a matter of fact, I have not confined myself strictly to a single decade, for it will be seen that my Nineties trespass upon the adjoining territory of the Eighties and the Nineteen Hundreds, and, to protect myself as far as possible against extraneous argument, I have adopted in the initial chapter the dates "1890-1900" as a kind of symbol for the period. The compromise is defensible, as I have not wilfully singled out a decade for review; that decade had singled itself out, the Eighteen Nineties having already become a distinctive epoch in the minds of those who concern themselves with art and ideas.

Anybody who studies the moods and thoughts of the Eighteen Nineties cannot fail to observe their central characteristic in a widespread concern for the correct—that is, the most effective, the most powerful, the most righteous—mode of living. For myself, however, the awakening of the Nineties does not appear to be the realisation of a purpose, but the realisation of a possibility. Life aroused curiosity. People became enthusiastic about the way it should be used. And in proof of sincerity there were opinionated battles—most of them inconclusive. But they were not wasteful on that account, for the very circumstance of idea pitting itself against idea, vision against vision, mood against mood, and, indeed, whim against whim, cleared the way for more definite action when the time ripened. It was an epoch of experiment, with some achievement and some remorse. The former is to be seen in certain lasting works of art and in the acceptance of new, and sometimes revolutionary, social ideas; the latter in the repentant attitude of so many poets and other artists of the time who, after tasting more life than was good for them, reluctantly sought peace in an escape from material concerns. The decade began with a dash for life and ended with a retreat—but not defeat. It was the



old battle between heterodoxy and orthodoxy, materialist and mystic, Christian and Pagan, but fought from a great variety of positions. Arthur Symons summed up the situation very effectively in the conclusion to *Studies in Prose and Verse*, where he discusses the conversion of Huysmans. "He has realised," Mr Symons wrote, "the great choice between the world and something which is not the visible world, but out of which the visible world has been made, does not lie in the mere contrast of the subtler and grosser senses. He has come to realise what the choice really is, and he has chosen. Yet the choice is not quite so narrow as Barbey D'Aurevilly thought; perhaps it is a choice between actualising this dream or actualising that dream. In his escape from the world, one man chooses religion, and seems to find himself; another choosing love may seem also to find himself; and may not another, coming to art as to a religion and as to a woman, seem to find himself not less effectively? The one certainty is that society is the enemy of man, and that formal art is the enemy of the artist. We shall not find ourselves in drawing-rooms or in museums. A man who goes through a day without some fine emotion has wasted his day, whatever he has gained by it. And it is so easy to go through day after day, busily and agreeably, without ever really living for a single instant. Art begins when a man wishes to immortalise the most vivid moment he has ever lived. Life has already, to one not an artist, become art in that moment. And the making of one's life into art is after all the first duty and privilege of every man. It is to escape from material reality into whatever form of ecstasy is our own form of spiritual existence." There we have the attitude of the Eighteen Nineties from which most pilgrimages into life began. In the following pages I have endeavoured to expound the attitude and to indicate its victories and defeats.

Finally, I have to thank all those who have so willingly given me their aid by permitting me to quote from their works and to use the illustrations written and pictorial which add so much to the grace and value of this book. Particularly

I must thank Mr John Lane for permission to use the following designs by Aubrey Beardsley :—"The Rape of the Lock," "Tail-piece from *Salomé*," and the cover designs from *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*; Mr William Heinemann, for the study of Rudyard Kipling from *Twelve Portraits* by William Nicholson; Messrs J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., for Aubrey Beardsley's page decoration from the *Morte d'Arthur*; Messrs George Routledge & Sons Ltd., for the frontispiece and title-page of *The House of Joy*, by Laurence Housman; the proprietors of *Punch*, for "A Lecture in Store," by Phil May; the editor of *Vanity Fair*, for the caricature of Phil May by Spy; the editor of *The Saturday Review*, for William Rothenstein's cover design of the Christmas Supplement, 1896; Mr Walter Crane and Messrs George Allen & Co. Ltd., for the illustration from the decorated edition of the *Faerie Queene*; Mr Walter Crane, for the Socialist cartoon, "A Garland for May Day"; Mr Francis Meynell, for the photograph of the life mask of Francis Thompson; Mr Raven Hill, for "A Voluptuary," from *Pick-me-up*; Mr Charles Ricketts, for the decorated pages from the Vale Press edition of John Gray's *Spiritual Poems*; the executors of William Morris, for the page from the Kelmscott *Coleridge*; Mr Max Beerbohm, for his caricature of Aubrey Beardsley and "Mr W. B. Yeats introducing Mr George Moore to the Queen of the Fairies"; and my friends, Mr Frederick H. Evans, for his portrait study of Beardsley; Mr William Rothenstein, for his drawing of A. E. Housman; Mr S. H. Sime, for "The Banks of the Styx"; Mr Grant Richards, for the "Arrival of Prince Charming," and "The Peacock Fan," by Charles Conder; and Mr Frederick Richardson, for untiring help and many suggestions during the making of the book in all its stages.

HOLBROOK JACKSON.

LONDON, *October*, 1913.

## CHAPTER I

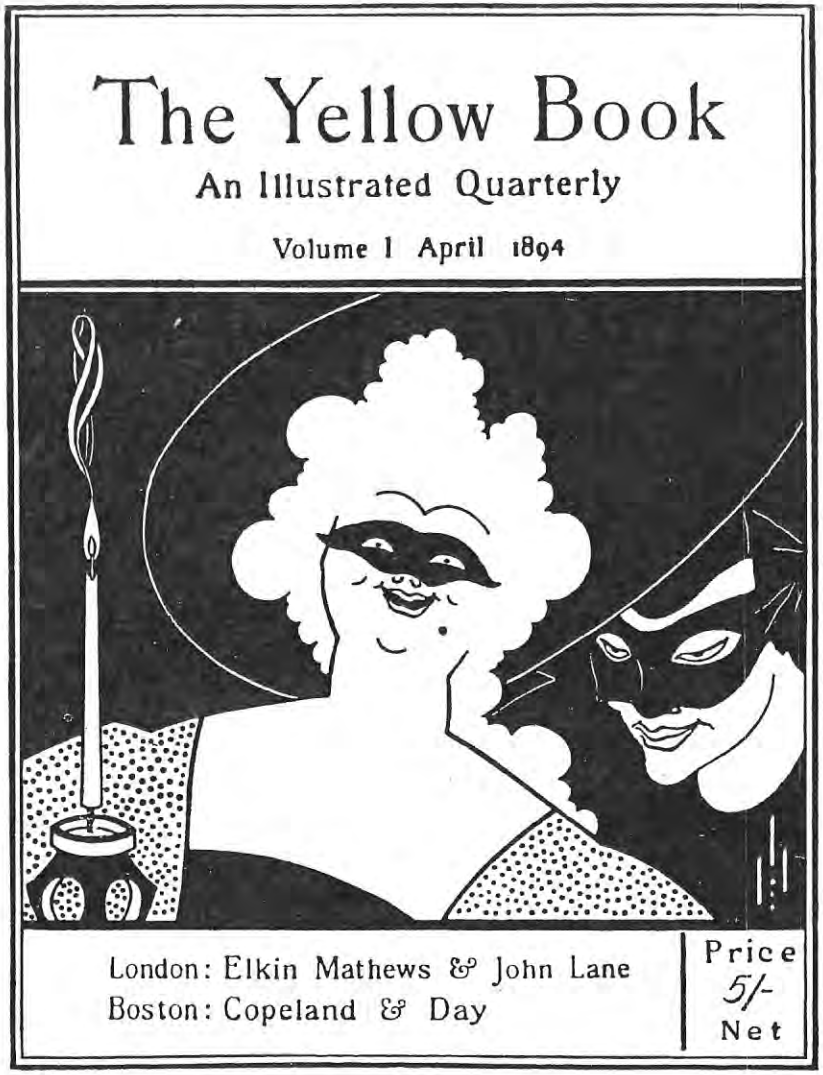
### FIN DE SIÈCLE—1890–1900

IN the year 1895 Max Beerbohm announced, how whimsically and how ironically it is not necessary to consider, that he felt himself a trifle out-moded. "I belong to the Beardsley period," he said. The Eighteen Nineties were then at their meridian; but it was already the afternoon of the Beardsley period. That very year Aubrey Beardsley's strange black and white masses and strong delicate lines disappeared from *The Yellow Book*, and he only contributed to the first few numbers of *The Savoy*, which began in 1896. Fatal disease was overtaking him, and remorse. Aubrey Beardsley actually abandoned his period in the evening of its brief day, and when he died, in 1898, the Beardsley period had almost become a memory. But, after all, Aubrey Beardsley was but an incident of the Eighteen Nineties, and only relatively a significant incident. He was but one expression of *fin de siècle* daring, of a bizarre and often exotic courage, prevalent at the time and connected but indirectly, and often negatively, with some of the most vital movements of a decade which was singularly rich in ideas, personal genius and social will. Aubrey Beardsley crowded the vision of the period by the peculiarity of his art rather than by any need there was of that art to make the period complete. He was, therefore, not a necessity of the Eighteen Nineties, although his appearance in the decade was inevitable; indeed he was so essentially *fin de siècle* that one can say of him with more confidence than of any other artist of the decade that his appearance at any other time would have been inopportune.

The Eighteen Nineties were so tolerant of novelty in art and ideas that it would seem as though the declining century

wished to make amends for several decades of intellectual and artistic monotony. It may indeed be something more than coincidence that placed this decade at the close of a century, and *fin de siècle* may have been at one and the same time a swan song and a death-bed repentance. As a matter of fact, a quickening of life during the last years of a century is not without parallel. The preceding century closed with the French Revolution and the First Consulate of Napoleon, and the sixteenth century closed with the destruction of the Armada and the appearance of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Spenser, Christopher Marlowe and Francis Bacon; whilst the close of the fifteenth century saw the Revival of Learning, and the discovery of America by Columbus and of Newfoundland by Cabot. One cannot avoid the temptation to speculate on the meaning of such *fin de siècle* occurrences, for we are actually made more conscious of our standing towards time by the approaching demise of a century, just as we are made conscious of our own ages on birthday anniversaries and New Year's Eve. And it is at least thinkable that as we are certainly moved in the latter circumstances to pull ourselves together, as it were, even if the effort be only an instinctive attempt to find in action forgetfulness of the flight of time; so it is equally thinkable that a similar but racial instinct towards unique activity may come about at so impressive a period as the close of a century. But, whatever the cause, the last decade of the last century was, in spite of its many extravagances, a renascent period, characterised by much mental activity and a quickening of the imagination, combined with pride of material prosperity, conquest and imperial expansion, as well as the desire for social service and a fuller communal and personal life.

Max Nordau, the Jeremiah of the period, linked up his famous attack on what were called "*fin de siècle* tendencies" with certain traditional beliefs in the evil destiny of the closure of centuries. "The disposition of the times is curiously confused," he said; "a compound of feverish restlessness and blunted discouragement, of fearful presage and hang-dog renunciation. The prevalent feeling is that of




COVER DESIGN OF *THE YELLOW BOOK*, VOLUME I
*By Aubrey Beardsley*

imminent perdition and extinction. *Fin de siècle* is at once a confession and a complaint. The old northern faith contained the fearsome doctrine of the Dusk of the Gods. In our days there have arisen in more highly developed minds vague qualms of the Dusk of the Nations, in which all suns and all stars are gradually waning, and mankind with all its institutions and creations is perishing in the midst of a dying world." All of which sounds very hectic and hysterical now, nearly twenty years after it was first written, when many of the writers and artists he condemned have become harmless classics, and some almost forgotten. But it is interesting to remember Nordau's words, because they are an example of the very liveliness of a period which was equally lively in making or marring itself. The Eighteen Nineties, however, were not entirely decadent and hopeless; and even their decadence was often decadence only in name, for much of the genius denounced by Max Nordau as degeneration was a sane and healthy expression of a vitality which, as it is not difficult to show, would have been better named regeneration.

At the same time the fact must not be overlooked that much of the vitality of the period, much even of its effective vitality, was destructive of ideas and conventions which we had come to look upon as more or less permanent; and one cannot help feeling, at this distance, that not a little of *fin de siècle* attractiveness was the result of abandonment due to internal chaos. But this is no cause for condemnation on our part, still less for self-complacency; for, as we have been told by Friedrich Nietzsche, himself a half-felt motive force, in this country at least, behind the tendencies of the times: "Unless you have chaos within you cannot give birth to a dancing star." More than one dancing star swam into our ken in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and the proof of the regenerative powers of the period are to be found most obviously, but perhaps even more certainly, if not quite so plainly, in the fact that those who were most allied with its moods and whims were not only conscious of the fact, but in some cases capable of looking at themselves and laughing. *Fin de siècle* was a pose as well as a fact, a point not realised

by Nordau. John Davidson, among others, was able to smile at its extravagances, and in *Earl Lavender*, his burlesque novel of the decadence, one of the characters, a garrulous Cockney dame with a smattering of French, reveals the existence of power to cast what Meredith would have called "the oblique ray" upon the doings of the time. "It's *fang-de-seeaycle* that does it, my dear," says this lady, "and education, and reading French."

It is obvious, then, that people felt they were living amid changes and struggles, intellectual, social and spiritual, and the interpreters of the hour—the publicists, journalists and popular purveyors of ideas of all kinds—did not fail to make a sort of traffic in the spirit of the times. Anything strange or uncanny, anything which savoured of freak and perversity, was swiftly labelled *fin de siècle*, and given a certain topical prominence. The term became a fashion, and writers vied one with another as to which should apply it most aptly. At least one writer emphasised the phrase in an attempt to stigmatise it. "Observe," wrote Max Beerbohm, "that I write no fool's prattle about *le fin de siècle*." And Max Nordau gives a useful list illustrating the manner in which the term was used in the country of its birth. A king who abdicates but retains by agreement certain political rights, which he afterwards sells to his country to provide means for the liquidation of debts contracted by play in Paris, is a *fin de siècle* king. The police official who removes a piece of the skin of the murderer Pranzini after execution and has it tanned and made into a cigar-case, is a *fin de siècle* official. An American wedding ceremony held in a gasworks and the subsequent honeymoon in a balloon is a *fin de siècle* wedding. A schoolboy who, on passing the gaol where his father is imprisoned for embezzlement, remarks to a chum: "Look, that's the governor's school," is a *fin de siècle* son. These are only a few from among innumerable examples illustrating the liveliness of the people of the Nineties to their hour and its characteristics. A further indication of the way in which the phrase permeated the mind of the period is found in its frequent occurrence in the books and essays of the day. It



appears fittingly enough in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, that typical book of the period, as a reflection upon an epigram afterwards used in *A Woman of No Importance*. Lady Narborough is saying:

"'If we women did not love you for your defects, where would you all be? Not one of you would ever be married. You would be a set of unfortunate bachelors. Not, however, that that would alter you much. Nowadays all the married men live like bachelors and all the bachelors like married men!'

"'*Fin de siècle*,' murmured Sir Henry.

"'*Fin du globe*,' answered his hostess.

"'I wish it were *fin du globe*,' said Dorian, with a sigh. 'Life is a great disappointment.'"

A reviewer of the novel, in *The Speaker* of 5th July 1890, describes Lord Henry Wotton as "an extremely *fin-de-siècle* gentleman." And another book of the period, *Baron Verdigris: A Romance of the Reversed Direction*, by Jocelyn Quilp, issued in 1894, with a frontispiece by Beardsley, is prefaced by the following inscription:—

*This Book is Dedicated equally to Fin-de-Siècleism, the Sensational Novel, and the Conventional Drawing-Room Ballad.*

But side by side with the prevailing use of the phrase, and running its popularity very close, came the adjective "new"; it was applied in much the same way to indicate extreme modernity. Like *fin de siècle*, it hailed from France, and, after its original application in the phrase *l'art nouveau* had done considerable service in this country as a prefix to modern pictures, dresses and designs, our publicists discovered that other things were equally worthy of the useful adjective. Grant Allen wrote of "The New Hedonism"; H. D. Traill, of "The New Fiction," opening his essay with the words: "Not to be *new* is, in these days, to be nothing."

In August 1892 William Sharp designed and produced one number, and one only, of *The Pagan Review*, which was written entirely by himself under various pseudonyms, to promote the "New Paganism," described as "a potent leaven in the yeast of the 'younger generation,' and which was concerned only with the *new* presentment of things." And again, in the famous attack on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in the *St James's Gazette*, on the first appearance of the novel in the pages of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* for July 1890, reference is made to "The New Voluptuousness" which "always leads up to bloodshedding." Oscar Wilde himself wrote on "The New Remorse," in *The Spirit Lamp*, in 1892. The range of the adjective gradually spread until it embraced the ideas of the whole period, and we find innumerable references to the "New Spirit," the "New Humour," the "New Realism," the "New Hedonism," the "New Drama," the "New Unionism," the "New Party," and the "New Woman." The popular, and what we should now call "significant," adjective was adopted by publishers of periodicals, and during the decade there was *The New Age*, a penny weekly with a humanitarian and radical objective, which, after many vicissitudes and various editorial changes, still survives; while William Ernest Henley, coming under the spell of fashion and carrying his modernism from the eighties, translated *The National Observer* into *The New Review*.

A decade which was so conscious of its own novelty and originality must have had some characteristics at least which distinguished it from the immediately preceding decade, if not from all preceding decades. The former is certainly true: the Eighteen Nineties possessed characteristics which were at once distinctive and arresting, but I doubt whether its sense of its own novelty was based in changes which lacked their counterparts in most of the decades of the nineteenth century—pre-eminently a century of change. The period was as certainly a period of decadence as it was a period of renaissance. The decadence was to be seen in a perverse and finicking glorification of the fine arts and mere



artistic virtuosity on the one hand, and a militant commercial movement on the other. The one produced *The Yellow Book* and the literature and art of "fine shades," with their persistent search for the "unique word" and the "brilliant" expression; the other produced the "Yellow Press," the boom in "Kaffirs," the Jameson Raid, the Boer War and the enthronement of the South African plutocrat in Park Lane. But this decadent side of the Nineties must not be looked upon as wholly evil. Its separation from a movement obviously ascendant in spirit is not altogether admissible. The two tendencies worked together, and it is only for the sake of historical analysis that I adopt the method of segregation. Taken thus the decadence reveals qualities which, even if nothing more than "the soul of goodness in things evil," are at times surprisingly excellent. The decadent vision of an Aubrey Beardsley introduced a new sense of rhythm into black and white art, just as the, on the whole, trivial masters of "fine shades," with their peacock phrases, helped us towards a newer, more sensitive and more elastic prose form. The "Yellow Press," with all its extravagances, was at least alive to the desires of the crowd, and the reverse of dull in the presentment of its views; and if it gave Demos the superficial ideas he liked, it was equally prepared to supply a better article when the demand arose. And, withal, a wider publicity was given to thought-provoking ideas and imaginative themes, although adjusted, and often very much adjusted, to the average taste, than had hitherto been possible. As for the "New Park Lane" and the "New" aristocracy, they in their garish abandonment helped us to apply the abstract science of economics to life, thus probably preparing the path for the Super-tax and other so-called "Socialistic" legislation of to-day. But apologies for the decadent side of the period do not complete the story of the renaissance of the Nineties. This latter was more real than the much-advertised decadence, and as time goes on it will prove itself to have been more enduring. The atmosphere of the Eighteen Nineties was alert with new ideas which sought to find expression in the average national life. If

luxury had its art and its traffic, so had a saner and more balanced social consciousness. If the one demanded freedom for an individual expression tending towards degeneration and perversion, the other demanded a freedom which should give the common man opportunities for the redemption of himself and his kind. Side by side with the *poseur* worked the reformer, urged on by the revolutionist. There were demands for culture and social redemption. A wave of transcendentalism swept the country, drawing with it the brighter intelligences of all classes; but it was not remote, it was of the earth and of the common life and hour, seeking the immediate regeneration of society by the abolition of such social evils as poverty and overwork, and the meanness, ugliness, ill-health and commercial rapacity which characterised so much of modern life. The vitality of this awakening of the social consciousness is proved by its extravagances. In the main it worked persistently, cheerfully and with that spirit of compromise dear to the English temperament, as can be seen by a reference to the pages of *The Daily Chronicle*, under the editorship of A. E. Fletcher; *The Star*, under T. P. O'Connor; *The New Age* of the period; Robert Blatchford's *Clarion*, and W. T. Stead's *Review of Reviews*. But now and then the cup of social zeal was too full; it overflowed, and one heard of the bomb of over-zealous anarchist; of the revolt of righteously impatient starvelings among the newly awakened proletariat, and of the purely negative militancy of the "Nonconformist conscience," which used the newborn and enthusiastic London County Council and Mrs Ormiston Chant as the instruments of a moral crusade among West End music halls, then only just discovered as more or less harmless and instructive places of entertainment by those guardians of British respectability—the lower middle classes.

In all these things the Eighteen Nineties were unique only in method and in the emphasis they gave to certain circumstances and ideas. The Eighteen Eighties and the late Seventies had been even more "artistic" than the Nineties, and the preceding decade had also its riots and revolutionary



organisations. Max Beerbohm, in a delightful essay which could only have been written in the Nineties and could only have appeared in *The Yellow Book*, has given us with subtle humour and satire a little history, not entirely free from caricature, of the Eighties. In the essay called "1880" he opens, as it were, a window in the house of the Nineties through which we get a fair glimpse of the immediate past. He says:

"Beauty had existed long before 1880. It was Mr Oscar Wilde who managed her début. To study the period is to admit that to him was due no small part of the social vogue that Beauty began to enjoy. Fired by his fervid words, men and women hurled their mahogany into the streets and ransacked the curio-shops for the furniture of Annish days. Dados arose upon every wall, sunflowers and the feathers of peacocks curved in every corner, tea grew quite cold while the guests were praising the Willow Pattern of its cup. A few fashionable women even dressed themselves in sinuous draperies and unheard-of greens. Into whatsoever ballroom you went, you would surely find, among the women in tiaras and the fops and the distinguished foreigners, half a score of comely ragamuffins in velveteen, murmuring sonnets, posturing, waving their hands. Beauty was sought in the most unlikely places. Young painters found her robed in the fogs, and bank clerks, versed in the writings of Mr Hammerton, were heard to declare, as they sped home from the City, that the underground railway was beautiful from London Bridge to Westminster, but not from Sloane Square to Notting Hill Gate. Æstheticism (for so they named the movement) did indeed permeate in a manner all classes. But it was to the *haut monde* that its primary appeal was made. The sacred emblems of Chelsea were sold in the fashionable toy-shops, its reverently chanted creeds became the patter of the *boudoirs*. The old Grosvenor Gallery, that stronghold of the few, was verily invaded. Never was such a fusion of delighted folk as at its private views. There was Robert Browning, the philosopher, doffing his hat with a courtly

sweep to more than one duchess. There, too, was Theo Marzials, poet and eccentric, and Charles Colnaghi, the hero of a hundred teafights, and young Brookfield, the comedian, and many another good fellow. My Lord of Dudley, the virtuoso, came there, leaning for support upon the arm of his fair young wife. Disraeli, with the lustreless eyes and face like some seamed Hebraic parchment, came also, and whispered behind his hand to the faithful Corry. And Walter Sickert spread the latest *mot* of 'the Master,' who, with monocle, cane and tilted hat, flashed through the gay mob anon."

There is also ample evidence of the social earnestness of the preceding decade in memories of the dock strike of 1889, which brought John Burns and Tom Mann to the front as the "new" labour leaders, and of the riots of 1886, which culminated in a free speech demonstration in Trafalgar Square on Sunday, 13th November 1887, when the Life Guards were called out, and during the clearing of the Square a young man lost his life. The first British Socialist organisation of any note, the Social Democratic Federation, later called the Social Democratic Party, and more recently merged in the British Socialist Party, was formed by Henry Mayers Hyndman, who had for chief supporter William Morris, in 1881. Two years later the Fabian Society was founded, and this organisation drew to its ranks the middle-class "intellectuals," who were beginning to interest themselves in Socialism. These included Sidney Webb, Bernard Shaw, Sydney Olivier, Graham Wallas, Annie Besant, Hubert Bland, Frank Podmore, Stewart Headlam and others who had made, or were about to make, their mark in various branches of the intellectual life. It was these various Socialist activities which made the formation of the Independent Labour Party a possibility in 1892, and the return of Keir Hardie, its first representative, to Parliament, in the same year.

But the chief characteristics of the Eighteen Nineties proper, although dovetailed into the preceding decade, may



be indicated roughly under three heads. These were the so-called Decadence; the introduction of a Sense of Fact into literature and art; and the development of a Transcendental View of Social Life. But again, it must not be assumed that these characteristics were always separate. To a very considerable extent they overlapped, even where they were not necessarily interdependent. Oscar Wilde, for instance, bridged the chasm between the self-contained individualism of the decadents and the communal aspirations of the more advanced social revolutionaries. His essay, *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, has been acclaimed by recognised upholders of Socialism. And even his earlier æstheticism (which belonged to the Eighties) was an attempt to apply the idea of art to mundane affairs. Bernard Shaw, rationalist and anti-romantic apostle of the sense of fact, openly used art to provoke thought and to give it a social, as distinct from an individualist, aim; just as other and more direct literary realists, such as Emile Zola and Henrik Ibsen, had done before him, either avowedly or by implication. The more typical realists of the Nineties, George Gissing and George Moore, seem to be devoid of deliberate social purpose, but the prevalent didacticism of the period is strikingly pronounced in the work of H. G. Wells, who has contrived better than any other writer of his time to introduce reality into his novels without jeopardising romance, to hammer home a theory of morality without delimiting his art. But apart from such obvious resemblances between types of *fin de siècle* genius, the popular idea of the period looked upon one phase of its thought as no less characteristic than another. The adjective "new" as an indicator of popular consciousness of what was happening, was, as we have seen, applied indifferently to all kinds of human activity, from art and morals to humour and Trade Unionism.

There is no clearer example of the intimate relationship between what might have been called the degenerate notions of the period and those which are admittedly regenerate, than a comparison of the Epicurean ideas in such strikingly different works as Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and

Grant Allen's essay on "The New Hedonism," which appeared in *The Fortnightly Review* of March 1894. Oscar Wilde says:

"Yes: there was to be, as Lord Henry had prophesied, a new Hedonism that was to recreate life, and to save it from that harsh, uncomely Puritanism that is having, in our own day, its curious revival. It was to have its service of the intellect, certainly; yet it was never to accept any theory or system that would involve the sacrifice of any mode of passionate experience. Its aim, indeed, was to be experience itself, and not the fruits of experience, sweet or bitter as they might be. Of the asceticism that deadens the senses, as of the vulgar profligacy that dulls them, it was to know nothing. But it was to teach man to concentrate himself upon the moments of a life that is itself but a moment."

Here we have a kind of self-culture by the constant variation of experiences, mostly passionate, with little if any reference to the rest of humanity. In a sense it is not a new Hedonism at all, but a Hedonism which had existed from time immemorial, although it found its way into Oscar Wilde's novel by the aid of two modern books. One of these, the *À Rebours* of Joris Karl Huysmans, may be said to contain the apotheosis of the *fin de siècle* spirit; the other, *The Renaissance*, by Walter Pater, containing a famous passage which became the precious gospel of the Æsthetic Movement of the Seventies and Eighties. It was new, however, in so far as it reacted against the "Nonconformist conscience" of the moment. But that it was not the only "New" Hedonism may be realised by reference to Grant Allen's essay, which is little more than a veiled piece of Socialist propaganda. The central idea of this sociological Hedonism is shown in the following extract:—

"Self-development, on the contrary, is an aim for all—an aim which will make all stronger, and saner, and wiser, and better. To be sound in wind and limb; to be healthy of body and mind; to be educated, to be emancipated, to be free, to be beautiful—these things are ends towards which all should strain, and by attaining which all are happier in themselves, and more useful to others. That is the central idea of the new hedonism. We see clearly that it is good for every man among us that he and every other man should be as tall, as strong, as well knit, as supple, as wholesome, as effective, as free from vice or defect as possible. We see clearly that it is his first duty to make his own muscles, his own organs, his own bodily functions, as perfect as he can make them, and to transmit them in like perfection, unspoiled, to his descendants. We see clearly that it is good for every woman among us that she and every other woman should be as physically developed and as finely equipped for her place as mother as it is possible to make herself. We see that is good for every woman that there should be such men, and for every man that there should be such women. We see it is good for every child that it should be born of such a father and such a mother. We see that to prepare ourselves for the duties of paternity and maternity, by making ourselves as vigorous and healthful as we can be, is a duty we all owe to our children unborn and to one another. We see that to sacrifice ourselves, and inferentially them, is not a thing good in itself, but rather a thing to be avoided where practicable, and only to be recommended in the last resort as an unsatisfactory means of escape from graver evils. We see that each man and each woman holds his virility and her femininity in trust for humanity, and that to play fast and loose with either, at the bidding of priests or the behest of Puritans, is a bad thing in itself, and is fraught with danger for the State and for future generations."



The intellectual, imaginative and spiritual activities of the Eighteen Nineties are concerned mainly with the idea of social life or, if you will, of culture; and the individual and social phases of that culture are broadly represented by the above quotations. For that reason alone the period is interesting apart from any achievements in art or science or statecraft. It is interesting because it was a time when people

went about frankly and cheerfully endeavouring to solve the question "How to Live." From one point of view such an employment suggests the bewilderment of a degenerate world, and it would seem entirely to justify the lamentations of Max Nordau; but those who lived through the Nineties as young men and women will remember that this search for a new mode of life was anything but melancholy or diseased. The very pursuit was a mode of life sufficiently joyful to make life worth living. But in addition there was the feeling of expectancy, born not alone of a mere toying with novel ideas, but born equally of a determination to taste new sensation, even at some personal risk, for the sake of life and growth.

"A great creative period is at hand," wrote William Sharp, in his preface to *Vistas*; "probably a great dramatic epoch. But what will for one thing differentiate it from any predecessor is the new complexity, the new subtlety, in apprehension, in formative conception, in imaginative rendering."

It was an era of hope and action. People thought anything might happen; and, for the young, any happening sufficiently new was good. Little of the older sentimentalism survived among the modernists; those who were of the period desired to be in the movement, and not mere spectators. It was a time of experiment. Dissatisfied with the long ages of convention and action which arose out of precedent, many set about testing life for themselves. The new man wished to be himself, the new woman threatened to live her own life. The snapping of apron-strings caused consternation in many a decent household, as young men and maidens were suddenly inspired to develop their own souls and personalities. Never, indeed, was there a time when the young were so young or the old so old. No family, were its record for solid British respectability established on no matter how secure a basis, was immune from new ideas; and if the bourgeoisie of the Eighteen Eighties were inspired to throw their mahogany into the streets, as we have been assured they were by Max Beerbohm, their successors of the



Eighteen Nineties were barely constrained from doing the same with their most cherished principles. Decadent minor poets sprang up in the most unexpected places. The staidest of Nonconformist circles begot strange, pale youths with abundant hair, whose abandoned thoughts expressed themselves in "purple patches" of prose, and whose sole aim in life was to live "passionately" in a succession of "scarlet moments." Life-tasting was the fashion, and the rising generation felt as though it were stepping out of the cages of convention and custom into a freedom full of tremendous possibilities.

There were misigivings in more directions than one, but these had small effect upon the spirit of the first half of the decade. The experimental life went on in a swirl of song and dialectics. Ideas were in the air. Things were not what they seemed, and there were visions about. The Eighteen Nineties was the decade of a thousand "movements." People said it was a "period of transition," and they were convinced that they were passing not only from one social system to another, but from one morality to another, from one culture to another, and from one religion to a dozen or none! But as a matter of fact there was no concerted action. Everybody, mentally and emotionally, was running about in a hundred different directions. There was so much to think about, so much to discuss, so much to see. "A New Spirit of Pleasure is abroad amongst us," observed Richard Le Gallienne, "and one that blows from no mere coteries of hedonistic philosophers, but comes on the four winds." The old sobriety of mind had left our shores, and we changed from a stolid into a volatile nation. At this time the provinces saw the birth of a new type of music hall, the "Palace of Varieties," with two performances a night, and we began to amuse ourselves.

Our new-found freedom seemed to find just the expression it needed in the abandoned nonsense chorus of *Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay*![1] which, lit at the red skirts of Lottie Collins, spread like a dancing flame through the land, obsessing the

[1] See *A Modern History of the English People*, by R. H. Gretton.

minds of young and old, gay and sedate, until it became a veritable song-pest, provoking satires even upon itself in the music halls of its origin. No song ever took a people in quite the same way; from 1892 to 1896 it affected the country like an epidemic; and during those years it would seem to have been the absurd *ça ira* of a generation bent upon kicking over the traces. Even to this day one can hear the song in the streets of Boulogne and Dieppe, where the urchins croak it for the benefit of the English visitor, under the firm conviction that it is the British National Anthem, and in hopes that the patriotic Britishers will reward their efforts with *petit sous*.[1]

The old dim and dowdy chop-houses and taverns also changed with our new mood, and they were replaced by larger and brighter restaurants and "tea shops," daintier food and orchestras, and we extended the habit of dining out, and mixing afternoon tea with shopping.

The "safety" bicycle was invented, and it took its place as an instrument of the "new" freedom as we glided forth in our thousands into the country, accompanied by our sisters and sweethearts and wives, who sometimes abandoned skirts for neat knickerbocker suits. "The world is divided into two classes," said a wit of the period, "those who ride bicycles and those who don't." But the great novelty was the woman cyclist, the New Woman *rampant*, but she was sometimes very charming also, and we immortalised her in our Palaces of Varieties:

> *"Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do,*
> *I'm half crazy all for the love of you!*
> *It won't be a stylish marriage,*
> *I can't afford a carriage,*
> *But you'll look neat,*
> *Upon the seat*
> *Of a bicycle made for two."*

[1] This was true in 1913, but now (1922) a new generation of urchins has arisen in Boulogne and other French towns who know not *Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay*. This famous ditty has been declassed by *Tipperairie*.

## CHAPTER II

### PERSONALITIES AND TENDENCIES

SUCH manifestations of liveliness may seem to be of no very great importance to-day, but many minor freedoms now enjoyed by all without question were then the subjects of battle. It is difficult to realise even now how many changes in taste, ideas and habits were crammed into the *fin de siècle* decade. For it has been too readily assumed that the achievement of the Eighteen Nineties is confined to that literary and artistic renaissance described by W. G. Blaikie Murdoch in *The Renaissance of the Nineties*. But such a conclusion is unjust to the period. The fine arts did flourish during the decade, and although many of the results were as ephemeral as they were extraordinary, others represent permanent additions to our store of artistic expression. Still, this habit of looking upon the renaissance as an affair of books and pictures has led too many into the belief that the main current of the artistic movement was solely an extension of the art-for-art's-sake principle; when, as a matter of fact, the renaissance of the Nineties was far more concerned with art for the sake of life than with art for the sake of art. The men with the larger prodigality of genius were not engaged chiefly with art as art; for good or ill they were engaged equally with ideas and life. Popular taste also was attracted by the artist-philosopher, as may be seen by its readiness to appreciate the older and more didactic painters and writers—just as in other years it had enjoyed the didacticism of Charles Dickens. Thus George Frederick Watts, Holman Hunt, Ford Madox Brown, Burne-Jones, for instance, though not of the period, received their nearest approach to popularity then; and the same may be said of William Morris, Walter Crane, and the craftsmen generally

who had evolved out of the Ruskinian gospel of "joy and work" and the Pre-Raphaelite movement.

This obvious taste on the part of the thoughtful public of the *fin de siècle* for art served with ideas found much to its liking in the writers who came into prominence during the time. Oscar Wilde I have already indicated as bridging the Eighties and Nineties, just as his art united the uncompromising artistic sufficiency upheld by Whistler and the art-culture of Pater. But there were in literature, besides, Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells, using plays and novels for criticising morality and teaching newer modes of social life; Rudyard Kipling and William Ernest Henley using verse to stimulate patriotism; Francis Adams singing revolt; Edward Carpenter, democracy; William Watson, justice; and these were as characteristic of the Eighteen Nineties as the self-centred poets and critics and storytellers who clustered about *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*. Even painters, Charles Ricketts and James Pryde and William Nicholson, typical products of the period, turned their genius for a time into the realm of applied art; the first, like William Morris, in the making of beautiful books, and the two latter by becoming, under the pseudonym of the Beggarstaff Brothers, the founders of our modern school of poster designers. And apart from all of these instances of art applied to life, or used to stimulate life, the abundant practical genius of an age which strove always to express itself in the reordering of social conditions, in innumerable activities called "progressive," embracing besides social, commercial, scientific and imperial affairs, supplies sufficient evidence of the breadth and variety of a renaissance which strove to triumph over what was merely artistic.

The movement of the Eighteen Nineties, however, which has most engaged the attention of writers, the movement called "Decadent," or by the names of Oscar Wilde or Aubrey Beardsley, the movement Max Nordau denounced in Europe generally, and recently summed up by *The Times* under the epithet "The Yellow Nineties," does even now dominate the vision as we look backwards. And, indeed,


COVER DESIGN OF *THE SATURDAY REVIEW* CHRISTMAS SUPPLEMENT (1896)
*By William Rothenstein*

though only a part of the renaissance, it was sufficiently "brilliant," to use one of its own *cliches*, to dazzle those capable of being dazzled by the achievements of art and letters for many years to come. For a renaissance of art and ideas which in literature had for exemplars Oscar Wilde (his best books were all published in the Nineties), Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, Rudyard Kipling, John Davidson, Hubert Crackenthorpe, W. B. Yeats, J. M. Barrie, Alice Meynell, George Moore, Israel Zangwill, Henry Harland, George Gissing, "John Oliver Hobbes," Grant Allen, Quiller Couch, Max Beerbohm, Cunninghame Graham, Fiona Macleod (William Sharp), Richard Le Gallienne, Ernest Dowson, Arthur Symons, Lionel Johnson, and A. B. Walkley; and in pictorial art, James Pryde, William Nicholson, Phil May, William Orpen, Aubrey Beardsley, E. E. Hornel, Wilson Steer, Charles Ricketts, J. J. Shannon, Charles Shannon, John Lavery, John Duncan Fergusson, J. T. Peploe, Charles Conder and William Rothenstein could not have been other than arresting, could not, indeed, be other than important in the history of the arts. For, whatever may be the ultimate place of these workers in literature and painting in the national memory, and whatever value we set upon them then and now, few will deny that even the least of them did not contribute something of lasting or of temporary worth to the sensations and ideas of their age, or its vision of life, and to its conception of spiritual or mental power.

As to what individuals among these writers and painters were the peculiar products of the Eighteen Nineties—that is, those who could not, or might not, have been produced by any other decade—it is not always easy to say. In dealing with the writers the book-lists of John Lane, Elkin Mathews and Leonard Smithers are useful guides in any process of narrowing-down; and further guidance may be found by a perusal of the files of *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*, for these two publications were the favourite lamps around which the most bizarre moths of the Nineties clustered. There were few essential writers of the Nineties who did not contribute to one or the other, and the very fact that Henry

Harland, who edited the former, and Arthur Symons, who edited the latter, were able to gather together so many writers and artists who were at once novel and notable, emphasises the distinction of the artistic activities of the time. But that emphasis should not be taken as indicating merely an awakening of virtuosity during the Nineties; the many definite artistic movements, embracing both writers and painters and craftsmen, could not have occurred had there not been a considerable receptivity among the people of the time. A renaissance of art depends equally upon artist and public: the one is the complement of the other. The Eighteen Nineties would have been unworthy of special notice had there not been a public capable of responding to its awakening of taste and intelligence.

But doubt is set at rest when we remember how numerous were the excellent periodicals issued with fair evidence of success. No other decade in English history has produced so many distinctive and ambitious publications; for, apart from *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*, there were *The Parade, The Pageant, The Evergreen. The Chameleon, The Hobby Horse, The Rose Leaf* and, later on, *The Quarto, The Dome*, and that able magazine's musical brother, *The Chord.* These periodicals were, of course, the journals which represented the unique qualities in the literature and art of the decade; they were bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh. But, important as they are, they do not by any means complete the typical and characteristic journalism of the period, for many less exclusive journals, journals making a wider public appeal, must be named—such notable examples of periodical literature and art, for example, as *The Studio, The Butterfly, The Poster, To-Morrow, Eureka*, and more popular still, but excellent also in their way, *The Idler, To-Day* and *Pick-me-up.* The last, during its best days, and these covered several years, had among its contributors many of the best black-and-white artists of the decade; Phil May, Raven Hill, A. S. Hartrick, W. T. Manuel, S. H. Sime and Edgar Wilson regularly sent drawings to this sportive publication, which for genius and humour have not been excelled, even by *Punch.*



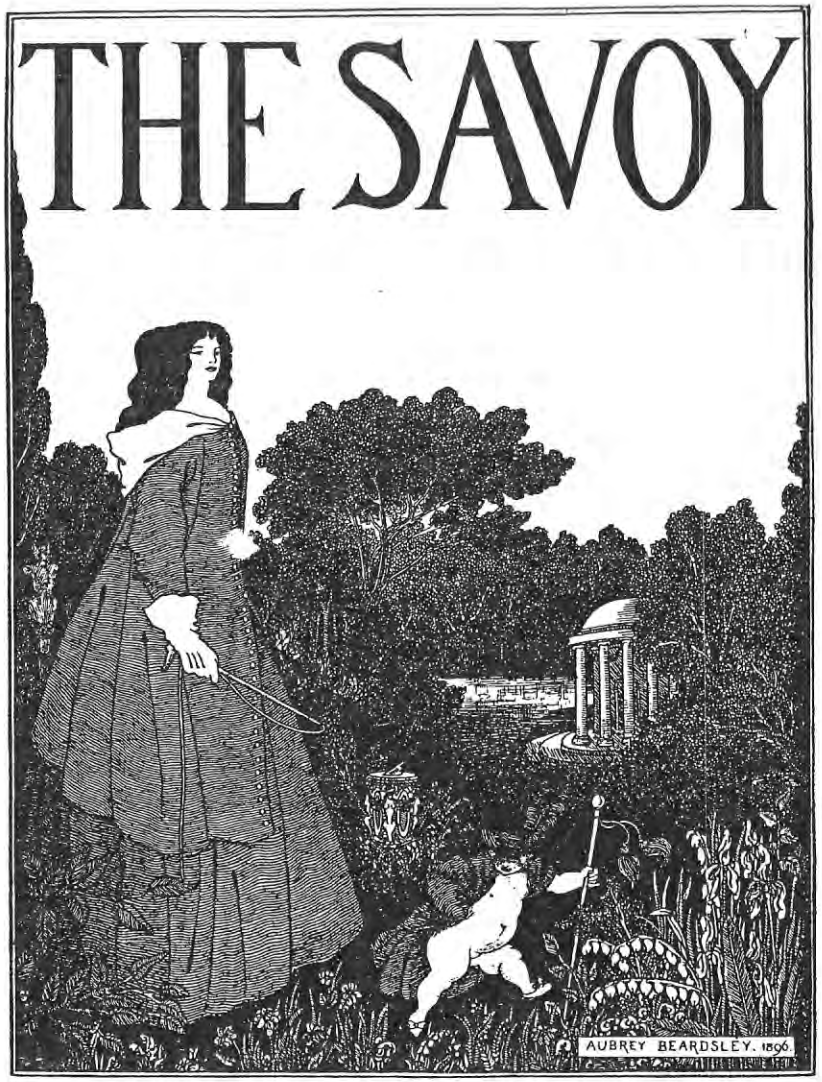
But although these publications must be named to the credit of the period, many of them, like many of the distinguished writers I have named, might conceivably have been produced at any time during the past forty years. *Pick-me-up*, for example, presented no new point of view; it was sprightly and humorous in the popular sense—that is to say, it expressed the inconsequent outlook of the *bon viveur* of fiction—and persistently assumed that cosmopolitan Piccadilly Circus-cum-Leicester Square, and the Anglo-American Boulevards des Italiens-cum-Montmartre (after midnight) were the last words in "life." In short, *Pick-me-up* represented the false and altogether absurd "Gay Paree" view of things—and to that extent it was not of a day but of all time. Such an attitude, however, is not inconsistent with a genius for art, and *Pick-me-up* possessed a staff of black-and-white draughtsmen of unequalled ability, and sometimes of rare genius; and in addition to its native talent it also introduced to this country the work of good foreign draughtsmen, including that of the great French artist Steinlen. Still, an able group of black-and-white artists is by no means a peculiarity of the Nineties. The Sixties had *Once a Week*—and *Punch* has reigned supreme from the Forties till to-day. Phil May and Raven Hill belonged to the artistic eminence of the Nineties, but, individual as they are, they might have happened in any other decade since Charles Keene and John Leech created the modern humorous pen drawing. One *Pick-me-up* artist, and only one, had anything approaching *fin de siècle* tendencies; that artist was (and is) S. H. Sime: he is an art product of the Nineties, along with Aubrey Beardsley, Charles Conder, Charles Ricketts and Laurence Housman.

The literary movement of the Eighteen Nineties has had full opportunity of insisting upon itself, but had no such opportunity existed the books of the period would have stood out with a certain distinction. In the year 1890 the literary field was so dominated by men whose reputations had long since been established, either with the inner circle of bookish people or the larger public, that any new-comers, especially in poetry, were apt to be labelled "minor." Tennyson was

still alive, and Robert Browning had died only in the previous year; Philip James Bailey was living, though forgotten, and Martin Tupper, like Browning, had passed away in 1889. William Morris and Algernon Charles Swinburne, although fully recognised as major poets, had still some good work to do, and there were a select few who admired the poetry of Coventry Patmore, and many who thought well of the works of Lewis Morris. And among women singers Jane Ingelow was still living, and Christina Rossetti was yet to publish two more volumes.

John Ruskin and Walter Pater were not only alive, but their æsthetic-social messages were finding ever wider fields of acceptance. "The acute but honourable minority," which hitherto had been George Meredith's way of referring to his own small following, was rapidly becoming a respectable body of supporters, aided not a little by the discerning but whole-hearted trumpeting of a young man from Liverpool, Richard Le Gallienne, who was to become a notability of the Nineties. Thomas Hardy, also, was established, and like Meredith winning to a wider, though not so tardy, popularity; and he also was heralded by a young poet of the period, Lionel Johnson, in a fine study called *The Art of Thomas Hardy* (1894). John Henry Newman ended his ardent life in 1890, but Cardinal Manning was still living; so also were the popular Church of England divines, Archdeacon Farrar and Canon Liddon, the equally popular Nonconformist, Charles Spurgeon, and at the antipodes of their faith, James Martineau. In science the great names of Thomas Henry Huxley, John Tyndall, Herbert Spencer, Francis Galton were honoured among living geniuses; and so was that of Alfred Russel Wallace, who survived until the eve of the Great War. The historian, James Anthony Froude, died in 1894, and W. E. H. Lecky lived through the decade.

Literary reputations beginning in the Seventies and Eighties, and only in a few cases awaiting further buttressing in the Nineties, were numerous; these, besides those already named, included W. H. Mallock, Edmund Gosse, Andrew Lang, Robert Louis Stevenson, Frederic Harrison, William




COVER DESIGN OF *THE SAVOY*, VOLUME I
*By Aubrey Beardsley*

Ernest Henley, John Addington Symonds, Arthur Pinero, Sidney Colvin, Austin Dobson, Edward Dowden, H. D. Traill, Theodore Watts-Dunton, Stopford Brooke, James Payn, Leslie Stephen, Henry James, Grant Allen, William Black, Robert Bridges, Frederick Wedmore, and among more popular writers, Marie Corelli, Rider Haggard, and Hall Caine. Mrs Humphry Ward had become famous on the publication of *Robert Elsmere*, in 1888, but the importance of her work during the succeeding decade places her, as it does also George Moore, Rudyard Kipling and George Gissing, each of whom did good work before 1890, in the newer movement. This latter was not, however, to have its effect on the younger generation alone, it was so irresistible as to inspire even those whose life-work was more or less done to new and modern activities. Thus Thomas Hardy began a new phase of his art in 1891 with *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, following it with the masterly, and ultra-modern, *Jude the Obscure*, in 1895. He also published his first volume of poems, *Wessex Poems*, in 1898. William Morris published most of his prose romances in the Nineties, including *News from Nowhere*, in 1891, and in quick succession *The Roots of the Mountains*, *The Story of the Glittering Plain*, *The Wood Beyond the World*, and *The Well at the World's End*. *The Water of the Wondrous Isles* and *The Story of the Sundering Flood* were left in manuscript and published after his death. John Addington Symonds, whose chief work, *The History of the Italian Renaissance*, was completed between the years 1875-1886, published *In the Key of Blue*, a book so typical in some ways of the Nineties that it might well have been written by one of the younger generation. Frederick Wedmore, without being *fin de siècle*, published *Renunciations* (a very Eighteen-Ninety title !) in 1893, and *English Episodes*, in 1894, both of these have a freshness of vision quite of the period. Theodore Watts-Danton published his gipsy novel, *Aylwin* (1898). The great veteran of black-and-white art, George du Maurier, suddenly became a popular novelist with the famous *Trilby* in 1894, which had been preceded by *Peter Ibbetson* (1891) and succeeded by *The Martian* (1896); and

another veteran artist of great eminence also reasserted himself as a writer of first-rate power during the period, for it was not until 1890 that James McNeill Whistler collected and published in a delightful volume his "Ten O'Clock" lecture, and his various letters to the newspapers, with other Press cuttings, under the appropriate title of *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*. Grant Allen, besides becoming a journalistic champion of the new school, himself joined the younger generation by the publication of *The Woman Who Did*, in 1895, and Arthur W. Pinero, like Thomas Hardy with his novels, began a new phase as a playwright with the production of *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*, in 1893; for, doubtless, both *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* would have been premature in the Eighties. And, finally, Richard Whiteing, veteran journalist, but unknown to the public by name, suddenly became something like famous by the publication of *No. 5 John Street*, in the last year of the decade.

Further evidence of the stimulating atmosphere of the period is to be found in the number of writers who sprang into existence out of the *Zeitgeist* of the decade, as people in this country were beginning to call the spirit of the times. I do not mean those who were of the period in the narrower sense, but those who, taking that which every writer takes from his time, were sufficiently general in attitude not to have been peculiar to any movement. Among such writers may be named J. M. Barrie, Conan Doyle, Maurice Hewlett, Owen Seaman, Barry Pain, Pett Ridge, Israel Zangwill, Anthony Hope, W. H. Hudson, Joseph Conrad, Jerome K. Jerome, Stanley Weyman, H. A. Vachell, Stephen Phillips, Henry Newbolt, A. E. Housman, Arthur Christopher Benson, William Watson, Allen Upward, and the late G. W. Steevens, all of whom published their first notable work in the Nineties, and in many instances their best work. A qualification is necessary in the case of W. H. Hudson, whose earliest work, *The Purple Land that England Lost*, was born "out of its due time" in 1885, and consequently neglected by critics and public. Had this remarkable book been published ten years later, under its abridged title, *The Purple Land*, such a fate



might not have befallen it; the Nineties almost certainly would have accorded it that recognition for which it had to await twice ten years. Robert Hichens should also appear in the above list, but the fact that he wrote in *The Green Carnation* (1894) the most notable satire of the period brings him into the more exclusive movement.

The writers most imbued with the spirit of the time, direct outcome of circumstances peculiar to the *fin de siècle*, will be more fully considered in other chapters of this book. Suffice it to say here that they fall roughly into groups which express ideas and tendencies then prevalent and, if not always taking the form of designed movements, indicating the existence of very definite though subconscious movements in the psychology of the age. Delightful among *fin de siècle* writers were those masters of a new urbanity, which, although in the direct tradition of Addison and Steele, of Dr Johnson and Charles Lamb, possessed a *flair* of its own, a whimsical perversity, a "brilliance," quite new to English letters. First and most eminent of these urbane essayists, for like their earlier prototypes they practised mainly the essayist's art, comes Max Beerbohm, who considered himself outmoded at the age of twenty-four and celebrated the discovery by collecting his essays in a slim, red volume with paper label and uncut edges, and publishing them at the sign of The Bodley Head, in 1896, under the title of *The Works of Max Beerbohm*. From the same publishing house came fascinating volumes by G. S. Street, who satirised suburbans, talked charmingly of books, art and persons, and in *The Autobiography of a Boy* revealed the irony of the youth who wanted to be himself, and to live his own scarlet life, without having any particular self to become or any definite life to live, save that of matching his silk dressing-gown with the furniture of his room. There were also Charles Whibley, who wrote able studies of scoundrels and dandies; Richard Le Gallienne, who made a fine art of praise and, besides reviving the picaresque novel of flirtation in *The Quest of the Golden Girl*, became a sort of *fin de siècle* Leigh Hunt; John Davidson, who wrote the *Fleet Street Eclogues* and some curiously urbane novels, but

who was more poet than essayist, and, latterly, was so much interested in ideas that he became a philosopher using literature as his medium; and Arthur Symons, poet of the music hall, the café and the *demi-monde*, literary impressionist of towns, and penetrating critic of the writers and ideas of the decadence in France and England.

Another group of writers distinctly associated with the period received its inspiration from the Celtic revival. Its chief figure was William Butler Yeats, the Irish poet and dramatist, whose earliest volumes of distinction, *The Countess Kathleen* and *The Celtic Twilight*, were published in 1892 and 1893. With him were Dr Douglas Hyde, George Russell (A.E.), John Eglinton, Lady Gregory, and others, who together made up the Irish Literary Movement which eventually established the Irish National Theatre in Abbey Street, Dublin, and produced the greatest of modern Irish dramatists, John Millington Synge. Wales also had its movement, with Ernest Rhys as its chief figure; and in Scotland there was a more effective revival, which clustered about Professor Patrick Geddes in Edinburgh and produced four numbers of a handsome quarterly magazine, called *The Evergreen*, in 1895, among its contributors being both "Fiona Macleod" and William Sharp (then supposed to be two separate persons). This Scottish movement was not entirely artistic in aim, but, like so many activities of the Nineties, it sought to link art and ideas with life, and so became actually a social movement with a Socialistic tendency. Next to W. B. Yeats the most prominent figure of the Celtic revival was Fiona Macleod, whose first book, *Pharais, A Romance of the Isles*, appeared in 1894. There was also another Scottish movement, very widely appreciated on this side of the border. It was called the "Kail Yard School," and included the popular dialect fiction of J. M. Barrie, S. R. Crockett and "Ian Maclaren."

The importation of realism from France began in the preceding decade, with translations of the novels of Emile Zola, for which the translator and publisher, Ernest Vizetelly, suffered imprisonment, and with the realistic novels of George



Moore during the same period. That writer's vivid piece of realism, *Esther Waters* (1894), made history also by being the first notable novel to be banned by the libraries and placed on the *Index Expurgatorius* of Messrs W. H. Smith & Son. In the same year a new realist arrived, in the person of Arthur Morrison, with *Tales of Mean Streets*, which was followed by *A Child of the Jago*, in 1896. These striking sketches of slum life were new in so far as they depicted slum life as a thing in itself at a time when people still looked upon the slums, much as they had done in the time of Dickens, as a subject for romantic philanthropy. W. Somerset Maugham published a slum novel, *Liza of Lambeth*, in 1897, which had some considerable vogue, and in 1899 Richard Whiteing's *No. 5 John Street* joined the same class. But there never could be more than a passing fancy for such sectional realism; slums were rapidly becoming the affair of the sociologist. Readers of books, and also those people who rarely read books, turned to the more stimulating realism, which by the way was not free of romance, of Rudyard Kipling, who had hitherto appeared in the blue-grey, paper-backed pamphlets issued, for Anglo-Indian consumption, by Wheeler of Allahabad. In 1890 their growing fame forced them upon the home booksellers, and when they were published in this country they aroused so great an interest that instead of remaining curiosities of Anglo-Indian publishing they became the chief modern literature of the English-speaking world. There were realists, too, like Cunninghame Graham, who savoured also of the new romance, whose first book appeared in 1895, and in the same year Frank Harris published his first volume of short stories, *Elder Conklin and Other Stories*. But neither of them achieved popularity. Cold also was the reception given to the personal experience of poverty which George Gissing put into his novels; although *The New Grub Street* (1891) was at least the first of this unfortunate author's works to receive anything like popular recognition.

I have pointed out more than once that the renaissance of the Nineties was largely social, and much of its literature reveals this spirit. There were many writers who made

literature of their social zeal, more particularly among Socialists. Some of the realists, indeed, were avowed Socialists. Richard Whiteing, Cunninghame Graham, Frank Harris and Grant Allen were all of that faith. George Bernard Shaw and Robert Blatchford persistently used their literary skill in the propagation of social theories, and only less directly was the same thing done at that time by H. G. Wells, who has since passed through a phase of deliberate Socialist propaganda. George Bernard Shaw's first really characteristic book, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, appeared in 1891, his first play, *Widowers' Houses*, in 1892, and his earliest collected plays, *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant*, in 1898. Throughout the Nineties he was a busy journalist, criticising music, art, drama, life, anything in fact that anybody would print, for he had views to express, and determination to express them, on all phases of our social life.

Robert Blatchford published *Merrie England*, a remarkable essay in Socialist special pleading, written for the man-in-the-street in a strong, simple and picturesque manner. The book attracted wide notice, and did much towards consolidating the Socialist movement of the time. Over a million copies were sold, and it has been translated into Welsh, Danish, German, Dutch, Swedish, French, Spanish, Hebrew and Norwegian. Edward Carpenter belongs to this class, for although *Towards Democracy* was published, with several of his other books, in the Eighties, he wrote and lectured much during the Nineties. He was also one of the earliest of English writers to consider problems of sex. And finally, Sidney Webb, the social historian and sociologist, published his first works in the late Eighties and the Nineties: *Socialism in England* (1889), *The London Programme* (1892) and with his wife, Beatrice Webb, *The History of Trades Unionism* and *Industrial Democracy* in 1894 and 1898. The Nineties also saw the beginning of that careful sociological investigation of poverty and industrial conditions which has been the basis of so many recent reforms—the monumental inquiry of Charles Booth into the conditions of the labouring classes of London. This great work was begun in 1892 and



finished in 1903, and is recorded in seventeen volumes, entitled *The Life and Labour of the London People*.

But there is no doubt that the most remarkable phase of the literary movement of the Eighteen Nineties was that which found expression in the work of those writers associated with the high journalism of *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*: poets, essayists and storytellers whose books were in most instances published either by Mr John Lane, at the Bodley Head, or by Mr Elkin Mathews, both of whom were established in Vigo Street. At the beginning of the decade they were partners, under the title of Elkin Mathews & John Lane; but the partnership was dissolved, and afterwards the partners carried on separate businesses almost opposite each other in the same street. Other publishers associated with the new literary movement were Henry & Co., Laurence & Bullen and, more intimately, Leonard Smithers, himself a decadent and the friend and associate of many of the leaders of the group. Nearer the new century the Unicorn Press continued some of the traditions of the early Nineties, when the other publishers of the movement had become normal. These last-named publishers, as in the case of so many of the British decadents, passed away with the Nineties or thereabouts. Mr William Heinemann was a notable publisher of the period and in sympathy with the younger generation; so was Mr Fisher Unwin, who showed his modernism by advertising his books by means of posters designed by Aubrey Beardsley; and Mr Grant Richards issued several important works of the time, notably Bernard Shaw's *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant*, and A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*. The lists of any of these publishers issued during the decade prove interesting reading even to-day, and they reveal sometimes a type of publisher as *fin de siècle* as their literary wares. No one will deny, however, that The Bodley Head was the chief home of the new movement, for not only did *The Yellow Book* issue from that house, but books by Oscar Wilde, John Davidson, Francis Thompson, Max Beerbohm, Richard Le Gallienne, George Egerton, Laurence Binyon, Michael Field, Norman Gale, Kenneth Grahame, Lionel Johnson, Alice

Meynell, William Watson, and G. S. Street. Leonard Smithers made a unique place for himself as a *fin de siècle* publisher, and when *The Savoy* (1896) was published by him he stood courageously for the ideas and art of the decadence at its darkest hour. With the passing of that excellent but short-lived quarterly the decadence in England may be said to have passed away.

The list of contributors to those two periodicals constitute practically the *dramatis personæ* of the movement—with the notable exception of Oscar Wilde, not any of whose work appeared in either. *The Yellow Book* had Henry Harland for literary editor, and for art editor, Aubrey Beardsley. Its first four numbers (1894-1895) afford us a clear and comprehensive view of the literary movement of the Nineties; but after the withdrawal of Aubrey Beardsley, who transferred his work to *The Savoy* in January 1896, the policy of *The Yellow Book* seemed to change, and this change proceeded always more away from the characteristics of the early days, and, save for its yellow covers, *The Yellow Book* eventually was hardly to be distinguished from any high-class magazine in book form. The first number was in the nature of a bomb-shell thrown into the world of letters. It had not hitherto occurred to a publisher to give a periodical the dignity of book form; and, although literature had before then been treated as journalism, it was quite a new thing in this country for a group of lesser-known writers and artists to be glorified in the regal format of a five-shilling quarterly. But the experiment was a success even in the commercial sense, a circumstance aided no doubt by its flaming cover of yellow, out of which the Aubrey Beardsley woman smirked at the public for the first time. Nothing like *The Yellow Book* had been seen before. It was newness *in excelsis*: novelty naked and unashamed. People were puzzled and shocked and delighted, and yellow became the colour of the hour, the symbol of the time-spirit. It was associated with all that was *bizarre* and queer in art and life, with all that was outrageously modern. Richard Le Gallienne wrote a *prose fancy* on "The Boom in Yellow," in which he pointed out



many applications of the colour with that *fin de siècle* flippancy which was one of his characteristics, without, however, tracing the decorative use of yellow to Whistler, as he should have done. Nevertheless his essay recalls very amusingly the fashion of the moment. "Bill-posters," he says, "are beginning to discover the attractive qualities of the colour. Who can ever forget meeting for the first time upon a hoarding Mr Dudley Hardy's wonderful Yellow Girl, the pretty advance-guard of *To-Day*? But I suppose the honour of the discovery of the colour for advertising purposes rests with Mr Colman; though its recent boom comes from publishers, and particularly from The Bodley Head. *The Yellow Book* with any other colour would hardly have sold as well—the first private edition of Mr Arthur Benson's poems, by the way, came caparisoned in yellow, and with the identical name, *Le Cahier Jaune*; and no doubt it was largely its title that made the success of *The Yellow Aster*."

The first number of *The Yellow Book*, published in April 1894, contained contributions by Richard Le Gallienne, Max Beerbohm, Ella D'Arcy, Arthur Symons, Henry Harland, George Egerton, Hubert Crackenthorpe, John Davidson, John Oliver Hobbes and George Moore, all of whom were in the vanguard of the new movement, and among the newer artists, besides Aubrey Beardsley, who contributed four full drawings, the cover decorations and title-page, there were Walter Sickert, Joseph Pennell, Laurence Housman, Will Rothenstein, and R. Anning Bell. But although *The Yellow Book* was mainly *fin de siècle* it was not exclusively so, for it included contributions by Henry James, Arthur Christopher Benson, William Watson, Arthur Waugh, Richard Garnett and Edmund Gosse, and illustrations by J. T. Nettleship and Charles W. Furse, and, above all, as though to reassure its readers and the British public after the Beardsley cover, and certain contents to match, and to assert its fundamental respectability, it contained a frontispiece by Sir Frederick Leighton, P.R.A. Volume II. had Norman Gale, Alfred Hayes, Dolly Radford and Kenneth Grahame among its new contributors, and P. Wilson Steer, E. J. Sullivan, A. S.

Hartrick and Walter Crane among its illustrators. Volume III. was more modern than Volume II., for in addition to many of the younger generation who contributed to the earlier volumes it introduced into its company Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Olive Custance, Theodore Wratislaw and Charles Dalmon, whilst Max Beerbohm was represented among the illustrators by his caricature of George IV. The most notable addition to the contributors of Volume IV. was Charles Conder, who sent a design for a fan ; and Volume V. is interesting as it contains an article by G. S. Street, the first English essay on Anatole France, by the Hon. Maurice Baring, and the first article by that distinguished French writer and *savant* ever published in England.

In spite, however, of its novelty, and the excellence of the contents of its early numbers, *The Yellow Book* was always inclined not only to compromise in matters of editorial policy, but its contents were not always chosen according to the high standard such a work demanded, and this became more pronounced after the retirement of Beardsley. *The Savoy* pursued a different policy. Edited by Arthur Symons, it stood boldly for the modern note without fear and without any wavering of purpose. Hence it represents the most ambitious and, if not the most comprehensive, the most satisfying achievement of *fin de siècle* journalism in this country. Such a result was inevitable with an editor of rare critical genius and one who had been profoundly influenced by the French decadents. If his choice was not always decadent it was always modern, even when it selected a drawing of a distant time. This can be seen also among the literary contributors to *The Savoy*, among whom were Arthur Symons, W. B. Yeats, Theodore Wratislaw, Ernest Rhys, Fiona Macleod, George Moore, Edward Carpenter, Ford Madox Hueffer and Lionel Johnson. All are *fin de siècle* writers, though differing in type and aim, and such writers could hardly do otherwise than give the periodical a decidedly modern expression, in spite of a challenging Editorial Note prefaced to No. 1 (dictated, it would seem, by dissatisfaction with the uneven editing, *fin de siècle* pose with apparent



readiness to compromise of *The Yellow Book*), which disavowed a definite modernist intent :

"It is hoped that THE SAVOY will be a periodical of an exclusively literary and artistic kind. To present Literature in the shape of its letterpress, Art in the form of its illustrations, will be its aim. For the attainment of that aim we can but rely on our best endeavours and on the logic of our belief that good writers and artists will care to see their work in company with the work of good writers and artists. Readers who look to a new periodical for only very well-known or only very obscure names must permit themselves to be disappointed. We have no objection to a celebrity who deserves to be celebrated, or to an unknown person who has not been seen often enough to be recognised in passing. All we ask from our contributors is good work, and good work is all we offer our readers. This we offer with some confidence. We have no formulas, and we desire no false unity of form or matter. We have not invented a new point of view. We are not Realists, or Romanticists, or Decadents. For us, all art is good which is good art. We hope to appeal to the tastes of the intelligent by not being original for originality's sake, or audacious for the sake of advertisement, or timid for the convenience of the elderly-minded. We intend to print no verse which has not some close relationship with poetry, no fiction which has not a certain sense of what is finest in living fact, no criticism which has not some knowledge, discernment and sincerity in its judgment. We could scarcely say more, and we are content to think we can scarcely say less."

*The Savoy* lived for twelve months, and during that time it went far towards realising its editor's ideal. It did realise that ideal to the extent of not admitting anything to its pages which could not be recommended alone on artistic grounds, and it never for a moment stepped beneath its high intent for the sake of financial gain or any of the other snares and pitfalls of even well-meaning editors. Among contributors

who were modern without being decadent were Bernard Shaw, who is represented in the first number by his most essay-like essay, "On Going to Church"; Havelock Ellis, who contributed one of the earliest articles in English on Friedrich Nietzsche; Frederick Wedmore, Edmund Gosse, Selwyn Image, Mathilde Blind and Joseph Conrad. Besides these *The Savoy* contained translations from Paul Verlaine, Emil Verhaeren and Cesare Lombroso. The illustrations were always modern, and always distinguished, and included, in addition to the last and, in many instances, best of Aubrey Beardsley's drawings, examples of the work of Charles Conder, Will Rothenstein, C. H. Shannon, Max Beerbohm, Joseph Pennell, William T. Horton, Walter Sickert and Phil May. It also reveals Aubrey Beardsley as a writer in both prose and poetry, the former taking the shape of his aggressively modern romance, *Under the Hill*. *The Savoy* was admittedly an art-for-art's-sake publication, and its failure in twelve months through lack of support proves that there was at the time no public for such a publication, even though the half-a-crown charged for each issue was not only half the price of *The Yellow Book*, but well within the reach of a fairly numerous cultured class. That class proved unequal to the demand of a decadent periodical of a fine type. Neither did the fact of a number being banned by Messrs W. H. Smith & Son, because it contained a reproduction of one of William Blake's pictures, have any appreciable effect on its circulation; and, finally, funds reached so low an ebb that Arthur Symons was forced to write the whole of the last number himself, and in his epilogue to his readers on the last page of that number he confessed to the pessimistic belief that "Comparatively few people care for art at all, and most of these care for it because they mistake it for something else," which in a way is true, but not necessarily unwise on the part of the majority, for art, as the Nineties were beginning to learn, was less important than life. But that does not invalidate the excellence of *The Savoy*.

A final attempt was made to produce a good periodical by the publication of *The Dome*, described as "A Quarterly



containing examples of all the Arts," at the price of one shilling, in 1898, two years after the death of *The Savoy*. But this quarterly never attempted to do more than represent the various arts; it had no guiding theory save excellence, with the result that it was less definite than either of its forerunners. It admitted good work of the past as well as the present, and reprinted many fine examples of ancient and modern wood-engraving. Notable among its modern illustrators were Gordon Craig and Althea Giles; and among its writers, Laurence Binyon, W. B. Yeats, C. J. Holmes, Laurence Housman, T. W. H. Crosland, Stephen Phillips, Fiona Macleod, John F. Runciman, T. Sturge Moore, Francis Thompson, Wilfrid Wilson Gibson, Gordon Bottomley, Arthur Symons, Roger Fry, "Israfel," and there was also a translation of one of Maurice Maeterlinck's earliest stories, *The Massacre of the Innocents*.

It will be seen from the foregoing that the art movement of the Eighteen Nineties found one of its most characteristic expressions in *belles lettres*. It was largely a literary renaissance, exemplifying itself in poetry, drama, fiction and the essay. Books became once again respected for their own sakes; publishers, led by John Lane, Elkin Mathews and, later, by J. M. Dent, competed as much in beauty and daintiness of production as in names and contents, and this bookish reverence reached its highest expression in a veritable apotheosis of the book at the hands of William Morris of the Kelmscott Press and Hacon & Ricketts of the Vale Press. But this branch of the fine arts, although still remote from the average national life, was no longer remote in the old sense; it did not desire academic honours, and those who promoted the renaissance had no idea of establishing a corner in culture. An air of freedom surrounded the movement; old ideals were not the only things that suffered at the hands of the iconoclasts, but, as we have seen, old barriers and boundaries were broken down and pitched aside; a new right-of-way was proclaimed, and invitations to take to it were scattered broadcast. It was not entirely a democratic movement, however, and in some of its more intense moments

it was not at all democratic. What really happened in the Nineties was that doors were thrown open and people might enter and pass through into whatever lay beyond if they would or could, and whether they were invited or not. To that extent the period was democratic. Such an attitude was a more or less intuitive recognition of a very obvious awakening of intelligence which represented the first mental crop of the movement towards popular education. The Board Schools were bearing fruit; Secondary Education and University Extension culture were producing a new inquisitiveness. Ibsen's younger generation was knocking at the door. The growing demand for culture was partially satisfied, in the case of those who could expect no further aid from the educational system, by popular reprints of the classics, as could be seen by the ever-growing demand for the volumes of *The Scott Library*, *The Canterbury Poets* and *The Temple Classics*. The mental and imaginative stimulus thus obtained created a hunger in many for still newer sensations, and many of these passed through the doors of the decadents or the realists into stranger realms. The remainder, unable to appreciate the bizarre atmosphere of *The Yellow Book*, turned with avidity to the new romantic literature of the Yellow Press.

The Eighteen Nineties were to no small extent the battle-ground of these two types of culture—the one represented by *The Yellow Book*, the other by the Yellow Press. The one was unique, individual, a little weird, often exotic, demanding the right to *be*—in its own way even to waywardness; but this was really an abnormal minority, and in no sense national. The other was broad, general popular; it was the majority, the man-in-the-street awaiting a new medium of expression. In the great fight the latter won. *The Yellow Book*, with all its "new" hopes and hectic aspirations, has passed away, and *The Daily Mail*, established two years later, flourishes. In a deeper sense, also, these two publications represent the two phases of the times. The characteristic excitability and hunger for sensation are exemplified in the one as much as the other, for what after all was the



"brilliance" of Vigo Street but the "sensationalism" of Fleet Street seen from the cultured side? Both were the outcome of a society which had absorbed a bigger idea of life than it knew how to put into practice, and it is not surprising to those who look back upon the period to find that both tendencies, in so far as they were divorced from the social revolution of the Nineties, were nihilistic, the one finding its Moscow at the Old Bailey, in 1895, the other in South Africa, in 1899.

I use both terms and dates symbolically, for I am neither blind to the element of injustice in the condemnation of Oscar Wilde nor to the soul of goodness in the South African War. But at the moment I am dealing with main tendencies, and trying to give an idea-picture of a period, which was self-contained even in its disasters. The first half was remarkable for a literary and artistic renaissance, degenerating into decadence; the second for a new sense of patriotism degenerating into jingoism. The former was in the ascendant during the first five years. In 1895 the literary outlook in England had never been brighter; an engaging and promising novelty full of high vitality pervaded the Press and the publishers' lists, and it was even commencing to invade the stage, when with the arrest of Oscar Wilde the whole renaissance suffered a sudden collapse as if it had been no more than a gaily coloured balloon. "The crash of the fall certainly affected the whole spirit of this year," says R. H. Gretton, in his *Modern History of the English People*. "There were few great houses in London where he was not known; fewer still where there was not among the younger generation an aggressive, irresponsible intolerance which had some relation, however vague, to his brilliant figure. Even athleticism rejoiced at this date to dissociate itself from anything that might have been in danger of easy approval from an older generation, by being too æsthetic; captains of university football teams had been seen with long hair. There was too much of real revolt in the movement to allow the fate of one man to hold it lastingly in check; but a certain silence, almost, if not quite, shamefaced, settled for

the moment on much of the social life of the country." Two of Oscar Wilde's plays were being performed at the time, and they were immediately suppressed. Outside of the smoking-room that writer's name was scarcely whispered; it was suppressed entirely in the newspapers. His books were allowed to go out of print, and unauthorised publishers pirated them, and were allowed for a time to thrive upon the *succès de scandale* attained by the books because of the misfortune of their author.

With the arresting of the art movement of the Nineties came the chance of the man-in-the-street, whose new intellectual needs found a new caterer in Alfred Harmsworth. The political prejudices of the average man and his need for romance by proxy were exploited with phenomenal success by the audacious genius of the great newspaper administrator who has since won a world-wide reputation as Lord Northcliffe. *The Daily Mail* openly fanned the Jingo flame, already beginning to leap aloft under the inspiration of Joseph Chamberlain and Cecil Rhodes, and the melodramatic Jameson Raid of December 1895. Then came the Jubilee of 1897, when pride of race reached so unseemly a pitch that Rudyard Kipling even, the acknowledged poet of Imperialism, as the new patriotism was called, was moved to rebuke his compatriots:

*"If, drunk with sight of power, we loose*
*Wild tongues that have not Thee in awe,*
*Such boastings as the Gentiles use,*
*Of lesser breeds without the Law.*
*Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,*
*Lest we forget—lest we forget!"*

But there was no turning back. Bitten by an unseeing pride, expressing itself in a strangely inorganic patriotism, the nation forgot art and letters and social regeneration, in the indulgence of blatant aspirations which reached their apotheosis in the orgy of Mafeking Night.

## CHAPTER III

### THE DECADENCE

NO English writer has a better claim to recognition as an interpreter of the decadence in recent English literature than Arthur Symons. He of all the critics in the Eighteen Nineties was sufficiently intimate with the modern movement to hold, and sufficiently removed from it in his later attitude to express, an opinion which should be at once sympathetic and reasonably balanced without pretending to colourless impartiality. But during the earlier phase his vision of the decadent idea was certainly clearer than it was some years later, when he strove to differentiate decadence and symbolism.

"The most representative literature of the day," he wrote in 1893, "the writing which appeals to, which has done so much to form, the younger generation, is certainly not classic, nor has it any relation to that old antithesis of the classic, the romantic. After a fashion it is no doubt a decadence; it has all the qualities that mark the end of great periods, the qualities that we find in the Greek, the Latin, decadence; an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilising refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity. If what we call the classic is indeed the supreme art—those qualities of perfect simplicity, perfect sanity, perfect proportion, the supreme qualities—then this representative literature of to-day, interesting, beautiful, novel as it is, is really a new and beautiful and interesting disease."[1]

Six years later Arthur Symons, like so many of the writers of the period, was beginning to turn his eyes from the "new

[1] "The Decadent Movement in Literature." By Arthur Symons. *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, November 1893.

and beautiful and interesting disease," and to look inwardly for spiritual consolation. In the "Dedication" to *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* he told W. B. Yeats that he was "uncertainly but inevitably" finding his way towards that mystical acceptation of reality which had always been the attitude of the Irish poet. And further on in the same book, as though forgetting the very definite interpretation of decadence given by him in the article of 1893, he writes of it as "something which is vaguely called Decadence," a term, he said, used as a reproach or a defiance:

"It pleased some young men in various countries to call themselves Decadents, with all the thrill of unsatisfied virtue masquerading as uncomprehended vice. As a matter of fact, the term is in its place only when applied to style, to that ingenious deformation of the language, in Mallarmé, for instance, which can be compared with what we are accustomed to call the Greek and Latin of the Decadence. No doubt perversity of form and perversity of matter are often found together, and, among the lesser men especially, experiment was carried far, not only in the direction of style. But a movement which in this sense might be called Decadent could but have been a straying aside from the main road of literature. . . . The interlude, half a mock-interlude, of Decadence, diverted the attention of the critics while something more serious was in preparation. That something more serious has crystallised, for the time, under the form of Symbolism, in which art returns to the one pathway, leading through beautiful things to the eternal beauty."

In the earlier essay he certainly saw more in decadence than mere novelty of style, and rightly so, for style can no more be separated from idea than from personality. The truth of the matter, however, lies probably between the two views. What was really decadent in the Eighteen Nineties did seem to weed itself out into mere tricks of style and idiosyncrasies of sensation; and whilst doing so it was pleased to adopt the term decadence, originally used as a term of reproach, as a



badge. But with the passing of time the term has come to stand for a definite phase of artistic consciousness, and that phase is precisely what Arthur Symons described it to be in his earlier article, an endeavour "to fix the last fine shade, the quintessence of things; to fix it fleetingly; to be a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul; that is the ideal of Decadence."

The decadent movement in English art was the final outcome of the romantic movement which began near the dawn of the nineteenth century. It was the mortal ripening of that flower which blossomed upon the ruins of the French Revolution, heralding not only the rights of man, which was an abstraction savouring more of the classic ideal, but the rights of personality, of unique, varied and varying men. The French romanticists, led by Victor Hugo, recognised this in their glorification of Napoleon; but fear and hatred of the great Emperor generated in the hearts of the ruling classes in this country and propagated among the people prevented the idea from gaining acceptance here. At the same time decadence was neither romantic nor classic; its existence in so far as it was dependent upon either of those art traditions was dependent upon both. The decadents were romantic in their antagonism to current forms, but they were classic in their insistence upon new. And it must not be forgotten that far from being nihilistic in aim they always clung, at times with desperation, to one already established art-form or another. The French artists of the first revolutionary period depended as much upon the traditions of republican Greece and Rome as those of the revolution of July, and the poets of Britain, led by Walter Scott and Byron, depended upon the traditions of mediæval feudalism. Romanticism was a reshuffling of ideals and ideas and a recreation of forms; it was renascent and novel. It could be both degenerate and regenerate, and contain at the same time many more contradictions, because at bottom it was a revolt of the spirit against formal subservience to mere reason. It is true that there is ultimately an explanation for all things, a reason for everything, but it was left for

romance to discover a reason for unreason. It was the romantic spirit in the art of Sir Walter Scott which saw no inconsistency between the folk-soul and the ideals of chivalry and nobility; that taught Wordsworth to reveal simplicity as, in Oscar Wilde's words, "the last refuge of complexity"; that inspired John Keats with a new classicism in *Endymion* brighter than anything since *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Comus*, and a new mediævalism in *The Eve of St Agnes* fairer than "all Olympus' faded hierarchy." It taught Shelley that the most strenuous and the most exalted individual emphasis was not necessarily antagonistic to a balanced communal feeling, and that the heart of Dionysos could throb and burn in the form of Apollo; and above all it taught Samuel Taylor Coleridge that mystery lurked in common things and that mysticism was not merely a cloistral property.

Though all of these tendencies of thought and expression went to the making of the decadence in England, the influence, with the exception of that of Keats, was indirect and foreign. In that it was native the impulsion came directly from the Pre-Raphaelites, and more particularly from the poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Swinburne. But the chief influences came from France, and partially for that reason the English decadents always remained spiritual foreigners in our midst; they were not a product of England but of cosmopolitan London. It is certain Oscar Wilde (hounded out of England to die in Paris), Aubrey Beardsley (admittedly more at home in the *brasserie* of the Café Royale than elsewhere in London) and Ernest Dowson (who spent so much of his time in Soho) would each have felt more at home in Paris or Dieppe than, say, in Leeds or Margate. The modern decadence in England was an echo of the French movement which began with Théophile Gautier (who was really the bridge between the romanticists of the Victor Hugo school and the decadents who received their inspiration from Edmond and Jules de Goncourt), Paul Verlaine and Joris Karl Huysmans. In short, Gautier, favourite disciple of Victor Hugo, represented the consummation of the old romanticism, and he did this by inaugurating that new



romanticism, which had for apostles the Parnassiens, Symbolists and Decadents. French romanticism begins with *Hernani*, and ends with *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. Decadence properly begins with *Mademoiselle de Maupin* and closes with *À Rebours*. In England it began by accident with Walter Pater's Studies in Art and Poetry, *The Renaissance*, which was not entirely decadent, and it ended with Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* and Aubrey Beardsley's romance, *Under the Hill*, which were nothing if not decadent.

The accident by which Pater became a decadent influence in English literature was due to a misapprehension of the precise meaning of the famous "Conclusion" to the first edition of the volume originally issued in 1873, which led the author to omit the chapter from the second edition (1877). "I conceived it might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall," he wrote, when he reintroduced it with some slight modifications, bringing it closer to his original meaning, into the third edition of the book, in 1888. Nevertheless there was sufficient material in the revised version to stimulate certain minds in a direction only very remotely connected with that austere philosophy of sensations briefly referred to in *The Renaissance* and afterwards developed by Walter Pater under the idea of a "New Cyrenaicism" in *Marius the Epicurean* (1885). To those seeking a native sanction for their decadence, passages even in *Marius* read like invitations. "With the Cyrenaics of all ages, he would at least fill up the measure of that present with vivid sensations, and such intellectual apprehensions as, in strength and directness and their immediately realised values at the bar of an actual experience, are most like sensations." Such passages seemed in the eyes of the decadents to give a perverse twist to the æsthetic Puritanism of the intellectual evolution of Marius, and to fill with a new naughtiness that high discipline of exquisite taste to which the young pagan subjected himself. It is not surprising then to find even the revised version of the famous "Conclusion" acting as a spark to the tinder of the new acceptance of life.

"The service of philosophy, of speculative culture, towards the human spirit is to rouse, to startle it into sharp and eager observation. Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive for us,—for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy? To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life. In a sense it might even be said that our failure is to form habits; for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike. While all melts under our feet, we may well catch at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours and curious odours, or work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend. Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, and in the brilliancy of their gifts some tragic dividing of forces on their ways, is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening. With this sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch. What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy of Comte, or of Hegel, or of our own. Philosophical theories or ideas, as points of view, instruments of criticism, may help us to gather up what might otherwise pass unregarded by us. 'Philosophy is the microscope of thought.' The theory or idea or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part



of this experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves, or what is only conventional, has no real claim upon us."

But misappropriation of the teaching of Walter Pater was only an incident in the progress of decadence in England. By the dawn of the last decade of the century susceptible thought had reverted to the original French path of decadent evolution which manifested itself from Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire through the brothers Goncourt, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, to Huysmans, with a growing tendency towards little secret raids over the German frontier where the aristocratic philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche was looted and made to flash approval of intentions and ideas which that philosopher, like Pater, had lived and worked to supersede. The publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1891 revealed the main influence quite definitely, for, apart from the fact that Wilde's novel bears many obvious echoes of the most remarkable of French decadent novels, the *À Rebours* of J. K. Huysmans, which Arthur Symons has called "the breviary of the decadence," it contains the following passage which, although *À Rebours* is not named, is generally understood to refer to that book, even if the fact were not otherwise obvious:—

"His eyes fell on the yellow book that Lord Henry had sent him. What was it, he wondered. He went towards the little pearl-coloured octagonal stand, that had always looked to him like the work of some strange Egyptian bees that wrought in silver, and taking up the volume, flung himself into an arm-chair, and began to turn over the leaves. After a few minutes he became absorbed.

"It was the strangest book he had ever read. It seemed to him that in exquisite raiment, and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. Things that he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him. Things of which he had never dreamed were gradually revealed.

"It was a novel without a plot, and with only one character, being, indeed, simply a psychological study of a certain young Parisian who spent his life trying to realise in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own, and to sum up, as it were, in himself the various moods through which the world-spirit had ever passed, loving for their mere artificiality those renunciations that men have unwisely called virtue as much as those natural rebellions that wise men still call sin. The style in which it was written was that curious jewelled style, vivid and obscure at once, full of *argot* and of archaisms, of technical expressions and of elaborate paraphrases, that characterises the work of some of the finest artists of the French school of symbolists. There were in it metaphors as monstrous as orchids and as evil in colour. The life of the senses was described in the terms of mystical philosophy. One hardly knew at times whether one was reading the spiritual ecstasies of some mediæval saint or the morbid confessions of a modern sinner. It was a poisonous book. The heavy odour of incense seemed to cling about its pages and to trouble the brain. The mere cadence of the sentences, the subtle monotony of their music, so full as it was of complex refrains and movements elaborately repeated, produced in the mind of the lad, as he passed from chapter to chapter, a form of reverie, a malady of dreaming, that made him unconscious of the falling day and the creeping shadows."

This book so revealed Dorian Gray to himself that he became frankly the Duc Jean des Esseintes of English literature. There are differences, to be sure, and the sensations and ideas of Dorian Gray are not elaborated so scientifically as those of des Esseintes, but there is something more than coincidence in the resemblance of their attitudes towards life.

Jean des Esseintes and Dorian Gray are the authentic decadent types. Extreme they are, as a matter of course, but their prototypes did exist in real life, and minus those incidents wherein extreme decadence expresses itself in serious



crime, such as murder or incitement to murder, those prototypes had recognisable corporeal being.

In the Eighteen Nineties two such types were Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley, each of whom approximated, if not in action, then in mind and idea to des Esseintes and Dorian Gray. There was in both a typical perversity of thought, which in Wilde's case led to a contravention of morality evoking the revenge of society and a tragic ending to a radiant career. Both preferred the artificial to the natural. "The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible," said Oscar Wilde, adding, "what the second duty is no one has as yet discovered." The business of art as he understood it was to put Nature in her proper place. To be natural was to be obvious, and to be obvious was to be inartistic. Aubrey Beardsley invented a new artificiality in black and white art, and in his romance, *Under the Hill*, only a carefully expurgated edition of which has been made generally accessible to the public, he created an *À Rebours* of sexuality. And both possessed an exaggerated curiosity as to emotional and other experiences combined with that precocity which is characteristic of all decadents. The curiosity and precocity of the decadence were revealed in an English writer before the Eighteen Nineties by the publication, in 1886, of the *Confessions of a Young Man*, by George Moore; but apart from the fact that the author who shocked the moral susceptibilities of the people who control lending libraries, with *Esther Waters*, loved the limelight and passed through enthusiasms for all modern art movements, he was as far removed from the typical decadent as the latter is removed from the average smoking-room citizen who satisfies an age-long taste for forbidden fruit with a *risqué* story. George Moore played at decadence for a little while, but the real influences of his life were Flaubert and the naturalists on the one side, and their corollaries in the graphic arts, Manet and the impressionists, on the other. For the rest he insisted upon England accepting the impressionists; abandoned realism; introduced into this country the work of Verlaine and Rimbaud, and the autobiography of indiscretion; flirted

with the Irish Literary Movement, and its vague mysticism —and remained George Moore.

The chief characteristics of the decadence were (1) Perversity, (2) Artificiality, (3) Egoism and (4) Curiosity, and these characteristics are not at all inconsistent with a sincere desire "to find the last fine shade, the quintessence of things; to fix it fleetingly; to be a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul." Indeed, when wrought into the metal of a soul impelled to adventure at whatever hazard, for sheer love of expanding the boundaries of human experience and knowledge and power, these characteristics become, as it were, the senses by which the soul may test the flavour and determine the quality of its progress. In that light they are not decadent at all, they are at one with all great endeavour since the dawn of human consciousness. What, after all, is human consciousness when compared with Nature but a perversity—the self turning from Nature to contemplate itself? And is not civilisation artifice's conspiracy against what is uncivilised and natural? As for egoism, we ought to have learnt by this time that it is not sufficient for a being to say "I am." He is not a factor in life until he can add to that primal affirmation a consummating "I will." "To be" and "to will" exercised together necessitate action, which in turn involves experience, and experience, not innocence, is the mother of curiosity. Not even a child has curiosity until it has experienced something; all inquisitiveness is in the nature of life asking for more, and all so-called decadence is civilisation rejecting, through certain specialised persons, the accumulated experiences and sensations of the race. It is a demand for wider ranges, newer emotional and spiritual territories, fresh woods and pastures new for the soul. If you will, it is a form of imperialism of the spirit, ambitious, arrogant, aggressive, waving the flag of human power over an ever wider and wider territory. And it is interesting to recollect that decadent art periods have often coincided with such waves of imperial patriotism as passed over the British Empire and various European countries during the Eighteen Nineties.



It is, of course, permissible to say that such outbreaks of curiosity and expansion are the result of decay, a sign of a world grown *blasé*, tired, played-out; but it should not be forgotten that the effort demanded by even the most ill-directed phases of decadent action suggests a liveliness of energy which is quite contrary to the traditions of senile decay. During the Eighteen Nineties such liveliness was obvious to all, and even in its decadent phases the period possessed tonic qualities. But the common-sense of the matter is that where the so-called decadence made for a fuller and brighter life, demanding ever more and more power and keener sensibilities from its units, it was not decadent. The decadence was decadent only when it removed energy from the common life and set its eyes in the ends of the earth whether those ends were pictures, blue and white china, or colonies. True decadence was therefore degeneration arising not out of senility, for there is nothing old under the sun, but out of surfeit, out of the ease with which life was maintained and desires satisfied. To kill a desire, as you can, by satisfying it, is to create a new desire. The decadents always did that, with the result that they demanded of life not repetition of old but opportunities for new experiences. The whole attitude of the decadence is contained in Ernest Dowson's best-known poem: "Non sum qualis eram bonæ sub regno Cynaræ," with that insatiate demand of a soul surfeited with the food that nourishes not, and finding what relief it can in a rapture of desolation:

> "I cried for madder music and for stronger wine,
> But when the feast is finished, and the lamps expire,
> Then falls thy shadow, Cynara! the night is thine;
> And I am desolate and sick of an old passion,
> Yea, hungry for the lips of my desire:
> I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion!"

In that poem we have a sort of parable of the decadent soul. Cynara is a symbol of the unattained and perhaps unattainable joy and peace which is the eternal dream of man. The decadents of the Nineties, to do them justice, were not so

degenerate as either to have lost hope in future joy or to have had full faith in their attainment of it. Coming late in a century of material pressure and scientific attainment they embodied a tired mood, rejected hope, beyond the moment, and took a subtle joy in playing with fire and calling it sin; in scourging themselves for an unholy delight, in tasting the bitter-sweet of actions potent with remorse. They loved the cleanliness in unclean things, the sweetness in unsavoury alliances; they did not actually kiss Cynara, they kissed her by the proxy of some "bought red mouth." It was as though they had grown tired of being good, in the old accepted way, they wanted to experience the piquancy of being good after a debauch. They realised that a merited kiss was not half so sweet as a kiss of forgiveness, and this subtle voluptuousness eventually taught them that the road called decadence also led to Rome. The old romanticism began by being Catholic; Théophile Gautier strove to make it pagan, and succeeded for a time, but with Huysmans romanticism in the form of decadence reverted to Rome. In England the artists who represented the renaissance of the Nineties were either Catholics like Francis Thompson and Henry Harland or prospective converts to Rome, like Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, Lionel Johnson and Ernest Dowson. If Catholicism did not claim them some other form of mysticism did, and W. B. Yeats and George Russell (A.E.) became Theosophists. The one who persistently hardened himself against the mystical influences of his period, John Davidson, committed suicide.

The general public first realised the existence of the decadence with the arrest and trial of Oscar Wilde, and, collecting its wits and its memories of *The Yellow Book*, the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley, and the wilful and perverse epigrams of *A Woman of No Importance*, it shook its head knowingly and intimated that this sort of thing must be stopped. And the suddenness with which the decadent movement in English literature and art ceased, from that time, proves, if it proves nothing else, the tremendous power of outraged public opinion in this country. But it



also proves that English thought and English morality, however superficial on the one hand and however hypocritical on the other, would neither understand nor tolerate the curious exotic growth which had flowered in its midst.

The passing of the decadence in England had been prepared by the satires of Robert Hichens and G. S. Street, in *The Green Carnation* and *The Autobiography of a Boy*, just as its earlier phase, the Æsthetic Movement, had been laughed out of any popularity it might have won by W. H. Mallock in *The New Republic*, W. S. Gilbert in *Patience*, and by George du Maurier in a famous series of humorous drawings in *Punch*. The weakness of *The Green Carnation* is that satire sails so perilously near reality as, at times, to lose itself in a wave of fact. At times the book reads more like an indiscretion than a satire, but no other writer has realised so well the fatuous side of the "exquisite" and "brilliant" corner in decadence which Oscar Wilde made his own:

"'Oh! he has not changed,' said Mr Amarinth. 'That is so wonderful. He never develops at all. He alone understands the beauty of rigidity, the exquisite severity of the statuesque nature. Men always fall into the absurdity of endeavouring to develop the mind, to push it violently forward in this direction or in that. The mind should be receptive, a harp waiting to catch the winds, a pool ready to be ruffled, not a bustling busybody, for ever trotting about on the pavement looking for a new bun shop. It should not deliberately run to seek sensations, but it should never avoid one; it should never be afraid of one; it should never put one aside from an absurd sense of right and wrong. Every sensation is valuable. Sensations are the details that build up the stories of our lives.'

"'But if we do not choose our sensations carefully, the stories may be sad, may even end tragically,' said Lady Locke.

"'Oh! I don't think that matters at all, do you, Mrs Windsor?' said Reggie. 'If we choose carefully, we become deliberate at once; and nothing is so fatal to personality

as deliberation. When I am good, it is my mood to be good; when I am what is called wicked, it is my mood to be evil. I never know what I shall be at a particular moment. Sometimes I like to sit at home after dinner and read *The Dream of Gerontius*. I love lentils and cold water. At other times I must drink absinthe, and hang the night hours with scarlet embroideries. I must have music, and the sins that march to music. There are moments when I desire squalor, sinister, mean surroundings, dreariness and misery. The great unwashed mood is upon me. Then I go out from luxury. The mind has its West End and its Whitechapel. The thoughts sit in the park sometimes, but sometimes they go slumming. They enter narrow courts and rookeries. They rest in unimaginable dens seeking contrast, and they like the ruffians whom they meet there, and they hate the notion of policemen keeping order. The mind governs the body. I never know how I shall spend an evening till the evening has come. I wait for my mood.' "

There is satire so guarded, and lacking just so very dainty a touch of humour, that the uninitiated might miss the point. But that cannot be said of the more humorous touch of the author of *The Autobiography of a Boy*. Esmé Amarinth and Lord Reginald Hastings are cold, satirical echoes of Lord Henry Wotton and Dorian Gray, or such prototypes as they may have had in actuality; but the delightful Tubby of the autobiography is an unforgettably comic exaggeration which might laugh the veriest and most convinced of decadents back to sanity. The introduction to the reader is masterly in its sly humour.

" He was expelled from two private and one public school; but his private tutor gave him an excellent character, proving that the rough and ready methods of schoolmasters' appreciation were unsuited to the fineness of his nature. As a young boy he was not remarkable for distinction of the ordinary sort—at his prescribed studies and at games involving muscular strength and activity. But in very early life



the infinite indulgence of his smile was famous, and as in after years was often misunderstood; it was even thought by his schoolfellows that its effect at a crisis in his career was largely responsible for the rigour with which he was treated by the authorities; 'they were not men of the world,' was the harshest comment he himself was ever known to make on them. He spoke with invariable kindness also of the dons at Oxford (who sent him down in his third year), complaining only that they had not absorbed the true atmosphere of the place, which he loved. He was thought eccentric there, and was well known only in a small and very exclusive set. But a certain amount of general popularity was secured to him by the disfavour of the powers, his reputation for wickedness, and the supposed magnitude of his debts. His theory of life also compelled him to be sometimes drunk. In his first year he was a severe ritualist, in his second an anarchist and an atheist, in his third wearily indifferent to all things, in which attitude he remained for the two years since he left the university until now when he is gone from us. His humour of being carried in a sedan chair, swathed in blankets and reading a Latin poet, from his rooms to the Turkish bath, is still remembered in college."

*The Autobiography of a Boy* is not, like *The Green Carnation*, a satire upon the leaders of the decadence; it is a satire upon the innumerable hangers-on to the movement—who were perhaps the only real degenerates. Perhaps the Tubby type will be always with us, and so long as we have our dominions beyond the seas, to which irate fathers may pack them, all may be well, especially if they depart with such superbly futile resolves as this Tubby made on the eve of his emigration to Canada. " My father," he writes towards the close of his autobiography, " spoke of an agent whom I was to see on my arrival: I think he wants me to go into a bank out there. But I shall make straight for the forests, or the mountains, or whatever they are, and try to forget. I believe people shoot one another there; I have never killed a man, and it may be an experience—the lust for slaughter.

They dress picturesquely; probably a red sash will be the keynote of my scheme."

The decadence proper, in this country, was only one of the expressions of the liveliness of the times. It was the mood of a minority, and of a minority, perhaps, that was concerned more about its own moods than about the meaning of life and the use of life. At its worst it was degenerate in the literal sense—that is to say, weak, invalid, hectic, trotting with rather sad joy into the *cul de sac* of conventional wickedness and peacocking itself with fine phrases and professions of whimsical daring. As such it was open to satire; as such it would have suppressed itself sooner or later without the intervention of public opinion. At its best, even when that best was most artificial and most exotic, it realised much, if it accomplished little. True it was a movement of elderly youths who wrote themselves out in a slender volume or so of hot verse or ornate prose, and slipped away to die in taverns or gutters—but some of those verses and that prose are woven into the fabric of English literature. And if it was a movement always being converted, or on the point of being converted, to the most permanent form of Christianity, even though its reasons were æsthetic, or due entirely to a yearning soul-weariness, it succeeded in checking a brazen rationalism which was beginning to haunt art and life with the cold shadow of logic. Ernest Dowson's cry for "Madder music and for stronger wine," Arthur Symons' assertion that "there is no necessary difference in artistic value between a good poem about a flower in the hedge and a good poem about the scent in a sachet," and Oscar Wilde's re-assertion of Gautier's *l'art pour l'art* (with possibilities undreamt of by Gautier) are all something more than mere protests against a stupid philistinism; fundamentally they are expressions not so much of art as of vision, and as such nothing less than a demand for that uniting ecstasy which is the essence of human and every other phase of life. All the cynicisms and petulances and flippancies of the decadence, the febrile self-assertion, the voluptuousness, the perversity were, consciously or unconsciously, efforts towards the rehabilitation



of spiritual power. "I see, indeed," wrote W. B. Yeats, "in the arts of every country those faint lights and faint colours and faint outlines and faint energies which many call 'the decadence,' and which I, because I believe that the arts lie dreaming of things to come, prefer to call the autumn of the body. An Irish poet, whose rhythms are like the cry of a sea-bird in autumn twilight, has told its meaning in the line, 'the very sunlight's weary, and it's time to quit the plough.' Its importance is great because it comes to us at the moment when we are beginning to be interested in many things which positive science, the interpreter of exterior law, has always denied: communion of mind with mind in thought and without words, foreknowledge in dreams and in visions, and the coming among us of the dead, and of much else. We are, it may be, at a crowning crisis of the world, at the moment when man is about to ascend, with the wealth he has been so long gathering upon his shoulders, the stairway he has been descending from the first days." So it may be that this movement, which accepted as a badge the reproach of decadence, is the first hot flush of the only ascendant movement of our times; and that the strange and bizarre artists who lived tragic lives and made tragic end of their lives, are the mad priests of that new romanticism whose aim was the transmutation of vision into personal power.